Context and Mythology

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will survey some philosophically representative approaches to the problem of the relationship between context and meaning. Starting from G.W.F. Hegel's discussion of the meaninglessness of indexical terms in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, I will investigate Gottlob Frege's notion of context and the legacy of this notion in the formal sciences of language, showing that this approach finds a ground for meaning in contexts which themselves must be thought of as meaningful. The formal approach will be compared with the theory of context developed by Philipp Wegener and expanded by the ethnographer Bronislaw Malinowksi, which locates the ground of meaning outside of the purview of the reasoning subject, locating context in culture. These differing conceptions of context as meaningful or effective presence will then be problematized by an assessment of the threat of the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein to any philosophical defense of the notions of meaning and context. Similarities between Wittgenstein's attack on meaning and the hermeneutic tradition, especially Hans-Georg Gadamer, will also be discussed, and the groundlessness or self-grounding of meaning will reveal an unexpected convergence between the idea of context and that of myth. Finally, the potential ramifications of and reactions to meaning understood as myth will be examined through the work of Edmund Husserl in his *The Crisis of European Sciences* and the work of Roland Barthes in "Myth Today".

Contents

1 Context as the Ground of Meaning

1.1 The Crisis of the 'Insufficiency' of Expression

One could perhaps say that the philosophical investigation of meaning has been faced with a crisis, a crisis which arose sometime, say, around the close of the 19th century, a crisis which is still being faced, at least inasmuch as the problematic which it has promulgated has delineated a field, or multiple fields, in which semantic and semiotic theories continue to situate themselves. The problem which defines this crisis might be termed the *(expressive) insufficiency of expression.* A paradoxical appellation — the aporia being the way in which an expression simultaneously can deserve its name, that is, *be* an expression of something or *have* some meaning, and yet, considered by itself, as an expression of language, be manifestly insufficient to express that of which it is nevertheless considered to be an expression. The 'crisis' whose existence is entertained here occurs in the recognition of this aporia, the recognition of language's inability to ground itself as self-evident meaning, and to postulate context as the supplement which would reinstate the possibility of meaning. For example, it is possible to say that formal semantics faced this crisis in its confrontation with the facts of indexical expressions, and that the formal notion of context (say, as a set of relevant parameters used in interpreting an expression) was developed in order to provide a basis by which a logical treatment of expressions containing such peculiar words as 'I' and 'now' could be provided. But the same crisis, in a different terminological and conceptual guise, can be read into the Saussurean conception of language, where the arbitrary nature of the sign necessitates the corresponding systematization of differences (i.e. it is only an understanding of *la langue* that makes it possible to understand *la parole* as meaningful). In both cases, the science of language in question is forced to theorize a supplemental presence in order to maintain the intelligibility of language as an object to be investigated and explained. I have no intention in this work to chase ghosts of my own invention and therefore do not wish to claim that a kind of hidden historical substance manifested itself in both instances. Nevertheless, there remains much that seems intuitively similar between the two little narratives of scientific progress just presented. In both cases, it seems that the self-congratulatory narrative which understands 'context' as that which makes the crisis surmountable might be understood quite differently, in such a way that the idea of context figures as that which engenders or perpetuates the crisis. On this reading, the notion of context, by making it possible to conceptualize meaning as something distinct from its expression, would be responsible for precipitating and perpetuating this 'crisis' in which a science of meaning is necessary to elucidate the relationship between meaning and context.

Forgoing such speculation until the 'crisis' has been explicated in more detail, it is worthwhile to comment on the general historical methodology which will be followed. In what follows, I shall attempt, if selectively, to underscore the common theme of a crisis of meaninglessness which arises in various attempts at a science or a philosophy of language. It will also assess the successive attempts made to mobilize various conceptions of context in addressing this meaninglessness. However, the examination of these proposed solutions will not merely seek to address their efficacy on their own stated terms, but also to take these solutions as signs which can reveal the nature of the problem to which they are addressed. As emphasized above, this does not mean that the 'crisis' in question will be understood as a unitary historical phenomena in any positive sense. Instead, I will attempt to establish a (very) provisional survey of the varying conceptions of this crisis that have been advanced, implicitly and explicitly, in order to determine how serious this crisis might be, to understand what relevance the idea of a crisis of meaninglessness might continue to have and to elucidate what claims it might therefore make on scientific and philosophical discourse. In other words, the 'history' which I will present will *not* trace the descent of a concept through philological rigor, but will seek to 'read', in the affinities between the dispersed signs of crisis, a still unresolved problematic. Unlike a more straightforward history of 'pragmatics' like that of Nerlich and Clarke[1], which assumes that the dimensions of language revealed by modern pragmatics are unproblematic universal insights into a natural phenomena, i.e. situated human language use, and that these same insights and the conceptual apparatus in which they are expressed can be retroactively fitted into a teleological narrative in which older works are noteworthy inasmuch as they can be understood as prefigurations of today's scientific conceptual apparatus, I will not proceed as if I was speaking from within a scientific tradition about that tradition (or its unknowing precursors). Context and meaning will not be understood as referring, more or less unproblematically, to a conceptual unity such as might be projected by those working within a science while assessing or investigating the historicity of their own discipline. Instead, ideas like 'context' and 'meaning' shall be understood as relevant in the texts considered insofar as they point to an underlying crisis or successive underlying crises requiring resolution. This will thus be a history of problems and failures, and not one of progressive successes.

