

Death and Discourse: An Inquiry into Meaning and Disruption

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Abstract: In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre vehemently argues that we must assume the world with the proud consciousness of being its authors, as it is only in and through our projects that the world has Meaning. I explore Martin Heidegger's *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* to develop a brief analysis of language that locates Meaning in the speaking human subject. I argue that while language does provide a pre-reflective foundation of Meaning onto the world, there are events that have the potential to severely disrupt that Meaning and, therefore, the potential to challenge Sartre's existential-phenomenological framework.

In *Being and Nothingness*, Jean-Paul Sartre vehemently argues that we must assume the world with the proud consciousness of being its authors, as it is only in and through our projects that the world has Meaning (Sartre 1943, p.707). Among a heritage of phenomenological thinkers such as Hegel, Husserl and Heidegger, Sartre argues that substance, or the world-as-phenomena, appears *as* substance only *for* consciousness. Meaning, as a force of signification that is placed onto the world, therefore, presents and sustains itself within the human subject (Sartre 1943, p. 239).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the limitations of Meaning as it is conceptualized in Sartre's existential-phenomenological framework. That said, it would not be enough to ask, "How is it that we come into Meaning?" or "How do we give Meaning to the world?" Such questions inquire into the sociological and psychological mechanics of how the human subject relates to Meanings provided by cultural and familial contexts while Meaning-as-such finds itself already presupposed and, moreover, un-interrogated. The guiding thread of our inquiry, if we wish to have any insight into Meaning, should then be fashioned in such a way that Meaning is put at great risk. We must ask in a preliminary

sense: “Are there non- or extra-human events that resist the jurisdiction of existential-phenomenological Meaning?”

Before we answer this question, however, we must detour in order to provide a deeper understanding of the way in which the human subject occupies the locus of Meaning. In the following section, I explore Martin Heidegger’s interpretation of various Greek terms in order to develop a brief analysis of language that lends itself to the existential-phenomenological framework. The key point that emerges from this development is a representation of substance, or the material/natural world, as purely semiotic. That is, because Meaning is located solely within the speaking human subject, a limited directional pattern is assumed in which semiotics always determine the meaning of world, and never world that determines the meaning of semiotics.¹ This position has, since the rise of post-structuralist thought, been a source of great debate. I will argue that while language does provide a pre-reflective foundation of Meaning onto the world, there are events that have the potential to severely disrupt that Meaning and, therefore, the potential to challenge the Sartrean thesis.

1. Λόγος [lógos] and Tearing From Concealment: Metaphysics, Truth and Presuppositions

In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, we find Martin Heidegger conducting an inquiry into the Greek term μετά τὰ φύσικά [metá tá phúsiká], an early expression of the word “metaphysics” that served to designate philosophy.² He begins by breaking down the last-mentioned term, φύσικά [phúsiká], to φύσις [phusis], a term customarily translated as “nature”, which itself comes from the Latin *natura*: to be born, to arise, to grow. Heidegger writes,

We here take growth and growing...in the primal experience of man...as [an] occurring in the midst of, and permeated by, the changing of the seasons...the alternation of day and night...the wandering stars, of storms and weather and the raging of the elements. Growing is all this taken together as one. (1929, p. 25)

Heidegger pushes us into this understanding of growing so that φύσις can be interpreted, not in the literal sense of “growth”, but rather as the “self-forming prevailing of beings as a whole” (1929, p. 25). The processes of procreation, birth, childhood, maturing, aging and death, are, therefore, understood not as strictly biological

1 Patrick McGann (2002, p. 83 makes a similar argument in relation to the body.

2 All Greek translations are Martin Heidegger, (1929, pp. 25-26).

processes of nature, but as “the general prevailing of beings, which comprehends within itself human fate and its history...[that which man] does not have power over, but which precisely prevails through and around him” (1929, p. 25).

Φύσις appears to have an ontological status in Heidegger’s interpretation and, in fact, this appears more so in his analysis of the Greek term λόγος, which literally translates as “word” or “speech”. He writes, “Man, insofar as he exists as man, has always already spoken out about φύσις, about the prevailing whole to which he himself belongs” (1929, p. 25). This “speaking out” of φύσις of prevailing beings and their order and constitution, provides a deeper understanding than the literal translation of λόγος because whatever is spoken out, for Heidegger, is already necessarily grounded within φύσις, “otherwise it could not be spoken out of it” (1929, p. 25).

To further explore the function of λόγος in Heidegger, we must introduce two more Greek terms he uses: λέγειν [légeín], which Heidegger translates to “bringing out of concealment and into word,” and its antithesis, κρύπτειν [kruppteín], or “keeping concealed and in concealment.” For Heidegger, the fundamental function of λέγειν is to reveal, or take out of concealment, that which conceals itself in φύσις. He writes, “Revealing...is that happening which occurs in the λόγος. In the λόγος the prevailing of beings [φύσις] becomes revealed, becomes manifest” (1929, p. 27).

