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From Science to Wisdom: The Significance of Transcendental Philosophy

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Abstract: In this autobiographical essay, Prof Otto Muck, one of the pioneers of neo Thomistic, transcendental philosophy, outlines his philosophical search. He focusses on his search for meaning in life and its discovery in terms of the philosophical insights of Joseph Maréchal, Martin Heidegger, Johannes Lotz, Karl Rahner, Emerich Coreth, and Bernard Lonergan. Finally, he dwells on the transcendental conditions for the possibility of thinking, of being human and listening to God's revelation.

Keywords: Martin Heidegger, Johannes Lotz, Karl Rahner, Emerich Coreth, and Bernard Lonergan, Transcendental Reflexion.

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The Development

At the age of attending school, I was fond of experiments in the fields of physics and chemistry. This explains my interest for after finishing school enrolling chemistry, this at the technical university, with better chances for practical applications. But this one year after the ending of World War II was again a challenge for orientation. Questions concerning orientation for my life became virulent. I think this was it that let me change from technical studies of chemistry to philosophy and mathematics at the university.

The Challenge

The impression of the difference between intersubjective empirical sciences with enormous practical impact on life and the diverging personal views regarding orientations of life I found very provoking. Experiential sciences are reliable in teaching us in different fields how things are reacting and helping to solve also technical problems. But how is it with the *personal worldview*, a habit to think and decide, which people learn by growing into their culture to develop their way of living?

This is possible if we consider that the *relation to empirical facts*, which is important for our reasonable understanding, is different in reflection about personal worldviews and in experiential sciences, as experimental sciences are looking for *sufficient* conditions to describe expected events, while worldviews look for *necessary* conditions for the personal integration of different concerns that they must handle.

The Search for Meaning

An example of searching for necessary conditions for our cognition we may find in Aristotle. In our reasoning, it seems to be evident to suppose that we should not accept a situation to be the case and not to be the case. For someone, doubting this

might hinder to think, Aristotle shows that to try to negate the validity of the principle of excluded contradiction shows that even the one who tries to negate it, *uses it in the act of negating* – by this showing it as a *necessary condition* for thinking.

Such a critical vindication of what is contained in insight, studied under the name of “retorsion” by Gaston Isaye, does not replace *insight* but is rather a clarification of what is contained in insight and has two tasks: it should *defend* such insights against criticism and should *filter out unjustified generalizations* by showing which insights must be included in the act of thinking because they are operative in it. The determination of the *fundamental concepts* and the indication of the necessity of acknowledging the *principles* are possible because of their necessary connection with the act of knowledge. They are conditions for the possibility of our access to being by affirmation.

Integrating Dialogue

This draws attention to further examples of elements that we use reliably for our cognition of what there is. According to Aristotle, for the use of the principle of excluded contradiction, it is relevant that the affirmed or negated sentences are taken in the same meaning, not differentiated in their meaning by assumed differences of time, space, perspective, etc. Recognizing this can be very valuable for distinguishing different approaches and the presuppositions of the kind of apprehension by partners in a dialog in everyday life and scientific arguments. Finding a *common core* of the different positions can help to find *systematic coordination* of aspects, viewpoints, approaches – coordination of cognitions and the fields of divergent application.

Finding a common core of the different positions can help to find systematic coordination of aspects, viewpoints, approaches – coordination of cognitions and the fields of divergent application.

As one example you may remember my observation that the relation *to empirical facts* is important for our reasonable understanding (common core), but it is different in reflection about personal worldviews or in experiential sciences (systematic difference and coordination).

So, the difference of statements not only shows their incompatibility but also the reason why they differ: not in fulfilling common requirements for reasonability but by the different interests for the kind of relation to empirical facts, interest for different questions. One might call this an *integrating application of a dialog*.

Such an analysis of the rational structure of a dialog on worldviews can show dimensions relevant for the explication of understanding one's life in the light of religious faith.

Another application can be seen in the Aristotelian solution of antinomies arising in our language about changing things. The common core is here the *thing* about which one speaks and the different *impressions* it provides *at* different times. Special terms may then be used to prevent confusing contradictions or antinomies, e.g., *potency* and *act*. Their use should remind us of their methodological function!

Many terms of classic metaphysics serve this purpose! They prevent contradictions that are rooted in the neglecting integration of different relevant viewpoints.

