

Existence and Hermeneutics

MY PURPOSE HERE is to explore the paths opened to contemporary philosophy by what could be called the graft of the *hermeneutic problem* onto the *phenomenological method*. I shall limit myself to a brief historical reminder before undertaking the investigation as such, an investigation which should, at least at its close, give an acceptable sense to the notion of *existence*—a sense which would express the renewal of phenomenology through hermeneutics.

I. THE ORIGIN OF HERMENEUTICS

THE HERMENEUTIC PROBLEM arose long before Husserl's phenomenology; this is why I speak of grafting and, properly, must even say a late grafting.

It is useful to recall that the hermeneutic problem was first raised within the limits of *exegesis*, that is, within the framework of a discipline which proposes to understand a text—to understand it beginning with its intention, on the basis of what it attempts to say. If exegesis raised a hermeneutic problem, that is, a problem of interpretation, it is because every reading of a text always takes place within a community, a tradition, or a living current of thought, all of which display presuppositions and exigencies—regardless of how closely a reading may be tied to the *quid*, to “that in view of which” the text was written. Thus, based on philosophical principles in physics and in ethics, the

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reading of Greek myths in the Stoic school implies a hermeneutics very different from the rabbinical interpretation of the Torah in the Halakah or the Haggadah. In its turn, the apostolic generation's interpretation of the Old Testament in the light of the Christic event gives quite another reading of the events, institutions, and personages of the Bible than the rabbinical interpretation.

In what way do these exegetic debates concern philosophy? In this way: that exegesis implies an entire theory of signs and significations, as we see, for example, in Saint Augustine's *De doctrina christiana*. More precisely, if a text can have several meanings, for example a historical meaning and a spiritual meaning, we must appeal to a notion of signification that is much more complex than the system of so-called univocal signs required by the logic of argumentation. And finally, the very work of interpretation reveals a profound intention, that of overcoming distance and cultural differences and of matching the reader to a text which has become foreign, thereby incorporating its meaning into the present comprehension a man is able to have of himself.

Consequently, hermeneutics cannot remain a technique for specialists—the *technē hermēneutikē* of those who interpret oracles and marvels; rather, hermeneutics involves the general problem of comprehension. And, moreover, no noteworthy interpretation has been formulated which does not borrow from the modes of comprehension available to a given epoch: myth, allegory, metaphor, analogy, etc. This connection between interpretation and comprehension, the former taken in the sense of textual exegesis and the latter in the broad sense of the clear understanding of signs, is manifested in one of the traditional senses of the word "hermeneutics"—the one given in Aristotle's *Peri hermēneias*. It is indeed remarkable that, in Aristotle, *hermēneia* is not limited to allegory but concerns every meaningful discourse. In fact, meaningful discourse is *hermēneia*, "interprets" reality, precisely to the degree that it says "something of something." Moreover, discourse is *hermēneia* because a discursive statement is a grasp of the real by meaningful expressions, not a selection of so-called impressions coming from the things themselves.

Such is the first and most primordial relation between the concept of interpretation and that of comprehension; it relates the technical problems of textual exegesis to the more general problems of meaning and language.

But exegesis could lead to a general hermeneutics only by means of a second development, the development of classical philology and the *historical sciences* that took place at the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth century. It is with Schleiermacher and Dilthey that the hermeneutic problem becomes a philosophic problem. The title of the present section, "The Origin of Hermeneutics," is an explicit allusion to the title of Dilthey's famous essay of 1900. Dilthey's problem, in the age of positivistic philosophy, was to give to the *Geisteswissenschaften* a validity comparable to that of the natural sciences. Posed in these terms, the problem was epistemological; it was a question of elaborating a critique of historical knowledge as solid as the Kantian critique of the knowledge of nature and of subordinating to this critique the diverse procedures of classical hermeneutics: the laws of internal textual connection, of context, of geographic, ethnic, and social environments, etc. But the resolution of the problem exceeded the resources of mere epistemology. An interpretation, like Dilthey's, bound to information fixed by writing is only a province of the much vaster domain of understanding, extending from one psychic life to another psychic life. The hermeneutic problem is thus seen from the perspective of psychology: to understand, for a finite being, is to be transported into another life. Historical understanding thus involves all the paradoxes of historicity: how can a historical being understand history historically? These paradoxes, in turn, lead back to a much more fundamental question: in expressing itself, how can life objectify itself, and, in objectifying itself, how does it bring to light meanings capable of being taken up and understood by another historical being, who overcomes his own historical situation? A major problem, which we will find again at the close of our investigation, is thus raised: the problem of the relationship between force and meaning, between life as the bearer of meaning and the mind as capable of linking meanings into a coherent series. If life is not originally meaningful, understanding is forever impossible; but, in order for this understanding to be fixed, is it not necessary to carry back to life itself the logic of immanent development which Hegel called the *concept*? Do we not then surreptitiously provide ourselves with all the resources of a philosophy of the spirit¹ just when we are

1. [Throughout this book we have translated Ricoeur's "*esprit*" (Hegel's "*Geist*") as "spirit" rather than "mind," and in harmony with this the title of Hegel's work will appear in the text as *The Phenomenology of the Spirit*.—EDITOR.]

formulating a philosophy of life? Such is the major difficulty which justifies our search for a favorable structure within the domain of *phenomenology* or, to return to our initial image, for the young plant onto which we can graft the hermeneutic slip.

