



**Epistemological Intimacy and the Hermeneutics of Transaction:
some notes for an attempt at a deconstruction of current philosophical
discourse**

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Abstract: This article offers some notes toward a theory of the putative transactional nature of modern human relationships, especially as these relate to the academic and intellectual world. I consider first the nature of ontological and conceptual theses in order to situate my own within this broad division. I then take up the concept of metanarratives and the nature of human immersion within a given conceptual scheme. This leads to the suggestion that there is a transactional or commodity-driven paradigm operating at the level of human mental exchange. It is proposed that this reduction of human relations to the transactional is tied, at least in part, to the dominance of deductive reasoning and the a-historical approach to philosophical reflection and cultural analysis. The third, and now somewhat ignored mode of reasoning in Aristotle's logical canon, dialectic, will be explored as a possible alternative to the dominant, winner-takes-all, deductive mode of reasoning. This mode of reasoning, it will be shown, is more suited to a communitarian approach to the pursuit of truth, which, in turn, may serve as an antidote to the dominance of the transactional in current human affairs.

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Introduction:

Much philosophical discourse throughout the latter part of the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first, particularly in the English-speaking world, has been dominated by the issue of the nature of the relationship between theory and language on the one hand and "reality" on the other. As regards the former, many of the issues concerning the philosophy of science have parallels in the philosophy of language.

Indeed, epistemological questions about the interpretation of scientific theory can hardly be separated from theories of meaning and reference.

A traditional understanding holds that language and theory are ontologically distinct from the reality which they describe. That is, one may describe objects, events or facts with the assurance that one's description bears a qualitatively dichotomistic relationship to the objects of that description. With the acceptance of this notion, moreover, comes the problem of determining where it

is theory and reality meet; wherever some such point is found an entire superstructure must be built upon it, and *belief* is at the nexus of the entire matter. At the heart of such an endeavor lies what Rorty calls "the archetypal philosophical fantasy," that is, a sort of piercing though all representation, and all description.

With this in mind, my first order of business is to make clear the nature of my thesis in this paper. Consider first of all, for example, what it means to offer various assertions in the realm of moral philosophy. *Descriptivism* and *Subjectivism*, however they might be tangentially connected to larger ontological issues, are best understood as linguistic or conceptual theses, for example. These types of theories do not, at least in any clear sense, assert the existence or non-existence of moral facts. In that sense we see that they are not ontological theses. Their *being* is wholly conceptual or linguistic, or, to use another vocabulary, it is entirely mind-dependent. This is to be contrasted with moral *Realism* and moral *Skepticism*. These sorts of theories purport

to tell us something of the ontological status of certain alleged moral facts; that is, they tell us something about 'furniture' of the world, to speak figuratively.

Now I think that what I want to put forward will be best understood as a conceptual or rational thesis rather than an ontological one. That is, I am seeking to say something about rational constraints and limitations rather than to make ontological claims.

Jaques Lacan tells us that a science, or a science's field, should be defined by a *praxis*. He had in mind of course, first and foremost, the task of delimiting psychoanalysis. But the task of delimiting, be its object a science, a question or a field of inquiry, is itself forever conditioned by Gadamer's insight that every act of understanding is simultaneously an act of interpretation. Interpretation has a conceptual being, what the medievals called an *ens rationis*, and it manifests itself, unconsciously, in the rational encounter with the world of signs by and through which we carry on our quotidian existence. Yet, it is precisely at this intersection of

the interpretive act and mundane existence that I wish to call your attention to the question of epistemological intimacy.

The act by which we encounter the rational other---that is to say, using Aristotle's definitional construct of proximate genus and specific difference, the rational animal--raises a sort of epistemological horizon, and the latter activates our hermeneutic faculty. We interpret. This is so fundamental to our being we need mention it only in passing. But even an observation *en passant* will be better appreciated in the context of Paul Ricoeur's dictum that conflict always nourishes the process of reflection. The cognitive intimacy of two rational beings is mediated, in part, by their biological constitution. The sound waves produced by the wolf's howl which bounce off my ear drum are identical to those striking the ear drum of a sheep, and to those which strike the ear drum of another wolf; yet we three, while having identical or near-identical sensations, have radically different *perceptions*. In almost every instance the

two, sensation and perception, are virtually simultaneous, which is just to say they occur on a level not available to conscious intervention. The intimacy that begins the moment I meet another rational being is mediated by the entire set of perceptions I form in the instant of encounter, but as circumscribed by my biological constitution. Were a man to don an angel outfit, complete with halo and wings, his dog would see him just as well as he (the dog) sees other humans; not much has changed on the level of sensation in this encounter. Yet, the dog can never see him *as an angel*, i.e., his perception of this object in front of him will never be similar to the perception that a *Homo sapiens* would have in such an encounter. In one sense we may say that the dog sees the angel, but never sees the angel *qua* angel, that is, with all the cultural associations, symbolism, myth, etc., that

accompanies our concept of angel. Thus, the perceptual encounter is delimited in a way that simple sensation never is.