Transcendental Reflexion

In centuries after medieval Christian culture and metaphysics, the dominant horizon of common publicity became changed, especially by changing to meet reality more by new sciences and their practical applications and economical aspects. This brought about changes in the way one asks for explanations – not metaphysical but astronomical, mechanical, biological, political.

These aspects became dominant for the integration of people into a culture and thereby into the commonly used language. Thus, the horizon of matters of communication has not much room for *personal* convictions, regarded rather as a personal affair, not of reasonable concern for others.

To this *Kant* contributed developing the *transcendental* reflection to help to evaluate special kinds of investigations about human life. One example for him was the question: How is a responsible human action possible given a naturalistic interpretation based on sciences like physics? So, by *reduction* he shows that physical experiments presuppose liberty, at least to change conditions in experiments. *Deduction* then pays attention to the fact, that a mechanistic explanation would exclude such liberty of a human person.

For Kant, such a *transcendental deduction* states an important qualification of the relation between a special science and the experienced activity of a human person. Transcendental reflection on the searching mind finds out how far the claims of spontaneous or scientific knowledge are justified and where their *limits* are. Thus, the content of direct knowledge is not to be *substituted* by the

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reflection, but transcendental reflection serves by this critic to *reinterpret* the expression of the direct knowledge, showing the *limits* of special forms of cognition, the horizon of their validity.

Philosophers in the 19th century, developing this method further, applied transcendental criticism also on Kant's assumptions and his transcendental idealism.

It would be expected that the unlimited horizon of Being, making possible reflection, not only leads to paying personal attention to the special limited horizons of activity but especially to an evaluation of their contribution to the life of the searching person.

In a further development of phenomenology, this analysis became linked to typical forms of activity in correlation to the intentional content of the acts. For M. Heidegger an "existential analysis" of human attitudes should open a new way to open the philosophical question about being.

Heidegger criticizes the tradition of "metaphysics" as missing the concern for Being, as the grounding for beings, as known and as existing, thereby missing the resoluteness of persons concerning their life.

For Heidegger, "beings" of which we are aware in common experience, and "Being" as their grounding, are to be distinguished. This is described as an *ontological difference*. The aim is to develop attention for Being, through which beings are beings, leading to a *fundamental ontology*. Heidegger has missed such considerations in metaphysics up to his time. Attention to the all-embracing horizon of Being should help people on their way understanding their life, to form their actual personal *worldview*.

I think this is shown by Heidegger's existential phenomenology of the reaction of "Dasein", that is for him the reflecting person, to its enslavement by the care for many things, but at the same

time being uncertain about the lasting impact on the development of its Dasein.

According to his distinction between an “*ontic*” *description of beings* of everyday life in traditional metaphysics a human person should become aware also of the unlimited horizon of Being as “*ontological*” *grounding of beings*.

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Our awareness of Being will then influence our worldview with its integrating function for our life. It is, therefore, to be regarded as a common task for philosophy to be aware of it and its structures and encourages improvement by dialog, using reasonable argumentation.

Heidegger however was beyond hinting to “events of Being” very reluctant about speaking about contents of awareness of Being, anxious about a reversion to ontic understanding.

Such a difficulty is also seen by theologians speaking in ordinary language about the contents of religious Revelation, anxious for correct understanding.

You may see this *dynamism of our intellect* in experiencing beings and developing their integrating it into our presentation of the world in which we live and compare it with the focus of this dynamism with the Being as perspective and the heuristic elements with operative structures of the process of integration. These elements may be shown, reflecting upon the process, in their *operational* function. Insofar as they are structures of the integrating intention of Being, one may regard them as elements with *ontological* significance.

It is important to realize that *naming them* becomes dependent on the used language with associations of the current culture. If

philosophy succeeds in helping to become aware of the operative structures underlying such formulations, it can serve for a better understanding of fruitful involvement in a dialogue.

We can here also note that while the expression of the effect of such a necessary structure of our cognition is dependent upon language and culture, the human structure which is here operative is independent thereof. This should be kept in mind to understand the exposition of metaphysical concepts in the right way – not relying on obvious associations but on the relation to the relational structures, which they indicate.

For this view, after the critical discussion of Kant's approach in the 19th century, attention deserves the critical assessment of the transcendental method by **Joseph Maréchal** (1878-1944) in the 20th century. Inspired by a critical survey of the history of epistemology he noticed that in the tradition of Aristotle and Thomas the empirical and rational element in human cognition is linked by the capacity of intellectual understanding, which also coordinates the theoretical and practical function of cognition.

