RUDI VISKER

Truth and Singularity

Taking Foucault into Phenomenology

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RUDI VISKER

TRUTH AND SINGULARITY

Taking Foucault into Phenomenology

"Waarachtig,'t is hier gezellig"

Voor André
van Nescio's *Uitvreter*

ABBREVIATIONS

The following is a list of cross-chapter abbreviations for Heidegger, Foucault, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas. Further abbreviations for these or other authors which are restricted to a chapter or a section thereof will be introduced in the notes. When appropriate the English pagination will be followed, after the solidus, by the pagination of the original.

Throughout this book all italics, unless otherwise indicated, will be my own. Whether or not a reference is given, double quotation marks, even around single words, always indicate that I am using a term by the author I discuss. Single quotation marks will be used for all other cases.

Heidegger:

BT *Being and Time* (transl. J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson), Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1988; *Sein und Zeit*, Tübingen, Max Niemeyer, 1979 (15th edition).

GA followed by the number corresponding to Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, Frankfurt a.M., Vittorio Klostermann. Details are given when first introduced.

Foucault:

AK *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (transl. A.M. Sheridan-Smith), London, Tavistock, 1974.

ODis *The Order of Discourse*, in R. Young (ed.), *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, Boston/London and Henley, Routledge, 1981.

OT *The Order of Things. An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (transl. anon.), London, Tavistock, 1977.

Merleau-Ponty:

PP *Phenomenology of Perception* (transl. C. Smith), London and Henley/New Jersey, Routledge & Kegan Paul/The Humanities Press, 1981; *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris, Gallimard (Collection TEL), 1945.

PrP *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics* (transl. J.M. Edie), Northwestern U.P., Evanston Ill., 1964.

PW *The Prose of the World* (transl. J. O'Neill), Northwestern U.P., Evanston Ill., 1973; *La prose du monde*, Paris, Gallimard (nrf), 1969.

S *Signs* (transl. R.C. McCleary), Evanston Ill., Northwestern U.P., 1964; *Signes*, Paris, Gallimard (nrf), 1960.

SO *Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne - résumé de cours* 1949-1952, Grenoble, Cynara, 1988.

TLC *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952-1960* (transl. J. O'Neill), Northwestern U.P., Evanston Ill., 1970; *Résumés de cours. Collège de France* 1952-1960, Paris, Gallimard (Collection TEL), 1968.

VI *The Visible and the Invisible. Followed by Working Notes* (transl. A. Lingis), Northwestern U.P., Evanston Ill., 1970; *Le Visible et l'Invisible suivi de notes de travail*, Paris, Gallimard (Collection TEL), 1964.

Levinas:

CPP *Collected Philosophical Papers* (transl. A. Lingis), Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster, Martinus Nijhoff/Kluwer, 1987.

DF *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism* (transl. S. Hand), London, The Athlone Press, 1990; *Difficile Liberté. Essais sur le judaïsme* (3rd edition), Paris, Albin Michel (biblio essais), 1976 (1963[1]).

EE *Existence and Existents* (transl. A. Lingis), Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague, 1978; *De l'existence à l'existent* (2nd edition), Paris, Vrin, 1990 (1947[1]).

TI *Totality and Infinity. An Essay on Exteriority* (transl. A. Lingis), Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer, 1991; *Totalité et Infini. Essai sur l'exteriorité* (4th edition), The Hague/Boston/Lancaster, Martinus Nijhoff/Kluwer, 1984 (1961[1]).

TO *Time and the Other (and additional essays)* (transl. R.A. Cohen), Duquesne U.P., Pittsburgh, 1987; *Le temps et l'autre* (2nd edition), Paris, Quadrige/P.U.F., 1985 (1948[1]).

OB *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (transl. A. Lingis), Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer, 1991; *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, Dordrecht/Boston/London, Kluwer, 1988 (1974[1]).

One does not write solely for oneself,
or solely for truth, but not simply for others either.
One writes.