1.2 Indexicals and abstraction: From Hegel to Frege

> Omnis determinatio negatio est. (Every determination is a negation.)
> –Spinoza, letter to Jarigh Jelles of June 2, 1674

An example serves to establish the plausibility of the rough chronology advanced here: In 1807, Hegel discusses in the first section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* what are now commonly called 'indexicals' — words which refer to some aspect of the situation in which they are uttered; Hegel examines the meaning of the words "Now", "Here", and "This"[2]. Hegel's exposition is concerned with "sense-certainty"; the conclusion of the section is that what the word "Now" or "Here" or "This" purports to refer to is only present to the subject as an abstraction or as a universal, such that the absolute specificity of the situation of utterance is denied by the very term which pretends to name it, because it names it *as* specificity. The use of the indexical expression, what it is intended to refer to, is

[1] As a bibliographic resource of amazing thoroughness and scope Nerlich's and Clarke's *Language, Action, and Context* nevertheless has much to recommend it.

[2] "This" in the *Phenomenology* is not to be understood as a demonstrative picking out one object among many (the analysis of the consciousness of particular *objects* takes place in the next section, "Perception"), but as 'Here-and-Now', i.e. the unanalyzed totality of immediate sensory experience.

precisely not what the expression itself means. But distinguishing between sense and reference here will not resolve this crisis. The point is not just that language is incapable of intelligibly naming or indicating what is absolutely particular and immediate without abstracting from this immediateness. It is, rather, that when this particular or immediateness is what a subject is conscious of, it is at once is bound up with its negation, abstraction — even before any use of language.[3] The troubling consequence is that the foundation upon which meaning could be secured, that of a world which is really there for who is speaking, is put into question. Meaning, if it is to have any ground at all, will only find it in the subject. This grounding function of the subject cannot be understood as an unshakable point from which all else follows, as in Descartes or Fichte. The critique of the "This" applies equally well, if not better, to the "I". Instead, the ground of meaning is to be furnished by the activity of the subject, in the teleological self-realization of this subject which proceeds through negativity and externalization, a becoming which ultimately concludes in the absolute recognition of subject as substance, and substance as subject.

Forgetting for the moment the daunting field of the Hegelian problematic (the full historical and ontological relationships holding between the universal and particular, being and negativity, etc.), it suffices to recognize that what is at stake in Hegel's analysis of the functioning of indexical terms is largely absent from contemporary semantic investigations. A very schematic picture of modern linguistic understanding of indexicals might run as follows: some linguistic terms are underdetermined with respect to meaning, and the interpretations of these terms must be filled in through an appeal to the context[4]. For Hegel, however, the scope of the negation extends, so to speak, all the way down to naked sense certainty — it is hard to see how Hegel could ask "What fixes the meaning of the word 'This'?" when the emptiness of this 'This' is not just the emptiness of a word, but an emptiness or negation which forms the kernel of the very being-in-the-world of the subject. It is therefore possible to read Hegel's examination of indexicals as a prefiguration of the 'crisis of context' insofar as there is a meaninglessness which is attributed to words, but it is impossible for Hegel to charge 'context' with the task of productively mediating between the abstraction of language and the particularity of experience, unless we consider the total teleological historicity of the realization of the concrete Absolute as 'context', which, if anything, makes the gap between Hegel's concerns and those of formal semantics appear even larger.

Provisionally, it can be said that the collapse of Hegel's ontological problematic into that of the semantic problematic concerning the meaning of indexicals is possible once two assumptions become prevalent: first, a conception of meaning understood as a formal correspondence between the form of the linguistic expres-

[3]For an interesting analysis of the role of immediateness as the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, see Jean Hyppolite, *Genesis and Structure of Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, first section of chapter one, "Sensuous Certainty." For a summary of the relationship of discursivity and negativity in Kojève's reading of Hegel, see http://www.mun.ca/animus/2000vol5/selcer5.htm

[4]This is a very schematic picture. This 'underdetermination' can be conceptualized in various ways, an example might be the distinction between a term which is ambiguous until understood in context and, as in the "direct reference" theory, a term which is unambiguous yet has has several unfortunate homonyms which are not present in that particular context.

sion and the picture of the world it expresses, and second, an understanding of the world in which communicating subjects have unproblematic (or unproblematized) epistemological access to a world of intelligible objects in which language use is situated.[5] It is only with these two assumptions in place that 'context' can be understood as that which makes language meaningful. Within the framework of these assumptions, it follows that context, like *language itself*, must be understood as a phenomenon which is both objective and subjective. Context is understood as objective in that only what is valid for all — independent of any subjective activity — can legitimately be expected to function in an act of communication between subjects. At the same time, however, this communicative function also demands that what functions as the context of a communicative act be more than merely objective, inasmuch as what is contextual is to be apprehended not simply as itself, but as a sign which points toward the correct interpretation of an utterance. Context can never be merely sensible, but must be *intelligible*, and thus subjective. As indicated above, this mode of existence between the objective and the subjective is exactly that of language, sensible and real yet animated by the meaningful accomplishment of subjectivity.

