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[Essay]

Life in Progress
Musings about Speech, Thought and Understanding

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Abstract

In the world of living organisms, the phenomena of movement and activity are not to be identified as equal, although both occur there. Activity, which is proper to humans, has a particular conscious quality that infra-human life and physical matter in its inanimate (chemical) movement lack. Human life is consciously value-oriented through speech, thought and understanding, the contemplation of which through a philosophical approach may indicate that a life in progress need not be classically understood necessarily. Humans must fashion their life through speech, thought and understanding (a philosophy of mind) within a contemporary and particular social context which infra-human life, and the AI of digital computers cannot do.

1. Introduction

"The branch of philosophy that is concerned with human beings as minded animals, these days, is called *philosophy of mind*." Philosophy of mind made its appearance as a post-Cartesian phenomenon in the English-speaking world in the 20th Century. Given that philosophy of life embraces the philosophy of mind, I offer some reflections for consideration on a sub-category of the philosophy of the mind, that is, human consciousness. Within human consciousness I have chosen to consider, somewhat summarily, the topics of speech, thought and understanding as activities of the person. In this reflection, I take my point of departure within Western philosophy, even though I acknowledge that it had reached a decadent status by the end of the Middle Ages.² I hold that, from a

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¹ Gabriel (2017), p. 1 [author's italics].

² My mind follows that of Brian Gaybba (1998, p. 69) who wrote: "For the major cause of [scholasticism's] decadence was that it became a dry philosophical analysis of minute details utterly removed from any perceptible link with experienced reality and without the life-giving vitality of the patristic period. Anything cut off from its roots withers and ultimately dies. Scholasticism withered badly, even if it did not die completely."

philosophical perspective, *activity* is not identical with *movement*. Living human organisms, as well as animate non-human entities and inanimate objects are capable of movement, that is, they can function without purpose. By way of exception, humans are capable of an additional action or activity which has a conscious end or purpose in mind. In short, humans do something in order to intentionally achieve or attain something.

Without doubt we do not know when or how life on earth began. Our ignorance is easily confirmed by a moment's reflection on the current variety of opinion on the genesis of life. As well, we do not know how concrete physical matter came to be in the universe. However, all cultures have various myths, legends and theories as to the origin of life and physical matter. For my purposes in this reflection I do not speculate about the origin of the physical universe. Rather, an individual "life in progress" is my starting point for reflection on the issues that I identify here, which are speech, thought and understanding. Lacking certainty as to the origins of life, I make one assumption only: that life originated from non-living physical matter and the mechanism by which this happened remains unknown. Although many theories have been put forth, scientific, philosophical and religious concerning the origin of life, to my knowledge, none has been confirmed through anyone's experience. All remain speculative.

The question I pose and to which I hope to supply a satisfactory, and probably temporary answer, is: Does a "life in progress" encounter a puzzle or mystery? I say "life in progress" to reinforce the notion that one quality of life is its dynamic character. Life is not static. My view has developed from the common sense observation which seems to affirm life's dynamic character through the phenomenon of death. Upon the death of a living organism life seems to move out of the organism as it leaves the body, the physical material, behind. Yet, if I have understood Marcus Aurelius correctly concerning his meditations about death, he entertains the opposite idea, it seems.³ It is the body, the physical material, that leaves life which is contrary to the way the majority of Western philosophers, influenced by Hellenistic ideas, continue to think. I believe that I share my understanding that life is dynamic with the majority of humankind, regardless of our ethnicity or the culture into which we were born. That conscious life is an individual philosophical phenomenon, (not a corporate

³ Recall that this Roman emperor (161-180), is considered as one of the last of the so-called Five Good Emperors. He was bilingual, Latin and Greek and his *Meditations* were written in Greek.

one) and with ethnicity and culture of no consequence, means that these philosophical reflections of mine originate from me as an individual being. They are primarily about the experience of the person that I am, and only secondarily about the environment or culture into which I was born; although the two are related. I understand the person in the sense suggested by Leslie Dewart that a "person (as subject) is a center of consciousness: it is that which can objectify itself. It is that which can objectively signify itself to itself by means of its consciousness."⁴