II. GRAFTING HERMENEUTICS ONTO PHENOMENOLOGY

THERE ARE TWO WAYS to ground hermeneutics in phenomenology. There is the short route, which I shall consider first, and the long route, the one I propose to travel. The short route is the one taken by an *ontology of understanding*, after the manner of Heidegger. I call such an ontology of understanding the "short route" because, breaking with any discussion of *method*, it carries itself directly to the level of an ontology of finite being in order there to recover *understanding*, no longer as a mode of knowledge, but rather as a mode of being. One does not enter this ontology of understanding little by little; one does not reach it by degrees, deepening the methodological requirements of exegesis, history, or psychoanalysis: one is transported there by a sudden reversal of the question. Instead of asking: On what condition can a knowing subject understand a text or history? one asks: What kind of being is it whose being consists of understanding? The hermeneutic problem thus becomes a problem of the Analytic of this being, *Dasein*, which exists through understanding.

Before saying why I propose to follow a more roundabout, more arduous path, starting with linguistic and semantic considerations, I wish to give full credit to this ontology of understanding. If I begin by giving due consideration to Heidegger's philosophy, it is because I do not hold it to be a contrary solution; that is to say, his Analytic of *Dasein* is not an alternative which would force us to choose between an ontology of understanding and an epistemology of interpretation. The long route which I propose also aspires to carry reflection to the level of an ontology, but it will do so by degrees, following successive investigations into semantics (in part III of this essay) and reflection (part IV). The doubt I express toward the end of this section is concerned only with the possibility of the making of a direct ontology, free at the outset from any methodological requirements and consequently outside the circle of interpretation whose theory this ontology formulates. But it is the *desire* for this ontology

which animates our enterprise and which keeps it from sinking into either a linguistic philosophy like Wittgenstein's or a reflective philosophy of the neo-Kantian sort. My problem will be exactly this: what happens to an epistemology of interpretation, born of a reflection on exegesis, on the method of history, on psychoanalysis, on the phenomenology of religion, etc., when it is touched, animated, and, as we might say, inspired by an ontology of understanding?

Let us then take a look at the requirements of this ontology of understanding.

In order to thoroughly understand the sense of the revolution in thought that this ontology proposes, we must in one leap arrive at the end of the development running from Husserl's *Logical Investigations* to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, prepared to ask ourselves later what in Husserl's phenomenology seems significant in relation to this revolution in thought. What must thus be considered in its full radicalness is the reversal of the question itself, a reversal which, in place of an epistemology of interpretation, sets up an ontology of understanding.

It is a question of avoiding every way of formulating the problem *erkenntnistheoretisch* and, consequently, of giving up the idea that hermeneutics is a *method* able to compete on an equal basis with the method of the natural sciences. To assign a method to understanding is to remain entangled in the presuppositions of objective knowledge and the prejudices of the Kantian theory of knowledge. One must deliberately move outside the enchanted circle of the problematic of subject and object and question oneself about being. But, in order to question oneself about being in general, it is first necessary to question oneself about that being which is the "there" of all being, about *Dasein*, that is, about that being which exists in the mode of understanding being. Understanding is thus no longer a mode of knowledge but a mode of being, the mode of that being which exists through understanding.

I fully accept the movement toward this complete reversal of the relationship between understanding and being; moreover, it fulfills the deepest wish of Dilthey's philosophy, because for him life was the prime concept. In his own work, historical understanding was not exactly the counterpart of the theory of nature; the relationship between life and its expressions was rather the common root of the double relationship of man to nature and of man to history. If we follow this suggestion, the problem is not to strengthen historical knowledge in the face of physical

knowledge but to burrow under scientific knowledge, taken in all its generality, in order to reach a relation between historical being and the whole of being that is more primordial than the subject-object relation in the theory of knowledge.

If the problem of hermeneutics is posed in these ontological terms, of what help is Husserl's phenomenology? The question invites us to move from Heidegger back to Husserl and to reinterpret the latter in Heideggerian terms. What we first encounter on the way back is, of course, the later Husserl, the Husserl of the *Crisis*; it is in him first of all that we must seek the phenomenological foundation of this ontology. His contribution to hermeneutics is twofold. On the one hand, it is in the last phase of phenomenology that the critique of "objectivism" is carried to its final consequences. This critique of objectivism concerns the hermeneutic problem, not only indirectly, because it contests the claim of the epistemology of the natural sciences to provide the only valid methodological model for the human sciences, but also directly, because it calls into question the Diltheyan attempt to provide for the *Geisteswissenschaften* a method as objective as that of the natural sciences. On the other hand, Husserl's final phenomenology joins its critique of objectivism to a positive problematic which clears the way for an ontology of understanding. This new problematic has as its theme the *Lebenswelt*, the "life-world," that is, a level of experience anterior to the subject-object relation, which provided the central theme for all the various kinds of neo-Kantianism.