In this theoretical ensemble, which, as I will show, Frege inaugurates and exemplifies, it is apparent that context is, as much as language, something which will *signify*, implicated in the same mediation occurring between the world and the subject. The technical sense of linguistic context arises in conjunction with the intelligibility of reality that is presupposed such that intelligible meaning might exist. In order to escape the regression which would understand language as its own ground, a thoroughly semiotic totality, this conception offers an alternate totality, that of a world of intelligible objectivity, in which notions like truth will essentially inhere.[6] It will be necessary to think reality as an unproblematic sign of itself. Now will be understood to signify 'now' as much as 'now' will matter-of-factly signify now. The fundamental *opacity* of language which Hegel underscores will be abandoned in favor of a transparent relationship between expression and object.[7]

90 years after Hegel, Frege writes in "Logic":

> Words like 'here' and 'now' only acquire their full sense through the circumstances in which they are used. If someone says 'It is raining', the time and place of utterance have to be supplied. If such a sentence is written down, it often no longer has a complete sense, because there

[5]Although it cannot be explored in detail here, it is interesting to speculate on the reinforcing reciprocity of these two assumptions (the existence of 'meaning' and the positivity of the world). In the upcoming section dealing with ethnographic approaches to the study of meaning in context, it will become apparent that the conceptualization of meaning as the encoding of information about the world in propositional form is not the only theory of meaning that can be understood as implicated in a certain forgetfulness or rejection of the Hegelian problematic.

[6]To say that Frege tries to 'escape' the conclusion of an infinite and internally self-sufficient semiosis is perhaps unfair; it might be better said that this alternative did not present itself.

[7]The presupposition by language of its objects, despite dominating much of subsequent semantic investigation since Frege, Russell, and the King of France, will be posed as a problem for semantics not as an accomplishment to be understood historically (i.e. the study of the implication of language in the creation of its objects), but as a mechanism to be unraveled on the level of thought, the self-evidence of these objects never being called into question.

> is nothing to indicate who uttered it, and where, and when.[8]

In this passage, context is introduced as that which makes expressions that contain indexicals meaningful. Two important conceptions can be gleaned from this short passage. First, in order for the meaningless (or incomplete with respect to meaning) indexical to be made fully meaningful, the context must be present in some form. This alone is fairly unproblematic; after all, one can reasonably expect only what is present in some way to be able to have an effect. The problem arises when the mechanism underlying this effect of presence is considered: for the presence of context to be effective in supplementing the sense of words, it must *signify* this supplement (it must, as Frege writes, "indicate" the information relevant to the interpretation of the sentence). It is important to note that context for Frege[9] is significant even when it immediately accompanies the spoken utterance. In "Thought", Frege writes that "the time of utterance is part of the expression of the thought."[10] What has been lost between Hegel's understanding of indexical expressions as meaningless and Frege's understanding of indexical expressions as incomplete without the specification of contextual parameters is precisely the negativity inherent in abstraction which Hegel had underscored. For Hegel, the sensuous certainty of the self-evident can never enter into language or even consciousness without becoming abstract or universal, in effect negating the certainty which was to be found in the unity of subject and object in prereflective experience. Frege's reflections on the uniqueness of Dr. Lauben's thoughts about himself in "Thought" echo some of Hegel's concerns on the difficult transition from the particularity of the immediate to the thinkable and communicable, but stop short before reaching the point where all concepts become an abstraction:

> Now every one is presented to himself in a special and primitive way, in which he is presented to no one else. So, when Dr. Lauben has the thought that he was wounded, he will probably be basing it on this primitive way in which he is presented to himself. And only Dr. Lauben himself can grasp thoughts specified in this way. But now he may want to communicate with others. He cannot communicate a thought he alone can grasp. Therefore, if he says 'I was wounded', he must use the 'I' in a sense which can be grasped by others, perhaps in the sense of 'he who is speaking to you at this moment'; by doing this he makes the conditions accompanying his utterance serve towards the expression of a thought.[11]

It is admitted here that the precondition of linguistic communication is a realm of meaning which has been severed from what is particular to the individual, yet what is particular to the individual is unproblematically assumed to be present to that

[8] "Logic", p. 235

[9] The problem of context under discussion is of course quite different than that which is commonly referred to as Frege's "context principle", which holds that (some) words acquire meaningfulness by virtue of being employed in a proposition — the idea of context under consideration here has less to do with the proposition than with the utterance.

[10] "Thought", p. 332

[11] ibid., p. 333

individual. The concept of self is a given for Frege, not an arduous accomplishment of the negative.

In a sense, context, including the utterance itself, is the necessary complement of the third realm of thoughts (distinct from the physical and the ideational) for which Frege argues. The support of the non-sensible, impersonal, and eternal world of thoughts — what makes this world accessible at all — is the semiotic, a world which is both sensible and ideational. Painstakingly, Frege tries to minimize or reject this debt of thought to language. He writes in a footnote:

> I am not here in the happy position of a mineralogist who shows his audience a rock-crystal: I cannot put a thought in the hands of my readers with the request that they should examine it from all sides. Something in itself not perceptible by sense, the thought, is presented to the reader — and I must be content with that — wrapped up in a perceptible linguistic form. The pictorial aspect of language presents difficulties. *The sensible always breaks in* and makes expressions pictorial and so improper. So one fights against language, and *I am compelled to occupy myself with language although it is not my proper concern here.*[12]