M. Merleau-Ponty

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INTRODUCTION

THE PART OF THE SUBJECT

At the origin of these essays, an increasing weariness produced by all those attempts to oppose what came to be known as Foucault's 'post-structuralism' to phenomenology – as if the two were incompatible and as if one could only proceed with thought after having chosen sides. And an equal reluctance to join those who pretended they could carry on as they had before since, quite obviously, there were no sides to choose, 'Foucault' being but the latest example of a relativism that one could easily ignore since it had, like all relativism, already refuted itself by daring to speak. And, finally, behind that weariness and that reluctance, a suspicion that what these two reactions to 'Foucault' had in common was a refusal to go 'toward the things themselves' and thus a refusal to approach the texts that we refer to by that proper name as we would approach other phenomena: not as the body-object of a thought that we would have to locate as coming either 'before' or 'after' phenomenology, but as a series of statements that appear to us in a certain way and whose appearing reveals to us something about our own, finite being. I am thinking, for example, of those passages in *The Order of Things* in which Foucault tried to show how what we thought to be discontinuous, opposing positions, really belonged to a same 'archaeological' soil and how what we considered to be in continuity (like Natural History and biology) was in fact marked by the harsh caesura that separated two such 'epistemes'. The bewilderment with which one read these statements was not, I think, caused by the immense erudition displayed in them. It was rather, I am inclined to believe, the expression of a certain unease with which we discovered that from a certain point of view all those magnificent fortresses which people – and not the least important – had erected in order to gain immortality in that great and ongoing battle for the truth, were no more than ripples on the surface of what Foucault called knowledge (*le savoir*), or, at best, positions whose effort to win that fight suddenly strikes us as grotesque once the archaeologist has taught us to recognize in them the "tines" of a fork which provides them with their common 'ground': "If we question Classical thought at the level of what, archaeologically, made it possible, we perceive that the dissociation of the sign and resemblance in the early seventeenth century caused these new forms – probability, analysis, combination, and universal language system –

to emerge, not as successive themes engendering one another or driving one another out, but as a single network of necessities. And it was this network that made possible the individuals we term Hobbes, Berkeley, Hume, or Condillac" (OT 63).

'The individuals we term ...', – it is this depersonalizing syntax and the long list of names to which it gives rise, that betrays what was really at stake in *The Order of Things* : not a history of ideas or a history of opinions, but a dispassionate attempt to unearth the "general system of thought" (OT 75) which made possible the interplay of simultaneous and apparently irreconcilable opinions. But an attempt that had the strange force to make *us* feel insecure: what if there would be a similar network which made *us* possible? What if one day *we* would be part of a similar list?

Anti-relativism could point as much as it liked to the underlying performative self-contradiction in which this 'relativism' seemed to trap itself as soon as it was brought down to the level of its theses[1], it could not prevent Foucault from playing foul and giving, instead of a thesis that would summarize his position, example upon example that managed to both *fascinate* and *irritate* his readers. Irritation of course with the iconoclasm with which the archaeologist seems to want to toss our history books into the paper shredder; irritation also with the air of superiority with which he dismissed as a "tempest in a teapot"[2] what until then had seemed of highest importance. Fascination with that gaze which seemed to come from without, with that knowledge that seemed fundamental and representative of a deeper wisdom because it appeared to have tapped the very source of knowledge itself. But also irritation in the fascination since Foucault, not wanting to place that source in our subjectivity, deliberately made it inaccessible: "it is not possible for us to describe our own archive, since it is from within these rules that we speak" (AK 130). Irritating was not so much Foucault's idea that our knowledge had to be emancipated from the sovereignty of 'the' subject and that it could only be understood when we shifted its source to "an anonymous field whose configuration defines the possible position of speaking subjects" (AK 122). For we might have been

1. E.g. H. SIEGEL, *Relativism Refuted. A Critique of Contemporary Epistemological Relativism*, Dordrecht, D. Reidel, 1987; H. PUTNAM, *Reason, Truth and History*, Cambridge U.P., 1981, esp. pp.150-73 on Foucault's (self-defeating) relativism. I have found David CARR's 'Welt, Weltbild, Lebenswelt. Husserl und die Vertreter des Begriffsrelativismus' a great help in trying to approach the return of relativism in contemporary thought somewhat differently (in E. STRÖKER (ed.), *Lebenswelt und Wissenschaft in der Philosophie Edmund Husserls*, Frankfurt a.M., Vittorio Klostermann, 1979, pp. 32-44).