If, then, the later Husserl is enlisted in this subversive undertaking, which aims at substituting an ontology of understanding for an epistemology of interpretation, the early Husserl, the Husserl who goes from the *Logical Investigations* to the *Cartesian Meditations*, is held in grave suspicion. It is he, of course, who cleared the way by designating the subject as an intentional pole, directed outward,² and by giving, as the correlate of this subject,

2. [The French term used here to describe the subject is *porteur de visée*, which in turn renders the German *die Meinung*, employed frequently by Husserl. The French substantive (*visée*) and verb (*viser*) are often translated in English as "intention" and "to intend," respectively. When asked about his use of the term, Ricoeur himself stressed the outward directedness of intention, the fact that the subject points toward or aims at its object. Indeed, in expressions such as *visée intentionnelle* he makes it impossible to view *visée* and *intention* as completely equivalent terms. In the present essay (and elsewhere in the book, as well.—Ed.) *visée* and *viser* have been rendered variously by "directed outward," "aim," and "intention," according to the context in which they appear.—TRANSLATOR.]

not a nature but a field of meanings. Considered retrospectively from the point of view of the early Husserl and especially from the point of view of Heidegger, the early phenomenology can appear as the very first challenge to objectivism, since what it calls phenomena are precisely the correlates of intentional life. It remains, nevertheless, that the early Husserl only reconstructed a new idealism, close to the neo-Kantianism he fought: the reduction of the thesis of the world is actually a reduction of the question of being to the question of the sense of being; the sense of being, in turn, is reduced to a simple correlate of the subjective modes of intention [*visée*].

It is thus finally against the early Husserl, against the alternately Platonizing and idealizing tendencies of his theory of meaning and intentionality, that the theory of understanding has been erected. And if the later Husserl points to this ontology, it is because his effort to reduce being failed and because, consequently, the ultimate result of phenomenology escaped the initial project. It is in spite of itself that phenomenology discovers, in place of an idealist subject locked within its system of meanings, a living being which from all time has, as the horizon of all its intentions, a world, the world.

In this way, we find delimited a field of meanings anterior to the constitution of a mathematized nature, such as we have represented it since Galileo, a field of meanings anterior to objectivity for a knowing subject. Before objectivity, there is the horizon of the world; before the subject of the theory of knowledge, there is operative life, which Husserl sometimes calls anonymous, not because he is returning by this detour to an impersonal Kantian subject, but because the subject which has objects is itself derived from this operative life.

We see the degree of radicality to which the problem of understanding and that of truth are carried. The question of historicity is no longer the question of historical knowledge conceived as method. Now it designates the manner in which the existent "is with" existents. Understanding is no longer the response of the human sciences to the naturalistic explanation; it involves a manner of being akin to being, prior to the encounter with particular beings. At the same time, life's ability to freely stand at a distance in respect to itself, to transcend itself, becomes a structure of finite being. If the historian can measure himself against the thing itself, if he can compare himself to the known, it is because both he and his object are historical. Making this historical character explicit is thus prior to any methodology.

What was a limit to science—namely, the historicity of being—becomes a constituting element of being. What was a paradox—namely, the relation of the interpreter to his object—becomes an ontological trait.

Such is the revolution brought about by an ontology of understanding. Understanding becomes an aspect of Dasein's "project" and of its "openness to being." The question of truth is no longer the question of method; it is the question of the manifestation of being for a being whose existence consists in understanding being.

However great may be the extraordinarily seductive power of this fundamental ontology, I nevertheless propose to explore another path, to join the hermeneutic problem to phenomenology in a different manner. Why this retreat before the Analytic of Dasein? For the following two reasons. With Heidegger's radical manner of questioning, the problems that initiated our investigation not only remain unresolved but are lost from sight. How, we asked, can an organon be given to exegesis, to the clear comprehension of texts? How can the historical sciences be founded in the face of the natural sciences? How can the conflict of rival interpretations be arbitrated? These problems are not properly considered in a fundamental hermeneutics, and this by design: this hermeneutics is intended not to resolve them but to dissolve them. Moreover, Heidegger has not wanted to consider any particular problem concerning the understanding of this or that being. He wanted to retrain our eye and redirect our gaze; he wanted us to subordinate historical knowledge to ontological understanding, as the derived form of a primordial form. But he gives us no way to show in what sense historical understanding, properly speaking, is derived from this primordial understanding. Is it not better, then, to begin with the derived forms of understanding and to show in them the signs of their derivation? This implies that the point of departure be taken on the same level on which understanding operates, that is, on the level of language.

The first observation leads to the second: if the reversal from epistemological understanding to the being who understands is to be possible, we must be able to describe directly—without prior epistemological concern—the privileged being of Dasein, such as it is constituted in itself, and thus be able to recover understanding as one of these modes of being. The difficulty in passing from understanding as a mode of knowledge to understanding as a mode of being consists in the following: the understanding which is the result of the Analytic of Dasein is

precisely the understanding through which and in which this being understands itself as being. Is it not once again *within language* itself that we must seek the indication that understanding is a mode of being?

These two objections also contain a positive proposition: that of substituting, for the short route of the Analytic of Dasein, the long route which begins by analyses of language. In this way we will continue to keep in contact with the disciplines which seek to practice interpretation in a methodical manner, and we will resist the temptation to separate *truth*, characteristic of understanding, from the *method* put into operation by disciplines which have sprung from exegesis. If, then, a new problematic of existence is to be worked out, this must start from and be based on the semantic elucidation of the concept of interpretation common to all the hermeneutic disciplines. This semantics will be organized around the central theme of meanings with multiple or multivocal senses or what we might call symbolic senses (an equivalence we will justify in due time).