He sees spontaneous human cognition as the product of integrating the manifold contents of experience under the *dynamic orientation* of knowledge and decision towards the "Absolute of Being". Thereby the empirical and rational elements become linked by the capacity of intellectual understanding, which also coordinates the theoretical and practical function of the process. In this process necessary distinctions to avoid contradictions lead to heuristic elements that affect the further structure of the process as conditions of its possibility.

It would be expected that the *unlimited horizon of Being*, making possible reflection, not only leads to paying personal attention to the structures of special limited horizons of activity of everyday life but especially to an evaluation of their

contribution to the life of the searching person, the horizon of grounding being by Being and by reflection beyond beings open for revelation.

Some German-speaking philosophers emphasized a combination of retorsion with a phenomenological approach starting from reflecting upon acts of judgment or question.

Johannes B. Lotz (1903-1994) e.g., begins directly with the act of judgment. He examines its structural elements in a phenomenological way and shows how the affirmative synthesis points to absolute being as the ultimate condition of possibility for judgment. Then he starts the more detailed elaboration of conditions of possibility – in contrast to Maréchal, who first investigated these conditions, only at the end he showed by transcendental deduction the constitutive function of the relation to the Absolute.

K. Rahner (1904-1984), starting from the person asking for Being, recognizes the personal worldview as our spontaneous response to this question. In methodological reflection about the necessary conditions which make this process possible, he develops the fundamental connection of Being and cognition in reflection, and the limitation by being dependent upon asking. So, the horizon of asking is not only bound to worldly beings but also open for the grounding horizon of Being, even if the searching mind is not explicitly formulated as a question.

Emerich Coreth (1919-2006) starts his transcendental reflection at the general operational features of acts of questioning. He explores the implicit knowledge manifested by these acts. This is the basis to make explicit the orientation of human activity beyond special fields of concern to the all-embracing horizon of Being.

Guided by structures operative in the performance of questioning he makes explicit presupposed conditions in the asking person as well as in the investigated reality. In his *Metaphysik* (Coreth, 1980), he shows the extent to which these items can be correlated to topics of

classic metaphysic, reinterpreted as formulations of operative elements in human life.

I think that the view of making explicit the assumptions that are *operative* in the human mind can also be understood as an inquiry of the minimal conditions for the rationality of personal worldviews to comply with their integrative function in the view of the horizon of Being.

This could also help to *understand theological texts*, which are using philosophical terminology of former times and other cultures, to grasp their relevance for present-day life and intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

This shows the *relation to systematic philosophy*, especially to metaphysics, as it is understood for instance by Johannes Lotz, Karl Rahner, Emerich Coreth, and Bernard Lonergan. I think that their views of making explicit the assumptions that are *operative* in the human mind can also be understood as an inquiry of the minimal conditions for the rationality of personal worldviews to comply with their integrative function the horizon of Being.

I consider these conditions to be of special relevance for intercultural dialogue. However, any application to these issues should keep in mind that the *explicit formulation* of these conditions is dependent on the special civilization of the partners. Therefore, in my opinion, one aim in teaching philosophy could be to become aware of the operative structures of the human mind which are intercultural despite the different ways of making them explicit.

Having in mind my observation of the connection of medieval philosophy with the religious culture of its time, today we notice the differences of present culture and personal orientation of life in the light of openness to Being. I think of Coreth's (1980) methodical exposition of *Metaphysics* and his critical

interpretation of classical medieval views and different approaches of modern times.

This is important for interpreting formulations of classical theology, especially where they use philosophical terms which have outdated associations. The interpretation considering the operational meaning helps to avoid misunderstandings of the intended formulations.

E.g., for Karl **Rahner**, “the transcendental method finds its deepest meaning in *theology*. We cannot avoid *thinking*, viz., doing philosophy, in theology. A theology, as *intellectus fidei*, must view its object through all the methods and within every horizon which it encounters in the intellectual activity of its time. The transcendental method can play an important role in such an approach to theology. This is true especially in “fundamental theology,” which, to be contemporary, must not merely demonstrate the “objective” authenticity of the event of divine revelation, but must come to understand man, much more precisely and reflectively than before, as the hearer of a possible revelation. This requires the reflection of the transcendental conditions of possibility of hearing a revelation.”

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