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The Primordial Insight into "Mediality" and the Contours of a "Medial" Philosophical Anthropology

Abstract

My planned presentation is to introduce a specific and, to the best of my knowledge, original interdisciplinary approach to addressing certain basic features of the human condition. It is designed to articulate the contours of a non-Cartesian, non-dualist, but fundamentally relational, indeed, "medial" philosophical anthropology. (The notion of "mediality" here is entirely distinct from the problem of "material mediation" widely discussed in literary theory and cultural studies).

1) The novelty of this approach lies in its methodology: it rests on an exploration of the philosophical significance of some extant linguistic research, which in turn is able to inform the phenomenological method of describing phenomena. The guiding idea here leans on Gadamer's notion of "*die Mitte der Sprache*:" language is a first and all-encompassing medium "where I and world ... manifest their original belonging together," it is "the record (*Spur*) of finitude" (Gadamer *TM*, 469, 453, respectively). As such, it embodies an immense stock of knowledge regarding the ways humans proved to be able to come to terms with their historical existence. If so, then primarily certain basic structural features of languages, especially in their historical development, must be interrogated—I maintain—as basic records of the deep tendencies within the historical self-understanding of humans.

2) As I plan to point out, linguistic research pertaining to the history of verbal systems of the Indo-European languages has shown that the primordial voice systems consisted of two voices, namely, middle and active (Benveniste).¹ The middle voice is primarily known to us from ancient Greek (as *mesotes*), because in most of the major occidental languages it does not have a morphologically distinct form (yet, it does in Hungarian, e.g.!). In fact, our occidental linguistic development attests to a loss of the original meaning of the middle voice, as thinking in terms of activity and passivity has become predominant. According to Benveniste's analysis, however, the middle is in fact the original voice (the active being its modification), and the primordial voices bring to language an action of a "subject" who stands in (middle), or externally relates to (active), an event taking place. Both voices express three aspects: i) a (temporal) event; ii) a "sub-ject" related to that event; and iii) the locality ("existential spatiality") of the "sub-ject" with respect to the event. As opposed to the occidental voice systems which reflect the predominance of thinking in terms of subject and object, agent and patient—where the subject stands in the center, either as agent or the one being acted upon—, the primordial voice systems represent a kind of thinking in terms of verb and subject, event and agent—where the subject is displaced, it gets out of the focus in favor of the event expressed by the verb. Thus, the notion of "pure event" (as opposed to some "action" exerted by someone / something) is central to such thinking: there, it is the first term of

¹ Benveniste, Emile [1966] *Problèmes de linguistique générale 1*, Paris, Gallimard. = *Problems in general linguistics*; transl. by M. E. Meek. Coral Gables, Fla.: University of Miami Press, 1971, pp. 145-151.

human (self-) understanding, the very “medium” in relation to which everything else becomes conceivable.

3) In the next section of my presentation I plan to show how such primordial insight into the “mediality” of the human condition is able to inform a phenomenological account of certain basic elements of a philosophical anthropology. Sketchily: the “subject” is understood on such view neither as a Cartesian-reflexive *cogito*, nor as some constituting transcendental subjectivity (Husserl), but rather, as a full-fledged agent who is always already sub-jected to self-revealing, pure events—events to which it belongs, and in relation to which it acts. Yet, the “agency” of the subject on this level is to be understood in a medial sense, namely, as a series of acts that “achieve something which is being achieved in it” (Benveniste, 149). The “subject” is originally not a spontaneous source of action, but rather, one who acts in relation to an event taking place in or around her. — In turn, “objects” as such appear on this linguistic account when the middle is converted into an active, whereby the latter becomes a transitive: the process expressed by the verb is “transferred to another term that will become the object of it” (ibid.). As opposed to that, the middle as such is in principle intransitive. — Accordingly, “consciousness” is primarily neither reflexive (in a strict sense), nor an intentional consciousness of objects, but rather, it is pre-eminently an awareness of events to which it belongs and along which it acts. Even an explicit object-consciousness is pre-determined by some sort of event-consciousness: *noema* and *noesis* are equally determined by such ground of their correlation. Thus, “intentionality” (taken as “consciousness of something”) proves to be derivative when compared to the more fundamental structure of consciousness, the latter being constituted by modes of mediality, the basic characteristic of which is “embeddedness” in, “belonging” (*Zugehörigkeit*) to, and co-acting with, self-revealing pure events. (Insofar as it makes good sense to talk about a “vocabulary” of such medial events, furthermore, this approach exceeds the usual distinction between causal and intentional vocabularies made in analytic philosophies of language, too.) — In addition, the sketched account also suggests a tripartite typology of agency: i) pure agency in the (occidental) sense of being the spontaneous source of action without involving any notion of event; ii) agency in the (primordial active) sense of being the source of action externally related to some event taking place; iii) agency in the (primordial medial) sense of being an agent internally related to some event taking place. As I maintain, this typology is a pregnant one: it implies more than what is captured in the Greek distinction between *poiesis* and *praxis*, and it is able to contribute to a phenomenology of eminently medial events (such as e.g. dreaming, *mimesis*, playing, processes of *Bildung*, true *praxis*, acts of artistic creativity, etc.).