I will indicate immediately how I intend to reach the question of existence by the detour of this semantics. A purely semantic elucidation remains suspended until one shows that the understanding of multivocal or symbolic expressions is a moment of *self-understanding*; the *semantic* approach thus entails a *reflective* approach. But the subject that interprets himself while interpreting signs is no longer the *cogito*: rather, he is a being who discovers, by the exegesis of his own life, that he is placed in being before he places and possesses himself. In this way, hermeneutics would discover a manner of existing which would remain from start to finish a *being-interpreted*. Reflection alone, by suppressing itself as reflection, can reach the ontological roots of understanding. Yet this is what always happens in language, and it occurs through the movement of reflection. Such is the arduous route we are going to follow.

III. THE LEVEL OF SEMANTICS

IT IS FIRST OF ALL AND ALWAYS in language that all ontic or ontological understanding arrives at its expression. It is thus not vain to look to semantics for an *axis* of reference for the whole of the hermeneutic *field*. Exegesis has already accustomed us to the idea that a text has several meanings, that

these meanings overlap, that the spiritual meaning is "transferred" (Saint Augustine's *translata signa*) from the historical or literal meaning because of the latter's surplus of meaning. Schleiermacher and Dilthey have also taught us to consider texts, documents, and manuscripts as expressions of life which have become fixed through writing. The exegete follows the reverse movement of this objectification of the life-forces in psychical connections first and then in historical series. This objectification and this fixation constitute another form of meaning transfer. In Nietzsche, values must be interpreted because they are expressions of the strength and the weakness of the will to power. Moreover, in Nietzsche, life itself is interpretation: in this way, philosophy itself becomes the interpretation of interpretations. Finally, Freud, under the heading of "dream work," examined a series of procedures which are notable in that they "transpose" (*Entstellung*) a hidden meaning, submitting it to a distortion which both shows and conceals the latent sense in the manifest meaning. He followed the ramifications of this distortion in the cultural expressions of art, morality, and religion and in this way constructed an exegesis of culture very similar to Nietzsche's. It is thus not senseless to try to zero in on what could be called the *semantic node* of every hermeneutics, whether general or individual, fundamental or particular. It appears that their common element, which is found everywhere, from exegesis to psychoanalysis, is a certain architecture of meaning, which can be termed "double meaning" or "multiple meaning," whose role in every instance, although in a different manner, is to show while concealing. It is thus within the semantics of the shown-yet-concealed, within the semantics of multivocal expressions, that this analysis of language seems to me to be confined.

Having for my part explored a well-defined area of this semantics, the language of avowal, which constitutes the *symbolism of evil*, I propose to call these multivocal expressions "symbolic." Thus, I give a narrower sense to the word "symbol" than authors who, like Cassirer, call symbolic any apprehension of reality by means of signs, from perception, myth, and art to science; but I give it a broader sense than those authors who, starting from Latin rhetoric or the neo-Platonic tradition, reduce the symbol to analogy. I define "symbol" as any structure of signification in which a direct, primary, literal meaning designates, in addition, another meaning which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the

first. This circumscription of expressions with a double meaning properly constitutes the hermeneutic field.

In its turn, the concept of interpretation also receives a distinct meaning. I propose to give it the same extension I gave to the symbol. *Interpretation*, we will say, is the work of thought which consists in deciphering the hidden meaning in the apparent meaning, in unfolding the levels of meaning implied in the literal meaning. In this way I retain the initial reference to exegesis, that is, to the interpretation of hidden meanings. Symbol and interpretation thus become correlative concepts; there is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning, and it is in interpretation that the plurality of meanings is made manifest.

From this double delimitation of the semantic field—in regard to symbols and in regard to interpretation—there results a certain number of tasks, which I shall only briefly inventory.

In regard to symbolic expressions, the task of linguistic analysis seems to me to be twofold. On the one hand, there is the matter of beginning an enumeration of symbolic forms which will be as full and as complete as possible. This inductive path is the only one accessible at the start of the investigation, since the question is precisely to determine the structure common to these diverse modalities of symbolic expression. Putting aside any concern for a hasty reduction to unity, this enumeration should include the cosmic symbols brought to light by a phenomenology of religion—like those of Van der Leeuw, Maurice Leenhardt, and Mircea Eliade; the dream symbolism revealed by psychoanalysis—with all its equivalents in folklore, legends, proverbs, and myths; the verbal creations of the poet, following the guideline of sensory, visual, acoustic, or other images or following the symbolism of space and time. In spite of their being grounded in different ways—in the physiognomical qualities of the cosmos, in sexual symbolism, in sensory imagery—all these symbolisms find their expression in the element of language. There is no symbolism before man speaks, even if the power of the symbol is grounded much deeper. It is in language that the cosmos, desire, and the imaginary reach expression; speech is always necessary if the world is to be recovered and made hierophany. Likewise, dreams remain closed to us until they have been carried to the level of language through narration.