Frege goes so far as to proclaim, in order to maintain the timelessness which is demanded of the thought, that "we may be inclined to distinguish between essential and inessential properties and regard something as inessential if the changes it undergoes involve only inessential properties. A property of a thought will be called inessential if it consists in, or follows from, the fact that this thought is grasped by a thinker."[13] With this, the semiotic, which conditions every grasping of a thought, is proclaimed to only inessentially connect to these thoughts, which persist in a presemiotic, eternal unalterability. If context is to function as it does for Frege, there must be a way in which the world can be present in such a way that it can be taken as a sign for something else, but at the same time, this semiosis must be limited by the availability of the objective (the components of eternal thoughts) as the ultimate meaning of expressions. Without this grounding, there would be no escape from the realm of the merely ideational, a possibility which Frege associates with the dissolution of the privileged place of the subject (the object which can be thought, which can have ideas, which can be thought as having these ideas).

To summarize then, for Frege, we have a world of signs (the physical/ideational couple), which cannot ground meaning nor be meaning, and a world of thoughts, which are eternal and formal and thus the very stuff that meaning is made of, with the subject as the privileged point of exchange between these two worlds. Context is a semiotic phenomenon, but it indicates into the non-semiotic, self-grounded world of meaning, rather than swallowing itself in a regressive circle.

1.3 The Fregean legacy in the formal sciences of language

Within the tradition of formal semantics, at least, the general approach to context exemplified by Frege's work has persisted largely unaltered. Context is theorized as

[12] ibid., p. 333D, emph. mine
[13] ibid., p. 344

the way in which the straightforwardly intelligible world is available to communicating subjects during the construction and interpretation of utterances, a source of extra information that allows utterances to bear more meaning than what is merely semantically encoded in them. Focusing on the logical representation of the meaning of natural language, the semantic tradition largely advances this conception of context by modeling it (context) through the introduction of formal contextual parameters for indexical variables like time, place, and speaker, relative to which interpretation of utterances with indexical expressions proceeds (paradigmatically Bar-Hillel and Montague[14]). In these theories, there is no consideration of how these formal sets of parameters arise — context is understood as something which has been supplied (i.e. signified), but the mechanism underlying this presence is understood more or less as a *deus ex machina* — the intelligibility of reality remains a given or something presupposed and not a problem. Both the indexical problem and the contextual solution, despite technical sophistication, are essentially developments of Frege's concerns in "Logic" and "Thought".

Of course, the parametric treatments of indexical meaning are only a small part, if a representative one, of the various theories of the role of context in interpretation within the formal tradition. Other formal theories have been formulated to deal with a range of problems of contextual interpretation, including the availability of referents within contexts of discourse and the effects of presuppositions and information states on implicature. Interestingly, many of these other theories do not (and indeed can not) assume that context will be supplied (be made present to the communicating subject) by an epistemology which functions autonomously with respect to language. As an example we can consider those theories which deal with discourse anaphora, in which the availability of referents for the anaphoric terms is contingent upon the interpretation of previous discourse. The basic phenomena motivating these theories are cross-sentential anaphora and so-called donkey-anaphora. Cross-sentential anaphora underly a discourse segment like 'The farmer owns a donkey. He beats it.' The referents of the pronouns in the second sentence are clearly determined by the second sentence's temporal position in the interpretative process with respect to the first sentence (consider the nonsensical 'He beats it. The farmer owns a donkey.'). The presence of the context which is relevant to the interpretation of anaphors in discourse is not assumed to lie outside the scope of the logical/linguistic investigation, but is explicitly theorized within the system as a relationship of signification.[15] This is even more clear in the case of the 'don-

[14] Montague's article "Pragmatics" provides a canonical example of this approach.

[15] Exactly how this happens of course depends on the particular theory under consideration. In DRT (Discourse Representation Theory), the first sentence ('A farmer owns a donkey') is understood to signify an operation to be carried out on a representation of the structure of the discourse underway (the DRS). In other theories, such intermediate representations are done away with, and what a sentence signifies is its "context-change potential", by which is meant a function from the context holding before the sentence under consideration to a new context. In the discourse anaphora case, the function will typically affect the assignment function which assigns referents from the model to 'free variables' like "He". Here it seems more appropriate to say that these operations on context are significations rather than meanings, if only because such operations do not fall under our normal use of the word 'meaning' to designate that which has been 'said'. Certainly an explication like "When Bob said to me 'J'ai vu un homme' he meant that he saw a man and that I should interpret occurrences of 'il' in the subsequent discourse as referring to this man." sounds rather strange.

key anaphora'. In a sentence like "If a farmer owns a donkey, he beats it." it is clear (from the contrast with "He beats it if a farmer owns a donkey.") that the interpretation of the pronouns is again contingent upon the prior comprehension of the conditional clause. But more importantly, the pronouns here refer to nothing which is actually claimed to exist, unlike the cross-sentential case, where the farmer and donkey are taken to be real entities which are being talked about. *The farmer and donkey here remain entirely hypothetical, existing only within the universe of discourse which has been established by the previous signification.* In the presupposition/implication theories as well, context is understood as a dynamic body of information which both conditions the interpretation of discourse and is conditioned by it. This circular interdependence of context and meaning is, however, limited or kept in check, on the one hand, by an unproblematized epistemology which provides knowledge of objects and their properties, and on the other, by the unproblematized access on the part of communicating subjects to the codes and conventions which make up their language. In short, the "spontaneous philosophy"[16] of the formal sciences of language still holds back the regressive threat of groundless semiosis through the postulation of a thoroughly intelligible world, presented to the subject as knowledge.