Let us analyze the statement, “the ball is round.” The simple analysis tells us that what I have done is connected an object in the world, i.e. the ball, to a predicate, i.e. round. Yet, what further inquiry discloses is that I have revealed or brought out of concealment several “truths” about the world: that there is an “I” and *some* notion of reality that makes my utterance possible, that there are objects and predicates in this reality, and that there are relationships among these objects and predicates.

The objection could be made that the statement has done nothing to reveal “truth.” Heidegger writes,

Yet, what is at issue is by no means the claim that this speaking out should be true, that statements about φύσις should be true and not false. It is rather a matter of comprehending what truth means here, and how the truth of φύσις is understood...in this commencement. (1929, pp. 28-29)

The Greek term, ἀλήθεια [alétheia], does not readily translate into the German *Wahrheit*, or truth. However, Heidegger interprets ἀλήθεια to mean, that which is not concealed, or that which has been unconcealed. He writes, “The Greeks thus implicitly understand something negative in the innermost essence of truth...In truth

beings are torn from concealment... Truth is innermost confrontation of the essence of man with the whole of beings themselves" (1929, p. 29).

The prevailing of beings, φύσις, as Heidegger understands it, their order and constitution and the law of beings themselves as grounded in φύσις is that towards which λόγος addresses and forms itself (1929, p. 26). The function of language, thus far, is twofold: (1) it tears from concealment and brings to light the ἀλήθεια of φύσις. Insofar as this is its function, to speak about and concern itself with the order and constitution of beings, language appears to be deeply metaphysical. (2) It expresses a confrontation and relationship between the speaker and that which speaking addresses, φύσις, in the name of ἀλήθεια and, therefore, lays claim to truth as it is understood in the commencement of speaking.

What remains to be addressed is the presuppositional nature of language. I refer here to an earlier observation that φύσις appears to be the ontological grounding toward which λόγος addresses and forms itself in Heidegger's interpretation. However, I would suggest that this thesis could be traced to Nietzsche's *The Twilight of the Idols* in which he writes, "I fear indeed that we shall never rid ourselves of God, since we still believe in grammar."³ Michel Foucault provides one of the most insightful analyses into this dictum. He writes,

God is perhaps not so much a region beyond knowledge as something prior to the sentences we speak; and if Western man is inseparable from him, it is not because of some invincible propensity to go beyond the frontiers of experience, but because his language ceaselessly foments him in the shadow of his laws. (1966, p. 298)

What Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Foucault all seem to understand is the presupposed onto-axiomatic foundation on which language rests. Speaking does not begin with the vocal utterance of a sentence but with the onto-metaphysical presuppositions that make that sentence possible.

II. The preliminary formulation of our guiding question can now be reformulated: Are there events in which φύσις resists λόγος, and therefore resists being brought to ἀλήθεια?

This brief analysis of language clearly lends itself to the Sartrean framework as Meaning is localized within the speaking human subject. The moment at which substance, or world, appears is the

3 Quoted in Foucault (1966, p. 130) from Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Twilight of the Idols* (First German ed. 1889; French trans. 1911).

moment at which λόγος, the word, tears it from concealment and brings it into ἀλήθεια, truth or understanding. The round ball of our earlier example, therefore, remains concealed from knowledge and Meaning until I have spoken about it and have brought it under the jurisdiction of λόγος. Once again, Sartre's words return to us. He writes, "for the very worst disadvantages or the worst threats which can endanger my person have meaning only in and through my project; and it is on the ground of the engagement which I am that they appear" (Sartre 1943, p. 708). And again, while discussing an existential-phenomenological epistemology, Sartre writes,

While the relation of the for-itself to the in-itself is originally constitutive of the very being which is put into the relation, we should not understand that this relation is constitutive of the in-itself but rather of the for-itself. It is in the for-itself alone that we must look for the key to that relation to being which we call knowing. (1943, p. 239)

This is the point at which controversy arises because, while Meaning is located solely within the human subject, a limited directional pattern is assumed in which the world is always the object of our Meaning and never our Meaning that is subject to the world.

Our analysis of language, as brief as it may be, and the function of λόγος, in relation to the onto-axiomatic foundation on which Meaning rests, provide the Sartrean position with substantial weight. Yet, exposing the foundations on which the existential-phenomenological framework rests helps to illuminate its vulnerabilities. If the goal of our investigation is to disrupt Meaning, and if that Meaning rests upon presupposed, metaphysical claims to truth, then it is precisely these foundations that must be called into question. I want to suggest that the event of disruption, then, presents itself at least in the event of Death.

III. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger writes, "Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*."⁴ What does this mean? Death as the incalculable arrival of the Other.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Emmanuel Levinas argues that the whole of Western philosophy has been an attempt to reduce "the Other to the Same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being" (1961, p. 43). Traditionally, the Other

4 Heidegger (1927, p. 294).

does not fall within the gaze of philosophical comprehension until it has first been turned into an object available for analysis, dissection, argumentation, refutation, etc. This process, according to Levinas, is a dispossession of the Other as *outside of* or *beyond* me and, as he writes, "it is hence not a relation with the Other as such but the reduction of the Other to the Same" (1961, p. 46).