This enumeration of the modalities of symbolic expression calls for a criteriology as its complement, a criteriology which would have the task of determining the semantic constitution of

related forms, such as metaphor, allegory, and simile. What is the function of analogy in "transfer of meaning"? Are there ways other than analogy of relating one meaning to another meaning? How can the dream mechanisms discovered by Freud be integrated into this symbolic meaning? Can they be superimposed on known rhetorical forms like metaphor and metonymy? Do the mechanisms of distortion, set in motion by what Freud terms "dream work," cover the same semantic field as the symbolic operations attested to by the phenomenology of religion? Such are the structural questions a criteriology would have to resolve.

This criteriology is, in turn, inseparable from a study of the operations of interpretation. The field of symbolic expressions and the field of the operations of interpretation have in fact been defined here in terms of each other. The problems posed by the symbol are consequently reflected in the methodology of interpretation. It is indeed notable that interpretation gives rise to very different, even opposing, methods. I have alluded to the phenomenology of religion and to psychoanalysis. They are as radically opposed as possible. There is nothing surprising in this: interpretation begins with the multiple determination of symbols—with their overdetermination, as one says in psychoanalysis; but each interpretation, by definition, reduces this richness, this multivocity, and "translates" the symbol according to its own frame of reference. It is the task of this criteriology to show that the form of interpretation is relative to the theoretical structure of the hermeneutic system being considered. Thus, the phenomenology of religion deciphers the religious object in rites, in myth, and in faith, but it does so on the basis of a problematic of the sacred which defines its theoretical structure. Psychoanalysis, on the contrary, sees only one dimension of the symbol: the dimension in which symbols are seen as derivatives of repressed desires. Consequently, it considers only the network of meanings constituted in the unconscious, beginning with the initial repression and elaborated by subsequent secondary repressions. Psychoanalysis cannot be reproached for this narrowness; it is its *raison d'être*. Psychoanalytic theory, what Freud called his metapsychology, confines the rules of decipherment to what could be called a semantics of desire. Psychoanalysis can find only what it seeks; what it seeks is the "economic" meaning of representations and affects operating in dreams, neuroses, art, morality, and religion. Psychoanalysis will thus be unable to find anything other than the disguised expressions of

representations and affects belonging to the most archaic of man's desires. This example well shows, on the single level of semantics, the fullness of a philosophical hermeneutics. It begins by an expanding investigation into symbolic forms and by a comprehensive analysis of symbolic structures. It proceeds by the confrontation of hermeneutic styles and by the critique of systems of interpretation, carrying the diversity of hermeneutic methods back to the structure of the corresponding theories. In this way it prepares itself to perform its highest task, which would be a true arbitration among the absolutist claims of each of the interpretations. By showing in what way each method expresses the form of a theory, philosophical hermeneutics justifies each method within the limits of its own theoretical circumscription. Such is the critical function of this hermeneutics taken at its purely semantic level.

Its multiple advantages are apparent. First of all, the semantic approach keeps hermeneutics in contact with methodologies as they are actually practiced and so does not run the risk of separating its concept of truth from the concept of method. Moreover, it assures the implantation of hermeneutics in phenomenology at the level at which the latter is most sure of itself, that is, at the level of the theory of meaning developed in the *Logical Investigations*. Of course, Husserl would not have accepted the idea of meaning as irreducibly nonunivocal. He explicitly excludes this possibility in the First Investigation, and this is indeed why the phenomenology of the *Logical Investigations* cannot be hermeneutic. But, if we part from Husserl, we do so within the framework of his theory of signifying expressions; it is here that the divergence begins and not at the uncertain level of the phenomenology of the *Lebenswelt*. Finally, by carrying the debate to the level of language, I have the feeling of encountering other currently viable philosophies on a common terrain. Of course, the semantics of multivocal expressions opposes the theories of metalanguage which would hope to remake existing languages according to ideal models. The opposition is as sharp here as in regard to Husserl's ideal of univocity. On the other hand, this semantics enters into a fruitful dialogue with the doctrines arising from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and from the analysis of ordinary language in the Anglo-Saxon countries. It is likewise at this level that a general hermeneutics rejoins the preoccupations of modern biblical exegesis descending from Bultmann and his school. I see this general hermeneutics as a contribution to the grand philosophy

of language which we lack today. We have at our disposal today a symbolic logic, a science of exegesis, an anthropology, and a psychoanalysis; and, for the first time perhaps, we are capable of encompassing as a single question the reintegration of human discourse. The progress of these dissimilar disciplines has at once made manifest and worsened the dislocation of this discourse. The unity of human speech is the problem today.

IV. THE LEVEL OF REFLECTION

THE PRECEDING ANALYSIS, dealing with the semantic structure of expressions with double or multiple meanings, is the narrow gate through which hermeneutic philosophy must pass if it does not want to cut itself off from those disciplines which, in their method, turn to interpretation: exegesis, history, and psychoanalysis. But a semantics of expressions with multiple meanings is not enough to qualify hermeneutics as philosophy. A linguistic analysis which would treat these significations as a whole closed in on itself would ineluctably set up language as an absolute. This hypostasis of language, however, repudiates the basic intention of a sign, which is to hold "for," thus transcending itself and suppressing itself in what it intends. Language itself, as a signifying milieu, must be referred to existence.