Yet, there is an additional burden in being human. If we take nothing else from Freud we must certainly come to terms, at the very least, with his assertion that man is delimited, that is, constrained, not only by his biology, but also by his long cultural history.¹ Each of us bears the burden of a plentiful *congeries* of archaic inhibitions, taboos and prohibitions, he holds. Man is therefore limited, as Lionel Trilling states, by being man.² These are not akin to the Idols of the Cave, in Bacon's schema, but to the Idols of the Tribe, that is, the common inheritance of mankind. As such, there is a kind of unity or camaraderie or even, if I may use the term, an *intimacy* in our epistemological dilemma.

The intimacy is the product, or perhaps I should say, the by-product, of a dilemma, that is, of

¹ I cannot help but think that Freud must here have been strongly influenced by Nietzsche's reflections on this matter of the burden of history, which latter he describes as a great *chain*: "[H]owever far or fast he runs, that chain runs with him....[M]an is always resisting the great and continually increasing weight of the

past; it presses him down and bows his shoulders; he travels with a dark invisible burden..." *The Use and Abuse of History*, by Friedrich Nietzsche (The Liberal arts Press, 1949), p. 5.

² See "Freud's Last Book," in *A Gathering of Fugitives* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), p.58.

a certain condition that we find ourselves in. There is a certain epistemological exhaustion brought on by the successive failure of the various metanarratives we are all formed in. Charles Peirce offered a metaphor in order to illuminate his semiotic theory in regard to the position of man at his biological birth. We are each of us born, he says, in the middle of a sort of river of signs, the banks of which cannot be seen. We are, in other words, at once immersed from birth in a semiotic stream. It seems to me that something similar is the case with regard to our immersion within a given metanarrative, a set of *Gestalten* composed of complexes of analysis and interpretations of our surroundings which is formed for us, if not quite at birth, yet at a very young age. Jean-François Lyotard was commissioned by the Council of Universities of Quebec to study the state of knowledge of the Western world. His report offered the conclusion that all modern systems of knowledge, including science, were based

on some “grand discourse” or “metanarrative” concerning the direction of history.

Lyotard’s analysis offers us some context for understanding our epistemological exhaustion. We may look about us at the detritus formed from the collapse of our theories and conclude that it is not just our surroundings, that is, the larger world around us, about which we are ignorant, but that we do not know even *ourselves*. We should recall that Karl Mannheim, in his classic 1930s study of ideology, showed us that the road to objectivity, to the extent that such may be achieved, is found only through self-examination, or as he termed it, “self-illumination.”¹ Yet he adds to this Socratic admonition the observation that it tends to be precisely those who speak most exuberantly about human freedom who are the ones most blind to the unconscious control of their actions by their own personal and class interests. Self-illumination, thus, is the gradual process of becoming aware of

¹ See *Ideology and Utopia*, especially ch. 1, by Karl Mannheim, tr. Louis Wirth &

Edward Shils, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1936)

one's own unconscious motivations.

Put another way, we may begin to see that even the formation of the ego is carried out within the context of a "grand discourse," to use Lyotard's terminology. We did not choose the discourse, or narrative, that we were "born" into, but we can come to realize that the discourse was a sort of midwife to our cognitive maturation process, and begin to examine the set of philosophical and pre-philosophical assumptions that underlie it. This may bring us to an appreciation of the fact that not only all philosophical problems, but all social and political problems also, arise within a given context, within an historical-cultural *milieu*. The contexts define the problems and the problems exist only within their contexts. The misunderstanding of contexts and their importance, or indeed of wholly ignoring them, is observed most vividly when we examine the accounts philosophers give of their own opponents or predecessors. It is

no longer enough to claim that the argument one's opponent has offered is, in one way or another, unconvincing; one now much more often hears the claim that the argument is "incoherent," a considerably more biting predicate, and one I fear may often tell us more about the degree of care with which the evaluation was carried out than about the actual validity or cogency of the argument. In fact, it is increasingly common to find that the first and often primary rebuttal offered to an argument is the suggestion that what is most interesting is the psychological motivation lying behind the argument; that is, its proponent was driven to offer it by these unmentioned psychological factors.¹

Aristotle was not immune to some of this. Notice that for the majority of his works, including, and especially, those on the natural sciences, he begins with an overview of his predecessors in the field, never seriously examining the theoretical commitments that

¹ This type of contentious rebuttal is especially common in debates over the existence of God---one's opponent has some hidden psychological motivation, it

is suggested, for claiming there is or isn't such a being or beings---but it is by no means limited to that debate.

underlay his own assumptions which are in turn used to frame the problems which he declares his predecessors have not resolved. At least since the Renaissance philosophers have been even less aware of this issue than Aristotle.