The brief analysis of language that we have provided elucidates this reductive process. As I speak about the round ball, there is a moment of objectification in which the ball becomes readily available for my analysis: "What is its shape? Its color? Its weight?" Thematization and conceptualization, what brings the object under the understanding of my onto-axiomatic foundations, are, for Levinas, forms in which a philosophy of power oppresses the Other (1961, p. 46).

It should be no surprise then that traditional philosophy has turned Death into an object. "In the publicness with which we are with one another in our everyday manner," Heidegger writes, "death is 'known' as a mishap which is constantly occurring – as a 'case of death'" (1927, p. 296). The question for Levinas, however, which appears to be, *prima facie*, analogous to the guiding thread of our inquiry, is, "How can the Same...enter into relationship with an Other without immediately divesting it of its alterity? What is the nature of this relationship?" (1961, p. 38).

Levinas' interests lie specifically in relations of inter-human subjectivity. The Other that traditional philosophy has reduced, and for whom Levinas seeks to restore a divine respect for, is the human Other. However, Levinas is faced with a difficult task: he must answer why that which is infinitely *outside of* and *beyond* me must meet certain preconditions to be recognized as Other *than* me. It appears that Levinas has undercut his own project: in order to first *recognize* the Other he or she must first be reduced to something *like* me.

Despite this blunder, the Levinasian project should not be abandoned as he does provide an intriguing and useful phenomenological description of the Other and, using the more inclusive logic of Jacques Derrida, the Other can move beyond relations of purely inter-human subjectivity and into the realm of "the 'free,' the incalculable, the unforeseeable, the undecidable, the event, the arrival... 'what comes'" (2004, p. 51). Within the parameters of these conditions, of how the Other presents itself to me, we can now speak of Death without simultaneously divesting it of its radical alterity – its status as infinitely *outside of* and *beyond* me – and can now attempt to appropriately assess Heidegger's claim

that "Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*" (1927, p. 294).

Heidegger argues, "Death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped*" (1927, p. 294). Death becomes something I must face on my own accord as nobody can die in my place. Yet, Heidegger does acknowledge that while *my* Death may be *my* ownmost possibility, I nonetheless experience the event and presence of Death in Others. As *Dasein* I am possibility, and Death, as the possibility of my impossibility, and as it presents itself to me *through* Others, manifests as radically Other *than* me; it is an event that is "*distinctively impending*" but has not yet come *to* me (1927, p. 294).

For both Levinas and Derrida, the Other contains within itself the idea of Infinity. Levinas writes, "The idea of Infinity is...the overflowing of an adequate idea. If totality can not be constituted it is because Infinity does not permit itself to be integrated" (1961, p. 80). Thus, any attempt to thematize or conceptualize in whole the event or presence of Death will be problematic because Death, as *Infinitely outside of* and *beyond* me, and in fact the negation of me, is *Infinitely separate* from me. It is this *Infinite separation* in the presence of Death that pushes me into ambiguity: how do I, or more appropriately, how can I understand or speak about Death without first divesting it of its radical alterity? As Derrida writes, "There is no *horizon* for the Other...it can fall upon me, or surprise me by coming at my back, from behind or below...and in such a way that I don't see it coming" (2004, p. 52).

IV. The severe disruption of Meaning as the calling into question of Freedom.

The role of language, as we have briefly attempted to understand it, is to objectify that which is Other than the speaker: as I bring the world into myself, I bring it within the understanding of my onto-axiomatic foundations and reduce its ambiguities. "Such is the definition of freedom," Levinas writes, "to maintain oneself against the Other" (1961, p. 46).

The guiding motivation of our inquiry has been to find at least one event in which the unidirectional flow of Meaning, as presented within the Sartrean framework, is severely disrupted. Death, as the radical Other, as that which is *outside of* and *beyond* me calls into question "the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being" (1961, p. 84). If Freedom is defined as the ability to reduce the world to the onto-axiomatic foundations of semiotics, then the event of severe disruption must call into question my

Freedom; Meaning must shudder before the immense ambiguities of the world. This, Levinas argues, is precisely how the Other presents itself, "as him over whom I cannot have power, whom I cannot kill" (1961, p. 84).

I began this paper with the suggestion that if we wish to have any insight into Meaning, our inquiry must, in its task, put Meaning at great risk. The conception of the speaking human subject as the locus of Meaning carries with it a portrait: an existential human placed at the center of the universe furnished with the power of signification that somehow extends beyond itself and on to the world. As I have attempted to demonstrate, however, Death is at least one means by which Meaning can be displaced and severely disrupted. In the case of Death, there is something of the world that cannot be spoken of or, at least, not without returning back onto itself with acquired tensions and problematics.

The implications of this displacement are to be further explored: Does the speaking human subject merely fumble onto the world? Or is this particular to the event of Death? If it turns out that Meaning is revealed to be boorish and clumsy, should not the existential value given to the speaking human subject be reconsidered or, perhaps, abandoned? In fact, are we not forced to come back onto ourselves? To question, not the object that falls under philosophical inquiry, but the philosophical inquiry itself?

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