I experience life consciously, that is to say I live life consciously by speaking intentionally, thinking deliberately, and understanding purposefully. Since speaking, thinking and understanding are activities that I undertake as a conscious human individual, I am able to share with other conscious human individuals these musings about each of these activities from a philosophical point of view. In my musings I do not restrict my thinking to facts and information obtained only through a biological, scientific or contemporary psychological experience. These are specific disciplines with their own goals and purposes. I undertake my philosophical reflections, not within a separate system of knowledge to be taught, but rather, as a personal activity *in relation* to the contribution of the natural sciences to my life in progress. My approach is similar to that as suggested by Moritz Schlick, who concluded his lecture:

I am convinced that our view of the nature of philosophy will be generally adopted in the future; and the consequence will be that it will no longer be attempted to teach philosophy as a system. We shall teach the special sciences and their history in the true philosophical spirit of searching for clarity and, by doing this, we shall develop the philosophical mind of future generations.⁵

The contemporary philosopher Markus Gabriel seems to be in accord with Schlick's view. He has written that

philosophers need to respect natural science and acquire as much knowledge as possible in its manifold fields. However, there is a widespread tendency in our culture (more so in the Anglophone than in

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⁴ Dewart (1966), p. 150.

⁵ Schlick (1932), p. 62.

the German-speaking world) to outsource philosophical issues from philosophy to natural science, which is a fundamental mistake.⁶

Like all human beings, I act and make decisions in my life consciously (although sometimes I act unconsciously) and interpret my experience in a particular way. That is because, as a human organism, I have a particular (and probably exclusive) type of mind. Which is to say, were I a "reductionist" and considered my mind as reduced to my brain, I would be just another great ape, as it were. However, my mind-brain relationship places me in a new class of organisms. As being a non-reductionist in this new class of organism I recognize that consciousness has been added to my biological life. Thus, formulating a conscious conception of my environment amounts to more than merely a sentient perception of my environment. It is without question, of course, that this new category of organism in which I am classed is a result of a long evolutionary progress of biological life, in which consciousness has made a recent appearance. Now, because of this unique and significant activity of my mind, i.e., a thinking consciousness, my status as a thinking organism must be recognized and respected. As I must recognize and respect other conscious humans as thinking organisms. To my knowledge, self-reflection upon the mind's consciousness of itself, or that the mind is capable of reflecting upon itself, which is a proper human activity, does not appear among infra-human life or in digital Artificial Intelligence. (Even though an awkward expression a more accurate concept for AI might be "machine knowledge.")

In my experience, and I presume with most of humanity, I assign value to my life, rather than receive value by simply sharing biological life with other living organisms. Biological life, of itself, is valueless in the sense of my non-assignment of value to it. By that I mean that infra-human life is only observable and experienced by the living organism as a movement without inherent value and purpose. It may be purposive, but not purposeful. Which is to say, living consciously as a human being is the means by which I assign value to my life, as well as the lives of other organisms. Ultimately, assignment of value to life is a communitarian, not solely individual activity. (I do hold, however, that infra-humans share a type of consciousness proper to their own existence that does not assign values but which I am not considering here.) From my

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⁶ Gabriel (2017), p.176.

philosophical perspective then, once an individual human life has irreversibly lost the ability or capacity to live and act at the level of human consciousness, but live only at a vegetative level, it has ceased to be a human life — even though it may, for a time, possess life in its organs. Thus, the consequences of human consciousness when defining human life affect the entire organism, positively or negatively, as long as it continues to exist. In short, humans exercise a life of value in their conscious state

Since I am aware of my conscious experiences I sometimes wonder if my life in progress is better valued as a puzzle or mystery. Being steeped in a Western philosophical tradition, I recognize that my experience interpreted classically has often taken on a more significant status than other aspects of my consciousness. That is to say, that other activities of my mind (scientific and critical thinking) have been somewhat de-emphasized or interpreted summarily even in light of their advanced contributions to my life in progress. This has been particularly noted with respect to the legacy of the ancient Greek philosophy which I inherited through the Western tradition. But that is changing.