But there is one particular type of unconscious, pre-philosophical commitment embedded in much contemporary work in the philosophical and social sciences which, I would like now to suggest, underlies the sorts of failings briefly just outlined and which has been inadequately observed in academic discussion.

The problem here is that even attempting to name an unconscious commitment or unspoken assumption, in a way that is adequate and at least minimally illuminating, is virtually bound to offend one constituency or another. The inadequacy of the nomenclature is a common philosophical stumbling block. Nevertheless, a close approximation to what I am trying to identify here is the term 'transactional,' though I must use it in other than solely adjectival forms. For I want to suggest that there has been a

gradual process by which even human relations have been *transactionalized* (or, perhaps a bit less accurately, *commodified*). The idea to be conveyed here is that contemporary discourse across the humanities has been unconsciously transactionalized. This is just to say that there is a pre-philosophical, pre-theoretical transactional paradigm underlying the ways in which problems are developed and questions are formulated. An examination of many modern philosophical discussions, in fact, will reveal that there has been both a gradual adoption of a set of transactional and jurisprudential metaphors for the evaluation of arguments generally, and a parallel elevation of deductive reasoning as the putative gold-standard of academic discourse. More on this in a moment.

Yet, it may be asked, what is distinct about a *commodified* or *transactionalized* discourse, as opposed to, say, just an awful one? What is truly commodified will blur or make opaque the hermeneutical commitments that underlie a discourse. Just as when a

product has reached a point whereby it is produced so cheaply and used so widely that it, for all practical purposes, essentially disappears from view into the background of our discourse, so there may be interpretive constructs that have become so basic to philosophical exchange that they are simply assumptions rather than premises and our common discourse has ceased to be aware of them.¹

I would like to suggest that the phenomenon is actually broader. I think we may find that not only is there an unconscious or at least unspoken hermeneutics of transaction at the core of much academic intercourse, but that these academic exchanges mirror broader phenomena within modern culture. Culture itself, at least as it is known in the West, has been transactionalized. This is just to say that the culture has been robbed of its genuine human intimacy; it has been de-

intimacized. The implication here is surely something Kant would recognize. For he would see that to regard one's fellow human beings as mere commodities in a web of transactional exchanges is exactly to fail to treat them as ends in themselves.²

This may not be visible at all on the surface of human interrelations. It is obscured by the mass of cultural debris that litters the social landscape. What is often overlooked is the need to view social phenomena at the right distance. We may assume that the closer we can observe a given phenomenon, or a given set of relations, the more accurate or correct is our view of it. But to see within the proper context is a more complicated affair. We may benefit from noticing the concept of *seeing at the appropriate distance* of the (now all too-rarely read) Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset. Every object or phenomenon, he insisted, has a

¹ It is worth noting here that Foucault developed the concept of an *episteme* (see especially *The Order of Things*, Pantheon: 1970), which operates (allegedly) at an even deeper level of the psyche. The concept of an *episteme* involved a set of deep dispositions that are

tied to a particular time period, and which are much more basic to the very possibility of knowledge than the set of unspoken assumptions that I have in mind.

² See especially the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*.

certain "distance" at which it is properly viewed; get the distance wrong and one is left with a distortion. "[W]hoever wants to see a brick must look at its pores, and therefore must bring his eyes close to it, but whoever wants to see a cathedral cannot see it as he sees a brick. This demands of us a respect for distance. Every single thing, if we want an optimum vision of it, demands of us a specific distance."¹

I want to suggest that the appropriate distance to view current philosophical discourse in our age is not that of our intellectual productions; that is to say, it is not at the level of conference papers or articles, books, book-reviews, etc. Rather, it is at the level of discrete human exchange, at the atomistic, give-and-take level of human interrelations. We noticed above that, regardless of what we may think of the general conclusions Freud has to offer us, or even of his general outlook, there is a minimal element we may draw from his work which is not particularly controversial,

namely, that the human psyche labors today under the detritus of past ages, i.e., under the enormous cultural baggage bequeathed to us from the history of our species' psycho-social development.