In order to more thoroughly substantiate this synopsis of the Fregean heritage in contextual semantics, I would like to examine a text by Robert Stalnaker called "On the Representation of Context". The article, which explicitly proclaims its intention "to try to describe the structure of discourse in a way that abstracts away from the details about the mechanisms and devices that particular languages may provide for doing what is done in a discourse"[17], provides a clear outline of the philosophical presuppositions underlying this heritage. The article begins by claiming:

> It has for a long time been widely recognized that no satisfactory semantic theory – theory of the relation between linguistic expressions and what they express – can ignore the role of the contexts in which

[16] This phrase "spontaneous philosophy" is originally Althusser's, but I am indebted to Michel Pêcheux for my understanding of its productive application to the sciences of language. Pêcheux's book *Language, Semantics, and Ideology* provided much of the initial impetus for this thesis, specifically calling my attention to the idea of self-grounding as it functions in language and the sciences of language, what Pêcheux calls the "Munchausen effect." Regarding Pêcheux's notion of "spontaneous philosophy", allow me to cite two representative passages:

> ...we shall be able to ascend from the (*logico-linguistic*) *evidentness of the subject*, inherent in the philosophy of language as the spontaneous philosophy of linguistics, to what will enable us to think *the 'subject form' (and specifically the 'subject of discourse') as a determinate effect of the process without a subject.*[*Language, Semantics, and Ideology*, p. 51]

> Furthermore, it may be observed that the situational-property/permanent property relationship is ineluctably conceived by the philosophy of language (which is, as I have said, the 'spontaneous philosophy' of linguistic science) along the lines of the *empirico-subjectivist myth of continuity* which holds that a gradual elimination of the situational leads steadily from the concrete individual subject 'in situ' (linked to his percepts and his notions) to a universal subject situated nowhere and thinking in concepts.[ibid., p. 86]

[17] "On the Representation of Context", p. 97

expressions are used and interpreted. Discourse is a dynamic interactive process in which speech acts affect the situations in which they take place, and in which the situation affects the way speech acts are understood.[18]

Stalnaker takes up both the 'Fregean' heritage in which meaning is a function of both expression and context, *and* the ordinary language or speech act tradition which emphasizes the possibility that the speech act, besides merely saying something true about the world, could actually in the case of 'performatives' call into existence the truth it professes, and more generally, that speech acts were like other rational acts, in that an utterance and the subsequent consequences (within a context) could be systematically related to the intentions of the utterer. Stalnaker, working within the dynamic conception of meaning outlined above, revises the Fregean conception of truth-conditional meaning: not only are utterances to be interpreted with respect to the context, but this very interpretation is also seen as a (proposed) operation on the context. Interestingly, in Stalnaker's approach, meaning and context are essentially 'woven from the same cloth'. An expression signifies a proposition, which is to be understood as a set of possible worlds (those worlds in which the proposition is true), and context is to be understood as the set of possible worlds which the participants in a dialogue regard as corresponding to the proposition which represents the knowledge shared between them. Stalnaker's innovation (with respect to DRT) is to underscore the idea that the utterance, before the proposition which has been uttered is "added" to the context (meaning that both participants mutually accept its validity and mutually recognize this acceptance[19]), the utterance is significant in that, as a manifestly observable event, the proposition that such and such a *speech act* (a significant and not merely physical event) occurred is assumed to also be "added" to the context. Crucial to this picture is the equation of meaning/context with (sets of) facts — while Stalnaker does not claim that all speech acts express a fact, it seems that the idea of context he advocates would always be composed only of facts, even when the interpretation of a non-declarative speech act was at stake. These facts which are composed into worlds (the debt to Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* explicitly acknowledged) have a number of noteworthy characteristics. First, as context is identified not merely with the speaker's or hearer's idea of the world, but what the speaker or hearer supposes is mutually shared knowledge, it is clear that the context is built up exclusively from what is either self-interpreting or what is communicable[20] — anything else could not legitimately be expected to be shared.[21]

Even more significantly, by conceiving the presence of context to discourse participants through the logical modality of the proposition, it is not enough that a fact be present in the context — what must also be present is the presence of

[18]ibid., p. 96

[19]And so on, and so on, cf. Schiffer, *Meaning*, for a thorough analysis of the reciprocal structure of 'common ground'.

[20]In Stalnaker's conception, communication to some extent provides its own interpretation — Stalnaker's response to Kamp at the end of the article depends on the speech act itself being a "manifestly observable event".

[21]A similar conception is advanced in Situation Semantics, where an emphasis is placed on the relationship of language to information.

this fact in the context, understood as an additional fact. Stalnaker makes the assumption "that speaker presupposition is transparent: speakers know what they are presupposing...."[22] The ramifications of this demand for transparency are, I think, farther reaching than Stalnaker's article indicates. It should be noted that the conceptual structure which makes a science of language along the lines of a formal semantics or pragmatics possible includes at the center the idea that the subject who enters into meaningful relations with the world and with other subjects in this world is completely transparent to themselves. Put another way, formal theories which understand context to be something that is signified to the subject (either as facts which are grasped mentally or as information which is available in the environment) can take into account the role of presupposition (which is reflexive in the sense that Stalnaker advances) but not the role of *prejudice*, which conditions the very existence of this subject. The model of meaning which formal theory of language construct finds their essential point of articulation in the subject who reasons, acts, and understands. For this reason, the notion of context which is incorporated into these theories is one in which context is present to the subject — what is not present to the subject cannot be articulated as a part of the process of meaning.