Since the days of Parmenides philosophers in the Western tradition have accepted, often without serious critique, that reality, as well as being, must possess inherent intelligibility in order to be understood. A pioneering philosopher, contemplating the necessity of inherent intelligibility of reality and being was Leslie Dewart (1922-2009), who has investigated this question most thoroughly, particularly in Evolution and Consciousness: The Role of Speech in the Origin and Development of Human Nature. Ultimately, in his philosophy, he rejects that reality must be necessarily intelligible in itself, before it can be understood by human consciousness. Further, he posits that reality itself is beyond being and that the two ought not be equated in contemporary philosophy. This has been confirmed in a note by Robert Prentice that "Dewart himself, as we already know from *The Future of Belief*, distinguishes being from reality though reality does not correspond to nothingness," that is, in the sense of Sartre's non-being of nothingness.⁷ This view is characteristic of Dewart's "dehellenization of philosophy" that pervades all his works. In like mind, I am of the opinion that all being is real, but not all reality is being. The words of George Tyrrell, written 115 years ago (as I write this) give us food for thought today.

⁷ Prentice (1971), p. 240 [italics in original].

For nothing can be more real to me than myself. Self is the very test and measure of all reality. If I ascribe reality to things in Nature, it is only because to understand or deal with them at all I must assume that they are like me in some way, that they are to some degree separate, individual, active, if not actually sentient and conscious as I am.⁸

It was at the point of realizing the significance of Dewart's dehellenization of philosophy that I begin to truly wonder what life would be, should I accept contrary to what I had been taught, that life lacks inherent intelligibility. From experience, I know that I cannot deny that "I am" (sum) but I can doubt that "I know" (cogito) or not know. (I intend this view as a clear reversal of the cogito ergo sum of René Descartes.) When fully conscious I cannot doubt that I am a living being, but I can doubt knowledge about my life. (From his philosophical perspective, Leslie Dewart understood cogito as the manifestation of "the self-observability of the mind," and which I conclude that such demonstration can possibly be mistaken in attaining its objective, but not in understanding its own activity, that it is conscious.)9 That is to say, I may be mistaken, or ignorant about what I am thinking, but not that I am — that is, about my own being. Up to this point, all the above has been by way of preparation for what is to follow. The question at this point is: should I understand life as a puzzle or mystery? If life is a puzzle, it ought to possess inherent intelligibility and be susceptible to solution, it seems to me. If it is a mystery, it ought to be able to be encountered by me, but not necessarily understood, I would think. Can life be both, I wonder.

By way of further clarification, I remind the reader that I am philosophizing in English. This offers the opportunity to organize and express my thoughts employing vocabulary in a particular manner and from a particular view-point that may not be possible in other languages. The word, "understand" is a case in point. Commonly used it means to grasp the meaning of something, to have a technical acquaintance or expertise with something, or to accept something with fact or certainty. In short, it means to obtain knowledge of an object outside oneself.¹⁰ Literally, understanding conveys the sense that one "stands under"

⁸ Tyrrell (1903), p. 8.

⁹ Dewart (2016), p. 13.

The word "grasp" is problematic in my way of philosophical thinking. Without digressing too far into the insightful and contemporary philosophical perspective for the 21st century that Markus Gabriel offers, I have a reservation about his "new realism" (Gabriel 2017, p. 13). As an attempt at grasping

something. Thus, it reflects a hierarchical theory of knowledge, where the object known somehow exists "above," and outside the knower, remaining separate from the knower. Within what I recognize historically as an early "philosophy of mind," as it were, the ancient Hellenist philosophers attempted an advance in thinking by confronting the hierarchical perspective of standing under reality. In their view to attain true knowledge the knower has to bring the known object to the level of the knower's ability to adequately comprehend it, rather than "stand under" it. As I see it the Hellenist philosophers introduced a "democratic" theory of knowledge whereby the object known is incorporated necessarily and ideally into the knower's mind thus becoming "understood" on the level and by a means proper to the knower. In Latin the term used to express this is the adaequatio rei et intellectus of scholastic philosophy. 11 This theory served the philosophers of medieval times very well; but has out-lived its usefulness for contemporary experience.