2. Cf. OT 262: "Their controversies may have stirred up a few waves and caused a few surface ripples; but they are no more than storms in a children's paddling pool." Foucault is speaking here, in the heady days of Althusserianism, about Ricardo and ... Marx!

prepared to give up our sovereignty had someone only told us what our submission consisted in, what form that anonymous field had, and what position we occupied in it. What disturbed us was that Foucault refused to become that someone who would finally reveal to us the outside of our thought and thus the significance of our significance, the meaning of our meaning. Unwilling to take the role of the new high priest of our existence, Foucault infuriated us because he confronted us with our fascination with what he refused to reveal and because he understood and dared to name that fascination: "they cannot bear (and one cannot but sympathize) to hear someone saying: 'Discourse is not life: its time is not your time; in it, you will not be reconciled to death' " (AK 211).

Instead of declaring the death of the subject, as our histories of philosophy would have us believe, it would seem that Foucault's archaeology was involved in a much more intricate attempt to 'de-centre' the subject: in pulling the subject out of the centre which it traditionally occupied, it was also suggesting that we should perhaps reconceive what we mean by 'death', 'mortality' and 'finitude'. For the decentred subject is a subject that is not only dependent on a law which lays down "what can be said" (AK 129 – Foucault's most succinct definition of an "archive"), but above all a subject that would either like to find access to that law (and thus to take up its place in the centre again) or, if that proves to be impossible, to simply consider itself and its own speech as a mere effect of a discourse that it doesn't control. But Foucault, as we have seen, frustrates both these ambitions: if 'discourse' does not reconcile the subject to death, it is not because discourse stands for the death of the subject, for that strangely anonymous structure into which it would disappear, but because it confronts the subject with the conditions of its appearance and with its desire to have access to these conditions. In frustrating that desire, in denying the subject access to its own 'archive', *Foucault is redefining the subject as that instance that would like to, but cannot disappear*. Discourse does not speak or think for us, it is not an anonymous subject that takes over the burden of subjectivity for us. Discourse, to the contrary, is what provides that burden with its weight since it puts the subject in a position in which it is neither fully constituting, nor fully constituted. A subject that would 'disappear' completely in its de-centredness, that would be completely absorbed in something else of which it is only the dependent effect, would not suffer from that burden, for the simple reason that it would no longer be there to feel its weight. A discursive objectivism would be but the other

side of the sort of subjectivism that 'Foucault' rightfully attacked[3]. Indeed, nothing would be gained if 'discourse' would simply have moved us, so to speak, from a subject that knows of no death to a death that no longer has a subject. The expression 'the death of the subject' only makes sense if it refers to a subject which, in being expelled from its traditional place in the centre, also finds itself bereft of the comfort of a decentred 'en-soi' where its speech would no longer have anything to do with it, since it would be spoken in its stead. Far from being itself an anonymous subject, 'discourse' is simply making *our own* subjectivity more anonymous, and less in our control than we had hoped it to be. And it thereby changes the meaning of our 'death'. 'Death' loses some of its terror, since it comes to stand for that situation where we will be finally relieved of the burden of having to speak a speech the meaning of which does not simply originate in us. But 'death', while drawing nearer to us, also becomes more elusive, since henceforth the meaning of our finitude and our mortality lies not in us preparing for that black hole into which, at the 'end' of our existence, we will disappear, but in our not being permitted to disappear. We may not be the ones who decide about "the difference between what can be said and what actually is said", there may be something called discourse which is establishing that difference for us and thus offering us "the positions and the functions that we could come to occupy", it is nonetheless we who speak and who have always already occupied such positions.