By making this admission, we join Heidegger once again: what animates the movement of surpassing the linguistic level is the desire for an ontology; it is the demand this ontology makes on an analysis which would remain a prisoner of language.

Yet how can semantics be integrated with ontology without becoming vulnerable to the objections we raised earlier against an Analytic of Dasein? The intermediary step, in the direction of existence, is reflection, that is, the link between the understanding of signs and self-understanding. It is in the self that we have the opportunity to discover an existent.

In proposing to relate symbolic language to self-understanding, I think I fulfill the deepest wish of hermeneutics. The purpose of all interpretation is to conquer a remoteness, a distance between the past cultural epoch to which the text belongs and the interpreter himself. By overcoming this distance, by making himself contemporary with the text, the exegete can appropriate its meaning to himself: foreign, he makes it familiar, that is, he

makes it his own. It is thus the growth of his own understanding of himself that he pursues through his understanding of the other. Every hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others.

So I do not hesitate to say that hermeneutics must be grafted onto phenomenology, not only at the level of the theory of meaning expressed in the *Logical Investigations*, but also at the level of the problematic of the *cogito* as it unfolds from *Ideen I* to the *Cartesian Meditations*. But neither do I hesitate to add that the graft changes the wild stock! We have already seen how the introduction of ambiguous meanings into the semantic field forces us to abandon the ideal of univocity extolled in the *Logical Investigations*. It must now be understood that by joining these multivocal meanings to self-knowledge we profoundly transform the problematic of the *cogito*. Let us say straight off that it is this internal reform of reflective philosophy which will later justify our discovering there a new dimension of existence. But, before saying how the *cogito* is exploded, let us say how it is enriched and deepened by this recourse to hermeneutics.

Let us in fact reflect upon what the self of self-understanding signifies, whether we appropriate the sense of a psychoanalytic interpretation or that of a textual exegesis. In truth, we do not know beforehand, but only afterward, although our desire to understand ourselves has alone guided this appropriation. Why is this so? Why is the self that guides the interpretation able to recover itself only as a result of the interpretation?

There are two reasons for this: it must be stated, first, that the celebrated Cartesian *cogito*, which grasps itself directly in the experience of doubt, is a truth as vain as it is invincible. I do not deny that it is a truth; it is a truth which posits itself, and as such it can be neither verified nor deduced. It posits at once a being and an act, an existence and an operation of thought: I am, I think; to exist, for me, is to think; I exist *insofar as* I think. But this truth is a vain truth; it is like a first step which cannot be followed by any other, so long as the *ego* of the *ego cogito* has not been recaptured in the mirror of its objects, of its works, and, finally, of its acts. Reflection is blind intuition if it is not mediated by what Dilthey called the expressions in which life objectifies itself. Or, to use the language of Jean Nabert, reflection is nothing other than the appropriation of our act of existing by means of a critique applied to the works and the acts which are the signs of this act of existing. Thus, reflection is a critique, not in the Kantian sense of a justification of science

and duty, but in the sense that the *cogito* can be recovered only by the detour of a decipherment of the documents of its life. Reflection is the appropriation of our effort to exist and of our desire to be by means of the works which testify to this effort and this desire.

The *cogito* is not only a truth as vain as it is invincible; we must add, as well, that it is like an empty place which has, from all time, been occupied by a false *cogito*. We have indeed learned, from all the exegetic disciplines and from psychoanalysis in particular, that so-called immediate consciousness is first of all "false consciousness." Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud have taught us to unmask its tricks. Henceforth it becomes necessary to join a critique of false consciousness to any rediscovery of the subject of the *cogito* in the documents of its life; a philosophy of reflection must be just the opposite of a philosophy of consciousness.

A second reason can be added to the preceding one: not only is the "I" able to recapture itself only in the expressions of life that objectify it, but the textual exegesis of consciousness collides with the initial "misinterpretation" of false consciousness. Moreover, since Schleiermacher, we know that hermeneutics is found wherever there was first misinterpretation.

Thus, reflection must be doubly indirect: first, because existence is evinced only in the documents of life, but also because consciousness is first of all false consciousness, and it is always necessary to rise by means of a corrective critique from misunderstanding to understanding.

At the end of this second stage, which we have termed the reflective stage, I should like to show how the results of the first stage, which we termed the semantic stage, are consolidated.

During the first stage, we took as a fact the existence of a language irreducible to univocal meanings. It is a fact that the avowal of guilty consciousness passes through a symbolism of the stain, of sin, or of guilt; it is a fact that repressed desire is expressed in a symbolism which confirms its stability through dreams, proverbs, legends, and myths; it is a fact that the sacred is expressed in a symbolism of cosmic elements: sky, earth, water, fire. The philosophical use of this language, however, remains open to the logician's objection that equivocal language can provide only fallacious arguments. The justification of hermeneutics can be radical only if one seeks in the very nature of reflective thought the principle of a logic of double meaning. This logic is then no longer a formal logic but a transcendental

logic. It is established at the level of conditions of possibility: not the conditions of the objectivity of a nature, but the conditions of the appropriation of our desire to be. It is in this sense that the logic of the double meaning proper to hermeneutics can be called transcendental. If the debate is not carried to this level, one will quickly be driven into an untenable situation; in vain will one attempt to maintain the debate at a purely semantic level and to make room for equivocal meanings alongside univocal meanings, for the theoretical distinction between two kinds of equivocalness—equivocalness through a surplus of meaning, found in the exegetic sciences, and equivocalness through the confusion of meanings, which logic chases away—cannot be justified at the level of semantics alone. Two logics cannot exist at the same level. Only a problematic of reflection justifies the semantics of double meaning.