I want now to claim that there is something similar in Marx, that is, a basic insight that verges on the undeniable. Yet, it is an insight that, diachronically, is the polar opposite of Freud's; that is, it pertains to our own time. It pertains to the ever-present, always current weight of our material conditions. For it is to Marx, I think, to whom we must attribute the insight regarding the reduction of human relations to the transactional. That insight is simply that the system within which we live, one largely dominated by the power of capital, has made life for its individual human constituents above all transactional. This transactional nature of human relations robs us of one thing above all others; it robs us of intellectual intimacy.

This transactional approach has seeped into our philosophical

¹ *An Interpretation of Universal History*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1973), p. 65.

discourse. In so doing it has robbed philosophical exchange of intimacy in the same way it robbed other human relations of it. In fact, to get back now to paradigms of the reasoning process, it has led us to believe that deduction and induction are the only means of carrying on a philosophical interchange. I want to suggest that what is now missing from the philosophical landscape, roughly, perhaps, since the start of the internet age, is the third element of rational inquiry in the Aristotelian tradition, the one that is so often left in the shadow of simple induction and deduction, namely *dialectic*. I want to hold that it is precisely dialectic, the kind of discursive inquiry that formed the third subject of the medieval *trivium*, that lies at the heart of the traditional craft of philosophical discourse as practiced by the ancients. It is the conversational approach to rational inquiry, the dialogue that carries out the process of reasoning leavened by a dollop of intimacy. Where deduction is a zero-sum game, that is to say, presents us only with (putative) winners and losers, dialectic is a joint effort at

arriving at insight. Dialectic offers us, in other words, epistemological intimacy.

Whereas deduction, as understood in Aristotle's *Organon*, seeks to arrive at demonstration, dialectic is paradigmatically carried on by more than one thinker; that is to say, it is at its base a *communitarian* endeavor, one which seeks insight, which seeks to discover. It is an endeavor, moreover, that finds its clearest analysis in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* and its archetypal exemplar in the dialogues of Plato (and perhaps also in the lost dialogues of Aristotle). Aristotle, in fact, tells us that dialectical persuasion, which is typically an open-ended reasoning process, involves both the one seeking to persuade and the one subject to persuasion coming together in collective inquiry, an inquiry which demands these respective roles be repeatedly reversed in a sort of play of discovery. In a sense this demands a repositioning of the concept of objectivity in the pursuance of truth.

Perhaps, though this is admittedly a whimsical speculation, it (dialectic) is also

the feminine aspect of Aristotle's schema of the reasoning process. I am suggesting this in view of the uniquely non-unitary, that is, the multi-faceted approach to inquiry of dialectic among Aristotle's 3 forms of reasoning. Gerda Lerner, among others, identified the pursuit of single, explanatory solutions or "answers" in scientific investigation as part of a patriarchal model or paradigm of science. Solutions aside, dialectic offers an approach which uses a parallel unfolding of multiple rational paths of inquiry as intrinsic to the reasoning process. It may well turn out that the end point or points of any given scientific investigation will indeed turn out to be unitary, or at least unitary in some important sense. Yet, it is worth asking whether the means of arriving at that point necessarily follow a unitary linear trail. Such a linear, non-discursive path to the solution would lend itself to both demonstrative (deductive) and strictly empirical (inductive) reasoning procedures. Now let us return to the transactional nature of current

philosophical discourse. I held above that our narratives are suffused with a transactional paradigm, I would like to add now that such a transactional paradigm seems to proceed hand-in-hand with the deductive mode of inquiry, i.e., with demonstration. In a transaction the parties are on opposite sides of an exchange, and as such necessarily have distinct goals (the man who purchases a bag of apples has indicated that he prefers the apples to the money; the other party to the transaction has signaled his preference for the money to the bag of apples). When two parties engage, likewise, in a debate via demonstration, i.e., a debate concerning a pair of propositions, for example, p and $\sim p$, these propositions represent as it were distinct goals, goals which are necessarily incompatible. The dénouement of the process will be a kind of exchange. In a discursive, dialectical search for insight, on the other hand, the parties are essentially on the same side, i.e., they have the same goal. The reasoning process in such a model is in some ways exploratory.

The ultimate foundation for demonstrative reasoning is the correspondence theory of truth, the broad congeries of propositions which Richard Rorty neatly encapsulates with the statement that it presents a view of the mind as a *mirror of nature*.¹ That is just to say that we, that is each of us individually, have an internal representation of the way the world *really* is. The representing mechanism, i.e., the mind and its connected sensory apparatus, must, on this view, reflect reality without affecting the image (hence, the mirror metaphor). It is the suggestion that we cast our gaze out upon the world with what is, at root, a sort of naked eye. Yet, surely if anything was gained from the seemingly interminable discussions of objectivity in the twentieth-century it was that there is no naked eye; that is, that every human being wears, figuratively

speaking, a pair of lenses crafted out of the social and cultural immersion that none of us can escape.