It seems that this conception of the subject as the empty point of rationality which approaches the world as a meaningful and authentic phenomena denies any possibility of real historicity entering into the determinations of meaning — a good definition of a historically situated subject might be that such a subject is their own blindspot. This non-transparency appears to be something a formal theory of meaning seems destined to ignore by virtue of the demands of its technical constitution. The empty subject of semantics, counterpart of a ready-made world of self-interpreting intelligibility, might be understood to function as a sort of alibi for the more problematic historical constitution of the communicating subject.

1.4 Context and culture: Wegener and Malinowski

Of course, the notion of context developed in the formal sciences of meaning is only a part of the larger 'crisis of context' which was introduced at the beginning of this chapter. Shifting the focus of the investigation underway away from formal semantics, I will now trace the development of a theory of context in another scientific tradition, one in which the psychological and cultural aspects of meaning are foregrounded. I will, perhaps somewhat arbitrarily, locate the beginning of this historical tradition in the work of Phillip Wegener, a German psychologist and linguist writing at roughly the same time as Frege. It can only be to due to the vagaries of academic fashion that the modern pragmatic research traditions — including the formal extensions of semantics discussed above, but especially Gricean intentional semantics and Austinian speech act theory — have been established without reference to Wegener's work. Wegener's work, represented best by his *Untersuchungen uber die Grundfragen des Sprachlebens*, has a decidedly philological (and even aesthetic) tendency, but the psychological explanations of the meaning of speech which are advanced to support his theses concerning the historical evolution

[22]ibid., p. 100

of language and the development of the language faculty in the child anticipate much of the work done in the subsequent century under the name of "pragmatics". Wegener's work includes coherent analyses of several phenomena which collectively almost define the entire field of investigation for contemporary pragmatics. A few examples of Wegener's proto-pragmatic analyses will serve to illustrate these common concerns. Speaking of the relationship of phonetic stress, grammatical saliency, and the 'newness' of information, Wegener advances a surprisingly modern analysis of the interaction of markedness and the topic/focus distinction. He begins with the basic grammatical fact of subject and predicate, but quickly moves beyond this simple model:

> One is accustomed to indicating this relationship grammatically with the words subject and predicate. The group of ideas from which a declaration is made we call the subject, the declaration itself, the predicate. The subject is the uninteresting known, the declaration, the interesting and new. Of course, this relationship doesn't always take place between grammatical subject and grammatical predicate. With the stress on *your* in *your father said it* the grammatical subject is the new and interesting; thus, logically, it is the predicate.[23]

Or consider Wegener's analysis of discourse anaphora:

> If I have spoken of Rome the sentence *The city was situated on the Tiber* will surely be understood as Rome; the indication of the genus city is supplemented by the remembrance of the previous thought. In the example *Caesar was murdered on the Ides of March; he had gone into the Curia*, *he* is a predicate to the Caesar present in memory.[24]

Later in the text, Wegener will analyze these and other cases where the full meaning is not explicitly contained in the utterance alone to a principle of economy : "in such cases in which a determining point of the action are supplemented by a built-in necessity, *certain abbreviations of linguistic expression* have emerged."[25]

Most importantly for the purposes of this work, Wegener advances an analysis of situated pragmatic inference as the basis of meaning, and a conception of meaning which focuses not on propositional structure, but on the function of the utterance within the communicative situation. There are two elements in Wegener's theory of pragmatic inference which resurface in mid-20th century pragmatics: intentions and contexts. Meaning is equated not with an information structure as in Frege or the early Wittgenstein (where meaning takes the form of a logical picture of the world), but with the intentions of the speaker. Wegener writes:

> The foremost purpose and intention of dialogue is to influence the listener in a specific way....The view that the purpose of all speech is the communication of ideas certainly contains an element of truth if one limits this definition to the dialogue; but which ideas do we communicate, and why? The definition is also too narrow in that

[23] *The Life of Speech*, p. 134
[24] ibid., p. 189
[25] ibid., p. 217

> all influencing of the mind in its various forms in language (such as the imperative, the request, the challenge) does not appear to us as communication of ideas. Moreover, that which is actually stated is not always the purpose of our speech.[26]

In the last sentence, Wegener alludes to his study of what Grice would later treat as "conversational implicature", the possibility that what is said is not what is meant, or is not all that is meant. This sort of implicature, the potential discrepancy between literal and intended meaning, motivates a theory of context or situation as that which mediates between the two.