I do not live in Medieval times. In these modern scientific times I am required to interpret my experiences without any necessarily pre-established philosophical method as a guide. I need to discover and subsequently describe the phenomena I experience through an adequate methodology that fits my lived situation, my life in progress. This includes, of course, answering the question: Is life a puzzle or mystery? To date, my answer is that I have decided that I need to solve puzzles (via a scientific approach) and interpret mysteries (through a philosophical approach). Reflecting upon the explanation given to me within the Western philosophical tradition, I soon realized that the traditional Hellenistic point of view placed constraints on two related concepts in my understanding and experience of my life in progress. They are what it means to be and reality. And by extension, constraints were also placed on my understanding of truth within this Hellenistic perspective. Subsequently, I employed imagination as a methodology to explore my world of experience, which included the experience of myself as a constituent of that world. In short, I imagined life differently. (I am part of [inside] the parade, as it were, not a mere [outside] spectator.) In short, I chose to think otherwise and abandon the presumed superiority and exclusiveness of ancient Greek philosophy that somehow had come to represent

reality his "new realism" leaves him still within the Hellenist philosophical legacy. Reality is not an object to be "reached for" and grasped, since it is beyond being. And as such, I hold that reality is "that from which" being is differentiated and individuated as from an unintelligible source.

¹¹ Latin phrase translated as the correspondence of the mind and reality.

the presumed universal manner of human thinking, at least within the Western context of thought. I began to realize my speech suitably communicated concepts in a manner not using Hellenistic terms, to others as well as myself. Thus, the manner in which I communicate to myself and others is the manner appropriate to me as a modern thinker having the advantage of modern conscious thinking at hand. The Latin phrase that the scholastics applied within their epistemology when discussing the relationship between the knower and the known still applies but needs a qualification. *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur* ¹² The qualification: As the receiver changes, what is "received" is changed.

2. The Significance of Human Speech/Thought

The fact is that I may speak audibly by making sounds, or I can speak inaudibly that is, by thinking. In my experience whether speaking out loud or thinking quietly constitutes one activity, whether I address another or address myself. There is no appreciable difference between the two save that thinking is silent. When thinking, I speak to myself. It is as if I were carrying on an internal dialogue without making sounds that others can hear. In thinking, I am living consciously. I am asserting my experience to myself. Were I making sounds I would be asserting my experience for the benefit of others, presuming that my sounds made sense to them. Living consciously, I can obtain more information about my experiences than my senses of perception alone can supply. That is to say, I can add to my interpretation of life by my own conceptions or add the conceptions of others. Thus, it is by not living a life in progress merely biologically but consciously that I attain personal information about myself and my existential condition.

In addition, my speech enables me to reach a deeper or higher level of conscious knowledge. Here again the English language offers an example of a case where an identical philosophical meaning can be intended by two words which often mean the opposite: depth and height. Whether my consciousness is deepened or heightened I attain the clarity of understanding. If I could not think consciously, I would have lost my ability to evaluate my life as a puzzle or mystery. As it is, however, I think consciously and deliberately to clarify my

¹² Whatever is received is received in the manner of the receiver.

understanding of life (i.e., life as a puzzle or mystery). This ability to think is what specifies me as a member of the human species. And over time, in thinking silently or audibly (i.e., having discussions) I discovered that how and what I know does not seem to require inherent intelligibility in the classical sense. Thus, through my experience, I have come to know that I can make sense of my life without having to know things in themselves. Whether I experience them existing outside, or inside, of my mind. (Inside my mind: I do not know what consciousness is, but I know that I am conscious. Outside my mind: I exist as an organism without knowing all its functions.)