This fact of our immersion should give us pause in regard to our commitment to the winner-takes-all nature of deductive reasoning. It was William James who most eloquently reminded us that there are various ways to arrive at the truth. Philosophers tend to get there by reason, but others get there by revelation, intuition, etc.² The model of deductive reasoning came to dominate the English speaking world, particularly in the era of high-church analytic philosophy flourishing in the mid-twentieth century. It was held out as the paradigmatic gold-standard of the rational process.³ Yet, even well before this John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801-1890), especially in his monumental work on logic and belief, A

¹ This is found in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton University Press, 1981).

² See especially *A Pluralistic Universe* (Longman's, Green and Co., 1916, p. 13).

³ While it may be a somewhat facile distinction, many observers have regarded Plato as the exemplar of the intuitive approach to truth, and Aristotle as the champion of empiricism, in the

ancient world. I would like only to add that the commentaries on Plato's *Republic* of Ibn-Rushd (Averroes), may be read as an attempt to add a dose of empiricism to the utopia of that famous work. Consider his observation that in order for Plato's ideal community to succeed the Philosophers would have to rule for an infinite amount of time.

Grammar of Assent, was something of a voice in the wilderness, holding that we are often better off trusting in persons rather than in “logical science.”¹ Newman was not so much attacking the deductive form of inference as he was highlighting the often overlooked possibilities of dialectic. My suggestion is that the demonstrative model is, at root, transactional in nature...and the transactional paradigm, left undiluted, is flawed.

It is in *The German Ideology* that Marx and Engels offer the clearest exploration of the transactional nature of human relationships resulting from the profit-seeking industrial complexes dominating society. It is a transformation of what they call “natural relationships” to relationships guided and lubricated by money.² This sort of analytic deconstruction of the intersubjective relationship is surely what leads Ricoeur to declare Marx, along with Freud and Nietzsche, to be one of the

three great representatives of reductive and demystifying hermeneutics.³ If I may be permitted, I would like to add an additional qualifier to this description of what Marx has offered us. For if we take a broader view of it we may see here the possibility of its opening up a more comprehensive cultural critique. We may detect, that is to say, what is essentially a *de-transactionalized* hermeneutics. By this, I am speaking of a hermeneutics shorn of the transactional, of the up or down, linear and deductive, and most importantly, *a-historical* model of inquiry, as the only path to rational insight. This is just to say that there are many issues for which a discursive and dialectical approach to insight is more appropriate, however seductive a QED-esque argument may be. The history of the commentary on Marx’s own thought is instructive here. There is no shortage of comparisons between what may be called the economics of Aristotle and that of Marx, for example, with one or the other

¹ *A Grammar of Assent*, (New York: Longman’s, Green and Co., 1901).

² See *The German Ideology*, “Feuerbach” B, 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1964), p. 76.

³ *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, by Paul Ricoeur (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 59.

held up as either more rational or (more frequently) more in line with human nature. The result of such a debate will present us with the sort of transactional *dénouement* discussed above. If, conversely, one were to pursue a dialectical approach to the comparison it might be found that the issue had first to be *historically situated*, and that being the case it might not be at all clear that, given a juxtaposition of the economics of household management found in Aristotle and the economics of early industrial society found in Marx, the two can even genuinely disagree in any meaningful sense of the term. A dialectical approach that makes of argumentation a form of inquiry, may often, in other words, undermine the QED style transactional debate. Further, the attempt to frame issues as historically situated is more in line with the nature of dialectic.

Perhaps, looked at from another standpoint, what I am really trying to say here is that much of modern philosophy is suffused with a legal or juridical model. That might be another way of framing the problem that I think I see in current philosophical and cultural criticism. My metaphors are poor

and my attempts to frame the thoughts at hand are inadequate. Nietzsche tells us, however, that one cannot add or abstract metaphors and tropes to or from language at will; they form a part of its very essence. Besides, didn't Wittgenstein already show us how easily we allow ourselves to get trapped within a given conceptual image?

I have suggested that the a-historical, the deductive, the transactional go hand-in hand in a very subtle and unobserved way. Really the idea here is that there is a peculiar sort of over-emphasis on these in current discourse, and that this has robbed us of the sort of intellectual intimacy that our current academic culture is much in need of, particularly with regard to the philosophical and cultural critiques which we offer of the societies in which we live. As disordered and rudimentary as this may be, these suggestions are offered as but some notes toward developing a larger project on this matter.

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