It is that originary delay, that de-centredness which we have with respect to our own discourse or our own archive, which explains why we find ourselves so troubled by Foucault's message. What we discover when we read *The Order of Things* is not that for each and every epoch, there is a hidden causality (called 'archive', '*savoir*', 'discourse' or '*episteme*') that had pre-programmed whatever statements people had uttered or written down. We discover that there are a vast number of things which had been said in other epochs, which we could no longer say and which nevertheless, as Foucault shows, somehow made sense for them. And we start to suspect that similarly our own effort to make statements that our contemporaries could

3. My reason for 'bracketing' Foucault's name here, is that, as I said before, one should strive to distinguish between the way his texts appear to us and the way they appeared to him. Indeed, the historical Foucault was perhaps more on the side of a discursive objectivism (the 'subject' is dead, everything of man lies outward) than I am suggesting here (for details cf. my *Michel Foucault. Genealogy as Critique*, London/New York, Verso, 1995). The point to remember here is that such 'anti-humanist' enthusiasm for *The Order of Things* by Foucault and others, was but the flip-side of humanist 'subject-centred' rejections of it. These historical reactions divide between camps the mixture of fascination and irritation with which we today still 'respond' to that book's 'message'.

take seriously, secretly obeys a hidden order that would make no more sense to them as theirs to us.

*

As I try to show in the essays contained in the first section of this book ('Truth and Finitude'), the sort of picture that begins to emerge once one concentrates on the effects Foucault's archaeological texts seem to have on us, is not all that different from the one phenomenologists like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty are offering us in their reflections on truth, finitude and death. Not that all these authors are saying the same thing, but the thought of each one touching on that of the others leaves room for an alliance which they might not have liked, but from which we could be the ones to profit, as long as we do not take the parallels that are thus drawn to be the pillars of a bridge on which we could stand and hover over the history of our most recent past so that we could 'make up' our minds and leave the scenery thus displayed, richer and wiser than we were before. My concern is not doxographical, I do not wish to 'compare' in these essays Foucault 'to' Heidegger or 'to' Merleau-Ponty. Here and elsewhere in this volume, I am, to the contrary, trying to break out of a history of ideas less interested in the thought of a thinker than in the fact that he is the one who owns it. Thought is not a matter of possession and one should not flatter oneself for having made the thought of a philosopher accessible, when all one has in fact done is to have restored his property rights. Proper names, I should hasten to add, are important, perhaps more so in so-called Continental Philosophy than elsewhere; but they do not refer to the thought of a thinker who fully controls it, they merely indicate that point where a certain 'unthought' (Heidegger), in attaching itself to a thought, has rendered it to a certain extent *inaccessible* and *unrepeatable* for those who come 'after' it. One can, to be sure, share everything with an author – except his way of being dispossessed by that which, in withdrawing, allows him to think. If we wish to take seriously a notion like *das Ungedachte*[4], we should stop congratulating ourselves for having made the thought of someone else accessible and try to reach for that point where, although we no longer have the feeling that we fail to understand what the other says or fail to see what he is trying to show us, the distance between him and us is greater than it was before, simply because in trying to understand him we also had to take into account what he had to leave out of the picture in order to draw at all.

4. Cf. S. IJSSELING, 'Das Ungedachte im Denken und das Ungedachte im Sagen', in H. KIMMERLE (ed.), *Das Andere und das Denken der Verschiedenheit*, Amsterdam, B.R. Grüner, 1987, pp. 151-7.

There is, then, an asymmetry between an author and his readers, which, due to a false humility on their part, is all too often forgotten. Or repressed. For there is something utterly disturbing and highly unpleasant in having to admit that, notwithstanding our best efforts, in the end (but when have we reached it? – for we should never rule out that we did not read well enough), communication between him and us is interrupted because the unthought for him is what he did not have to think in order to formulate his thought, whereas it is what we should try to think at all costs, if we are to avoid merely becoming disciples who mistake the thought of an other for a thought of their own.