V. THE EXISTENTIAL LEVEL

AT THE END OF THIS ITINERARY, which has led us from a problematic of language to a problematic of reflection, I should like to show how we can, by retracing our steps, join a problematic of existence. The ontology of understanding which Heidegger sets up directly by a sudden reversal of the problem, substituting the consideration of a mode of being for that of a mode of knowing, can be, for us who proceed indirectly and by degrees, only a horizon, an aim rather than a given fact. A separate ontology is beyond our grasp: it is only within the movement of interpretation that we apperceive the being we interpret. The ontology of understanding is implied in the methodology of interpretation, following the ineluctable "hermeneutic circle" which Heidegger himself taught us to delineate. Moreover, it is only in a conflict of rival hermeneutics that we perceive something of the being to be interpreted: a unified ontology is as inaccessible to our method as a separate ontology. Rather, in every instance, each hermeneutics discovers the aspect of existence which finds it as method.

This double warning nevertheless must not deter us from clearing the ontological foundations of the semantic and reflective analysis which precedes it. An implied ontology, and even more so a truncated ontology, is still, is already, an ontology.

We will follow a track open to us, the one offered by a

philosophical reflection on psychoanalysis. What can we expect from the latter in the way of a fundamental ontology? Two things: first, a true dismissal of the classical problematic of the subject as consciousness; then, a restoration of the problematic of existence as desire.

It is indeed through a critique of consciousness that psychoanalysis points to ontology. The interpretation it proposes to us of dreams, fantasies, myths, and symbols always contests to some extent the pretension of consciousness in setting itself up as the origin of meaning. The struggle against narcissism—the Freudian equivalent of the false *cogito*—leads to the discovery that language is deeply rooted in desire, in the instinctual impulses of life. The philosopher who surrenders himself to this strict schooling is led to practice a true ascesis of subjectivity, allowing himself to be dispossessed of the origin of meaning. This abandonment is of course yet another turn of reflection, but it must become the real loss of the most archaic of all objects: the self. It must then be said of the subject of reflection what the Gospel says of the soul: to be saved, it must be lost. All of psychoanalysis speaks to me of lost objects to be found again symbolically. Reflective philosophy must integrate this discovery with its own task; the self [*le moi*] must be lost in order to find the “I” [*le je*]. This is why psychoanalysis is, if not a philosophical discipline, at least a discipline for the philosopher: the unconscious forces the philosopher to deal with the arrangement of significations on a level which is set apart in relation to the immediate subject. This is what Freudian topography teaches: the most archaic significations are organized in a “place” of meaning that is separate from the place where immediate consciousness reigns. The realism of the unconscious, the topographic and economic treatment of representations, fantasies, symptoms, and symbols, appears finally as the condition of a hermeneutics free from the prejudices of the ego.

Freud invites us, then, to ask anew the question of the relationship between signification and desire, between meaning and energy, that is, finally, between language and life. This was already Leibniz’ problem in the *Monadology*: how is representation joined to appetite? It was equally Spinoza’s problem in the *Ethics*, Book III: how do the degrees of the adequation of ideas express the degrees of the *conatus*, of the effort which constitutes us? In its own way, psychoanalysis leads us back to the same question: how is the order of significations included within the order of life? This regression from meaning to desire is the

indication of a possible transcendence of reflection in the direction of existence. Now an expression we used above, but whose meaning was only anticipated, is justified: by understanding ourselves, we said, we appropriate to ourselves the meaning of our desire to be or of our effort to exist. Existence, we can now say, is desire and effort. We term it effort in order to stress its positive energy and its dynamism; we term it desire in order to designate its lack and its poverty: Eros is the son of Poros and Penia. Thus the *cogito* is no longer the pretentious act it was initially—I mean its pretension of positing itself; it appears as *already* posited in being.

But if the problematic of reflection can and must surpass itself in a problematic of existence, as a philosophical meditation on psychoanalysis suggests, it is always in and through interpretation that this surpassing occurs: it is in deciphering the tricks of desire that the desire at the root of meaning and reflection is discovered. I cannot hypostasize this desire outside the process of interpretation; it always remains a being-interpreted. I have hints of it behind the enigmas of consciousness, but I cannot grasp it in itself without the danger of creating a mythology of instinctual forces, as sometimes happens in coarse conceptions of psychoanalysis. It is behind itself that the *cogito* discovers, through the work of interpretation, something like an *archaeology of the subject*. Existence is glimpsed in this archaeology, but it remains entangled in the movement of deciphering to which it gives rise.