Wegener postulates three distinct ways in which a situation may be present to the participants in a dialogue, as "external elements from which an interpretation is derived". The first is direct perceptual presence: "The situation, given by the surrounding relationships and the presence of the addressed person, comes to consciousness through perception. Thus we call it the situation of perception." Wegener gives the example here of the interpretation of the word 'Linden' in the sentence "This tree is a linden.", in a situation where the participants in the conversation are standing in front of the tree.[27] In the second type of situation, the perceptual situation can pass into the memory of the participants in dialogue, and still remain 'present' for the purposes of interpretation. Wegener's example makes this process clear:

> If the eyes of thousands of people are trained on a great spectacle such as a coronation, the exclamation *beautiful!*, *magnificent!*, is comprehensible while the crowd disperses, since one may assume that everyone in the audience remains concentrated on what he has just seen. Memory keeps alive what has just occurred, so that any linguistic utterance is related to it at once in the absence of further exposition.[28]

The third type of situation is the cultural one, the background of the community's shared concerns and assumptions which serve to resolve ambiguous expressions.

> It can be concluded without argument that the cultural differences of various peoples and places must produce significant differences in their exposition. We say today *He took the wood in order to make a fire* and everyone understands that wood is that which will be brought to flames by another fire or some other means of ignition. Would a man comprehend this idea if his culture knew only of lighting a fire by rubbing two sticks together? Would he understand the expression *steel and stone*? We call this situation the cultural situation.[29]

Notably, Wegener does not seem to understand the presence of cultural context as something which is present to the speaking subject as a reason, so much as something which "can cross the threshold of consciousness"[30]. Working within the

[26] ibid., p. 174
[27] ibid., p. 135
[28] ibid., p. 136
[29] ibid., p. 139
[30] ibid., p. 136

associationist psychological framework, Wegener assumes that this "threshold" is crossed when some sign in the immediate situation can be linked to these interests. He thus allocates a role to the unconscious in the determination of meaning, in that culture provides subjects with tendencies in the interpretations they will offer automatically when faced with a sign, not with knowledge of a convention which governs likely interpretations. Starting from the raw perception of the present situation and examining those situational factors in interpretation which are farther and farther removed from the consciousness of the communicating subject, Wegener complicates the picture advanced by formal semantics, which locates meaning in the logical processes whose nexus is the self-transparent subject.

Wegener continues to deploy both psychology and philology in the elucidation of how meaning is not a transparent process to the subject. In Wegener's opinion, the meaningful word, which can be compositionally combined with other words in order to make meaningful sentences, is necessarily the product of a sort of cultural amnesia. Because what determines meaning is intention, not reference or truth, the unit of meaning for Wegener is the sentence. It is impossible for mere reference to something to influence the behavior of an other person; Wegener spends a good deal of time examining how single word utterances, considered in context, are really best understood as complete sentences, expressing not only reference to a piece of the world, but the desire of the speaker regarding that piece of the world. According to Wegener, this immediate connection of meaning with intention or desire is not superseded by the attainment of a more abstract consciousness. Rather, there is a logic which underlies the encoding/decoding of intention into/from the sentence, but one which depends not so much on active inference on the part of the conscious subject, but on mechanized or automated chains of reasoning.[31] Because the genetic link between intention and meaning as it is mediated in the expression is continually being concealed both on the level of individual development through the capacity for associations to be chained together in the unconscious, and on the level of the development of the historical speech community by what Wegener calls "the obscuration of the etymological consciousness", the "force" which the expression operates meaningfully on the will of the other is not a conclusion at which the subject arrives rationally, but rather a conclusion supplied by the machinery of the subconscious. Discussing the process by which the actual connection between the subject and predicate is not specified by the sparse finite resources of the combinatorial system of grammar (consider for example the difference between 'I ran the factory' and 'I ran the mile', which, forgoing a homonymic analysis, is not represented in the syntax), Wegener makes a statement which I believe also extends more generally to his approach to situated meaning:

> Indeed, language itself offers only an extraordinarily small number of indications about the relation of the action components to the action

[31] An interesting question related to Wegener and the historical context of his work concerns the dependence of his use of the mechanization or automation in the psyche as an element of psychological discourse. Is this mode of theorizing the interior opacity of the subject possible without the corresponding development of actual mechanization in the labor process? Wegener writes "Today every liberally educated man understands the expression *inhibition of ideas*. One no longer needs the troublesome exposition *one must think of an idea as a mechanical quantity*." [ibid, p. 161]

> as a whole.... In this case it is the same as the listener's conclusions discussed above: at the beginning these conclusions are drawn slowly, until habituation mechanizes them; and then the listener and the speaker *believe* that the supplementations gained by inference are expressed in the words of speech themselves, because the mechanized series of conclusions no longer cross the threshold of consciousness.[32]

Presumably, the inferences based on context are also, for Wegener, not normally present to consciousness in the 'adult' life of speech. In some sense, the phenomenon of meaning is phantasmagorical — the experience of meaning for consciousness is largely that of an ungrounded yet near certain given. Without this direct, near magical capability to call a conclusion into being in the mind of the other, language would be incapable of fulfilling its primary function (or at least what Wegener understands to be its primary function). This *magical* character of language will be even more relevant to the work of one of Wegener's followers, Bronislaw Malinowski, whose work I will consider shortly. Wegener offers a theorization of context which goes beyond the Fregean model traced above. In addition to the co-presence of context as self interpreting presence (perception is the canonical example here) which enters into a determination of meaning with an utterance through the logical articulation of a reasoning subject, Wegener proposes, through the figure of reasoning which has, in its automatization, been submerged behind consciousness, a mode of presence of context which inheres within the meaning of the utterance itself. The role of the automatic in Wegener's thought is to introduce into the Fregean model a distinction between understanding and interpreting — while Wegener allows that one may reason based off of context in order to *interpret* an utterance, in the more common process of *understanding* this reasoning takes place 'behind the scenes', as it were. Context is not thematized or even necessarily present to the understanding subject — what is present in understanding is situated meaning. The threat of a regressive spiral of a semiotic world without ground looms larger in Wegener than it does in Frege. Whereas for the latter context was present as a sign which, together with a linguistic sign, signified meaning, the former allows that context may not be present as an independent sign at all, submerged instead in the relationship between a linguistic sign and its situated meaning. While the ground of meaning for Wegener ultimately remains within contextual presence, this presence, in its transposition into memory and culture, continues through psychological mechanization to appear as meaning after it has been forgotten.