One would misunderstand the ethos of reading that I am trying to convey here, were one to simply read in these last lines the covert expression of an ambition to think for oneself. The point is rather that in allowing Foucault, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and so many others in this volume to have what would no doubt be considered illicit contacts from the point of view of a history of ideas obsessed with rendering thought accessible, I am trying to find out what it means that we, today, are not exempted from the task of thinking. If there is any ambition in the pages that follow, it is not to generously offer the reader new insights, but to leave him with the impression that this book – these 'essays' – has made him poorer than he was before and that there is something which has not been thought for 'us'.

*

One need not, then, make one's way back to Protagoras (as our textbooks present him) or to Pirandello (as the French translated him[5]) to suspect that 'truth' and 'singularity' might be more intimately connected than the brutal

5. 'Chacun sa vérité' is the title of the French translation of Pirandello's wonderfully complex 'parable in three acts' *Così è (se vi pare)* (literally: 'it is such (if it appears to you)'). One need only read this play in order to see that it suggests a reading that goes beyond the vulgar 'to each his own truth'. For example in its last lines:

> *The prefect*: Ah! But no! For yourself, madam, you must be the one or the other! *Ms. Ponza*: No, sirs. For me, I am the one that one believes me to be! (She throws a proud look *through her veil* on the whole company and *withdraws*. A silence). *Laudisi*: You see, ladies and gentlemen, how the truth speaks! (A defying ironic glance). Are you satisfied? (Bursts out in laughter). Ah! ah! ah! ah! (Curtain).

My italics indicate the Heideggerian reading. But there is, in the whole play, a sort of 'raw being' to Ms. Ponza who seems to demand from us 'creation for there to be adequation' (Merleau-Ponty). Whereas Laudisi, the sophist, seems to have just read Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*: his point is that there is an 'inquisitory' moment to the sort of truth the prefect and the rest of the crowd are looking for. He is the only who realizes that the veil of Ms. Ponza is not just an obstacle between us and the truth...

oxymoron of a true singularity or a singular truth ('chacun sa vérité') would suggest. As always, the difficulty comes with the smallest word, but philosophy as I have just suggested would not be the practice it is, had it not already assumed that difficulty. If it were only about 'truth', then argument would prevail, and it could, like science, forget about its past. But whereas to argue with a painting or a religion is merely to display one's lack of education, one would be equally mistaken to locate philosophy entirely within a sphere of 'meaning' that some, like Habermas (but in a different context), like to oppose to 'validity'. Perhaps more than anything else, philosophy should come to mind as a prime example of a practice that escapes or undermines such neat oppositions. One does not fully understand it if one restricts it to a quest for a truth that is the opposite of falsehood. There is, to be sure, that sort of truth in philosophy. There are 'validity claims' and they should be taken seriously. But, as we all know, the difficulty is precisely that before we can debate these claims, we must be able to hear them and that before these claims can claim anything, they need quite literally to be understood. And to understand them is to take them on their own terms, which demands not just that we learn each time a new language, but that we allow it to transport us into a world to which it is at once the key, and the door and all that lies behind it. Validity does not come apart from meaning. It is to their interconnection that we refer when we speak of the world of Plato or Novalis, as we speak of that of Henry James or Arthur Miller. But since we are not worldless beings, it would seem to be unduly optimistic to rule out in principle that we should experience difficulties living in all these worlds at once, or even consecutively. It is our own inscription in a world that sometimes can block our access to the world of another philosopher and that explains the fact that although we might be able to reconstruct internally what he has to say, we nonetheless feel unable to share the passion with which he states his case. We might be able to teach his work in our class, but we cannot make use of his ideas for our own thought. They leave us indifferent, not because we judge them to be without value, but because we find ourselves unable to pass judgement in these terms. We may, of course, be wrong in this and find that what we took to be a sign of our finitude was but an excuse for our laziness. But what this shows is that the connection between 'meaning' and 'validity' or between 'singularity' and 'truth' may be such that the finitude of the subject which follows from that connection includes its inability to know at what point exactly these dimensions cross. But it does not show that they do not cross at all and it would thus be equally unwise to suspect behind every inability to judge an unwillingness to do so. A subject that would always be able to judge the claims of another would not be decentred. But a subject that could