What occurs because of my speech, when I think or communicate with other persons, is the establishment of my social context within a specific culture. This means that my mind and the minds of other humans are engaged in a reciprocal activity. (Communication among infra-humans, which is not speech as humans engage in it, does not bring about such reciprocal interaction but does establish a social context.) Contrary to conventional wisdom my speech creates or fashions a particular social context and as well as a particular culture; my speech is not generated from a particular social context or culture. I consider the Latin terms homo creator (man the creator) and homo faber (man the maker) as equivalent concepts for my purposes. Both convey the notion that humans have the ability to organize and regulate what surrounds them, that is, their environment. Given this perspective my approach to life recalls George Tyrrell's disclaimer to being no "more than a weaver of materials gathered from many quarters which in the present fabric may acquire a very different significance from that which was theirs in the original texture from which they have been torn." It has been attributed to Appius Claudius Caecus (c. 340 BCE- 273 BCE) the Roman politician that he coined the phrase homo faber suae quisque fortunae (every man is the architect of his destiny). Such architectural fabrication does not mean that my speech changes external reality. Rather my speech changes my life (my being) within that reality. This change in me is achieved through the differentiation and individuation of myself from that reality without total separation from it. And this is how, as a human, I learn. This human way of learning is to be distinguished from "machine learning," which is frequently misunderstood as Artificial Intelligence by social scientists. It is uncontested that computers (machines) can communicate with other computers (or with humans)

¹³ Tyrrell (1903), p. xxxii.

but since such machines are not capable of speech, they cannot learn. They need to be programmed by a human learner. When computers communicate with a human being, or vice versa, all mental activity is solely on the part of the human organism. In short, garbage/knowledge *in*: garbage/knowledge *out*, as it was understood at the advent of the computer culture, still remains the norm.

Through speech, I describe my experiences or give a name to the object I experience. In this activity of speaking, I do not give an object its identity. My language, the vehicle of speech, can give different names to the same entity without changing its identity. I know an entity for what it means to me. That is, I philosophically describe or name my experience "as if" that is what it is. Here I am following the thinking initially laid out by Hans Vaihinger in his *The Philosophy of 'As If:' A System of the Theoretical, Practical and Religious Fictions of Mankind*. That is to say, through the philosophy of "As If," the names I impose on my experience of being actually refer to the concepts of my experience which I then may communicate to others and to myself, not to any reality itself. Therefore, I can form concepts that allow me to conceive of my life in progress either as a puzzle or a mystery, or both. This is the sense in which I mean that my speech differentiates me from reality — through concepts — rather than *connects* me to reality. Through the process of change my concepts continue to evolve, as well as, increase in number.

Whether my life is conceived as a mystery or puzzle, my being within life appears as an individuated conceptual notion that I fashioned from reality. By way of example, in common-sense talk reality is "out there." However, I hold philosophically the opposite that reality is not "out there" as a static thing, as "that which is" or "being," in the Hellenistic or scholastic intellectual philosophical sense. (It would be a mistake to understand that the scholasticism of the 14th and 15th centuries was a monolithic ideology without philosophical distinctions. Brian Gaybba notes that scholasticism was not a homogenous entity and, "like any other vibrant intellectual movement, it spawned a variety of ways of utilising reason to probe the data of faith." But, a variety of ways notwithstanding, that still leaves reality "out there.")¹⁴ I hold the opposite view that reality is that from which conscious life (my being) comes into being, i.e., is differentiated. In shorthand: reality is individuated life. This means that I live within reality which "grasps" me, figuratively speaking. To be sure all being is

¹⁴ Gaybba (1998), p. 66.

puzzling, but that does not exhaust human life. There is mystery (non-being) which also constitutes human life. What I can do consciously in my thinking is to distinguish between puzzle and mystery. This capacity to distinguish between the two indicates a further stage in the evolution of my thinking and speaking as a human organism. Thus, I need not reduce mystery to puzzle, or elevate puzzle to mystery, blurring their understanding. But, how does this distinction clarify my life in progress?