This decipherment, which psychoanalysis, understood as hermeneutics, compels us to perform, other hermeneutic methods force us to perform as well, although in different ways. The existence that psychoanalysis discovers is that of desire; it is existence as desire, and this existence is revealed principally in an archaeology of the subject. Another hermeneutics—that of the philosophy of the spirit, for example—suggests another manner of shifting the origin of sense, so that it is no longer behind the subject but in front of it. I would be willing to say that there is a hermeneutics of God’s coming, of the approach of his Kingdom, a hermeneutics representing the prophecy of consciousness. In the final analysis, this is what animates Hegel’s *Phenomenology of the Spirit*. I mention it here because its mode of interpretation is diametrically opposed to Freud’s. Psychoanalysis offered us a regression toward the archaic; the phenomenology of the spirit offers us a movement in which each figure finds its meaning, not in what precedes but in what follows.

Consciousness is thus drawn outside itself, in front of itself, toward a meaning in motion, where each stage is suppressed and retained in the following stage. In this way, a teleology of the subject opposes an archaeology of the subject. But what is important for our intention is that this teleology, just like Freudian archaeology, is constituted only in the movement of interpretation, which understands one figure through another figure. The spirit is realized only in this crossing from one figure to another; the spirit is the very dialectic of these figures by means of which the subject is drawn out of his infancy, torn from his archaeology. This is why philosophy remains a hermeneutics, that is, a reading of the hidden meaning inside the text of the apparent meaning. It is the task of this hermeneutics to show that existence arrives at expression, at meaning, and at reflection only through the continual exegesis of all the significations that come to light in the world of culture. Existence becomes a self—human and adult—only by appropriating this meaning, which first resides “outside,” in works, institutions, and cultural monuments in which the life of the spirit is objectified.

It is within the same ontological horizon that the phenomenology of religion—both Van der Leeuw’s and Mircea Eliade’s—would have to be interrogated. As phenomenology it is simply a description of rite, of myth, of belief, that is, of the forms of behavior, language, and feeling by which man directs himself toward something “sacred.” But if phenomenology can remain at this descriptive level, the reflective resumption of the work of interpretation goes much further: by understanding himself in and through the signs of the sacred, man performs the most radical abandonment of himself that it is possible to imagine. This dispossession exceeds that occasioned by psychoanalysis and Hegelian phenomenology, whether they are considered individually or whether their effects are combined. An archaeology and a teleology still unveil an *archē* and a *telos* which the subject, while understanding them, can command. It is not the same in the case of the sacred, which manifests itself in a phenomenology of religion. The latter symbolically designates the alpha of all archaeology, the omega of all teleology; this alpha and this omega the subject would be unable to command. The sacred calls upon man and in this call manifests itself as that which commands his existence because it posits this existence absolutely, as effort and as desire to be.

Thus, the most opposite hermeneutics point, each in its own way, to the ontological roots of comprehension. Each in its own

way affirms the dependence of the self upon existence. Psychoanalysis shows this dependence in the archaeology of the subject, the phenomenology of the spirit in the teleology of figures, the phenomenology of religion in the signs of the sacred.

Such are the ontological implications of interpretation.

The ontology proposed here is in no way separable from interpretation; it is caught inside the circle formed by the conjunction of the work of interpretation and the interpreted being. It is thus not a triumphant ontology at all; it is not even a science, since it is unable to avoid the *risk* of interpretation; it cannot even entirely escape the internal warfare that the various hermeneutics indulge in among themselves.

Nevertheless, in spite of its precariousness, this militant a truncated ontology is qualified to affirm that rival hermeneutics are not mere “language games,” as would be the case if their absolutist pretensions continued to oppose one another on the sole level of language. For a linguistic philosophy, all interpretations are equally valid within the limits of the theory which founds the given rules of reading. These equally valid interpretations remain language games until it is shown that each interpretation is grounded in a particular existential function. Thus, psychoanalysis has its foundation in an archaeology of the subject, the phenomenology of the spirit in a teleology, and the phenomenology of religion in an eschatology.

Can one proceed any further? Can these different existential functions be joined in a unitary figure, as Heidegger tried to do in the second part of *Being and Time*? This is the question the present study leaves unresolved. But, if it remains unresolved, it is not hopeless. In the dialectic of archaeology, teleology, and eschatology an ontological structure is manifested, one capable of reassembling the discordant interpretations on the linguistic level. But this coherent figure of the being which we ourselves are, in which rival interpretations are implanted, is given nowhere but in this dialectic of interpretations. In this respect, hermeneutics is unsurpassable. Only a hermeneutics instructed by symbolic figures can show that these different modalities of existence belong to a single problematic, for it is finally through the richest symbols that the unity of these multiple interpretations is assured. These symbols alone carry all the vectors, both regressive and progressive, that the various hermeneutics dissociate. True symbols contain all hermeneutics, those which are directed toward the emergence of new meanings and those which are directed toward the resurgence of archaic fantasies.

It is in this sense, beginning with our introduction, that we have insisted that existence as it relates to a hermeneutic philosophy always remains an interpreted existence. It is in the work of interpretation that this philosophy discovers the multiple modalities of the dependence of the self—its dependence on desire glimpsed in an archaeology of the subject, its dependence on the spirit glimpsed in its teleology, its dependence on the sacred glimpsed in its eschatology. It is by developing an archaeology, a teleology, and an eschatology that reflection suppresses itself as reflection.

In this way, ontology is indeed the promised land for a philosophy that begins with language and with reflection; but, like Moses, the speaking and reflecting subject can only glimpse this land before dying.