It leads me to understand that an authentic faith, religious or secular, is not to be confused with philosophy of life. This is so since philosophy of life is not a system that requires faith, religious or secular. Rather, philosophy of life discloses one's stance within a state of mind (consciousness) in searching for clarity and wisdom. Within philosophy of life the activity of the person is disclosed and not only the movement of the world that surrounds the person. I justify the person as a philosophizer of life on the grounds that the person is a subject, which confronts itself as a whole thinking and speaking human organism, not only as a biological one. The person cannot be rightly thought of as computer-style communicator which, although made up of different parts with built-in regulations, regulates itself only as a mechanism. Persons are conscious selves and since I am a person, I must be capable of conceiving my "self." That is, I must be conscious that my intellectual horizon is, in principle, open to limitless evolution. Thus, for me, philosophy of life offers an opportunity for more than simple credulity. I believe it to be the case that philosophically, through speech, I am able to remove the puzzle of life as I name (conceptualize) my experience particularly through scientific concepts. I believe it to be equally the case that philosophically through speech as logos of that which is "other than" me (reality), yet speaks to me, I am able to engage, that is, participate in the mystery of life. Not only receive passively sentient knowledge, that is, merely experience life in progress, but give meaning to it.

3. The Significance of Understanding

My experience, as an active participant in life, has shown me that it is most satisfying to understand my life in progress as both a puzzle and mystery. As I solve the puzzles of life (usually scientifically) I establish a concrete or physical *connection* with being. Such a connection serves my biological status very well as a human organism. In participating in the mystery of life, however, I have

come to differentiate a transcendent unknown as "something other," and am able to conceive relationships which are beyond being. These relationships not only serve my transcendental status as a human organism very well but allows me to fashion (or create) my own transcendent selfhood. Ultimately, such transcendent selfhood allows me to evolve as a holistic human being that is greater than the sum of its physical and mental parts.

The activity of evolving towards a holistic being I undertake consciously, which is an activity that infra-human organisms cannot undertake. My conscious activity of speech, thought and understanding, undertaken simultaneously and as a single activity requires of itself understanding, but not in the hierarchical sense I noted above. I do not "stand under" my life in progress, but I stand "within" my life in progress. (If I were I writing in Greek, I would use the preposition, $\acute{e}v$ to indicate "within.") My speech and thought allow me to conceptualize and participate in this philosophical stance, which is not merely a static position in my mind, but an activity of being alive as a human person. My mind's activity raises me above mere sense perception and liberates me from the limiting truth of concrete existence (a scientific puzzle). In other words, through my mind's activity I am able to understand that which is transcendent in the dynamic of my life and participate in it as mystery.

When I understand life, that is, stand within it, I consciously organize my knowledge obtained through reflection upon my experience. I subsequently express this organization in concepts by way of speech, thought and understanding to others, as well as myself. Being human, I am able to filter the data I have obtained through my conscious and unconscious life. The latter is usually pointed out to me by other human beings. In short, by virtue of my understanding I am able to channel my attention at will to the past, present and future with attendant consequences. I am free to organize the data I experience in accordance with the way I conceive it limited only by the ability proper to me as a human organism. The concepts I envision do not re-present being, as in classical Hellenistic understanding, but rather differentiate reality as I envision it. Envisioning concepts equates to becoming conscious of my life in progress as a dynamic in which I pro-actively do something, not simply re-actively be something. Being something is the tradition I inherited from my classical background. Doing something is the activity I initiate for clarification within philosophy of life. The "I" that I cannot doubt, is my "self," which I have actively and consciously individuated from reality. It is the counterpart of solely

a biological life-world. Thus, René Descartes notwithstanding, I understand that *sum* (I am), not *cogito* (I think) is the more accurate notion of what it means to be humanly conscious. It is the consciousness of *sum* that crafts me into an adult, through an evolutionary process, by which I am able to contribute to life in general. Thus, viewing speech, thought and understanding from this less frequented, but more adventurous path, my life in progress might reveal a *natural* religion. To my mind, philosophy of life is not philosophy *plus* certain other beliefs. Philosophy is but embryonic life, and life is but developed philosophy.

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