The specific linguistic suggestions made by Wegener were largely rediscovered independently by researchers in the mid-20th century who give no indication of having benefited from his work. Wegener's real legacy is in the discourse of anthropological or ethnographic linguistics. I will concentrate here on the further development of Wegener's notion of context within this discourse as expressed in the work of Bronislaw Malinowski.[33] Malinowski's relevance to linguistic theory

[32] ibid., p. 213

[33] Malinowski is a somewhat problematic figure — unlike Frege, whose anti-semitism could be seen as incidental to his contributions to logic, Malinowski's racism, as revealed in the posthumously published diary recounting his personal thoughts during his research among the Trobriand islanders,

is eclipsed by his invention (so to speak) of the idea of "ethnographic fieldwork" as a social-scientific methodology, but his analysis of language prefigures important developments within the pragmatic tradition, especially the work of the later Wittgenstein and the development of speech act theory by Austin.[34] In this paper, I will concentrate on Malinowski's *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, a late work which offers a comprehensive outline of his "ethnographic theory of language". Within the sketch offered here, it is interesting to note the further development of Wegener's notion of meaning in context as the concept is transplanted to ethnological soil. Much like Wegener, Malinowski holds that "the real linguistic fact is the full utterance within its context of situation".[35] Also following Wegener, "context" in its widest sense appears in Malinowski's work to refer not to something which is so much present, as something significant to the subject who lives within it, but something that the anthropological linguist must postulate and delineate in order to be able to study the meaning of words in another culture. For those not engaged in the scientific study of culture, linguistic meaning and context appear as a prereflective unity, because, for Malinowski, meaning is not the expression of thought, but the practical effect of language in context[36], an effect that is more magical than rational. Malinowski demonstrates this methodological strategy of making context explicit in his explication of how it is possible to translate "untranslatable words" — by specifying the context of utterance in the fullest anthropological sense, it is possible for the meaning of utterances which resist paraphrase into the language of the analyst to nevertheless be grasped and transcribed.

This problem of the "translation of untranslatable words", for the analytic philosopher of language, might bring to mind the work of Davidson in "Radical Interpretation", where the concept of truth is mobilized in order to provide a sketch of how a theory of interpretation might be constructed. Davidson suggests that a system of Tarskian T-sentences, which biconditionally equate the truth of sentences in the object language (which is to be translated) with the truth of sentences in a

deeply problematizes the project of anthropology. It is hard not to speculate that the shameful history of Western colonialism and the concomitant disregard for the humanity of the colonized are in some meaningful way linked to the project of anthropological science which understands humans and human society as objects which can be studied from a neutral scientific perspective. However, I shall refrain from refusing to consider the substance of Malinowski's theories on the grounds of his personal attitudes — there are important problems to be addressed that are internal to his intentionally published work.

[34] According to Nerlich and Clarke, a direct historical filiation can only be seriously considered between Malinowski and Wittgenstein, via Ogden and Richard's book "The Meaning of 'Meaning"' in which Malinowski's essay "The problem of meaning in primitive languages" appeared as an supplement. Nerlich and Clarke go so far as to suggest that it was conceivably the influence of Malinowski that led to the 'turn' in Wittgenstein's thought from the picture theory of meaning to the 'meaning-as-use' thesis.

[35] *Coral Gardens and their Magic*, II, p. 11. Malinowski's formulation "context of situation", whose meaning he explicates clearly in "On the Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages", represents an effort to broaden the meaning of context from the sense it would have for someone thinking of Frege's principle, or of textual interpretation, where it refers exclusively to the surrounding text, to one which includes everything Wegener refers to with the term "situation".

[36] "... the conception of meaning as *contained* in an utterance is false and futile. A statement, spoken in real life, is never detached from the situation in which it has been uttered....utterance and situation are bound up inextricably with each other and the context of situation is indispensable for the understanding of words." ["The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages", p. 307]

known language, could serve as a philosophically coherent theory of interpretation for the object language. (in the sense that the theory allows one who has it to translate, and thus interpret the language in question.). Davidson treats simple contextual meaning by relativizing the truth of both sides of the biconditional to indexical parameters. (e.g. "'Es regnet' is true-in-German when spoken by x at time t if and only if it is raining near x at t.") We might be tempted to view Malinowski's ethnological procedure as a sort of field-deployment of Davidson's theories. However, Malinowski's methodology functions in the presence of evidence which seems to put into question the very condition Davidson requires in order for his theory to function: namely, his principle of charity, which assumes that human beings, independent of language and culture, will tend to believe more or less the same things about the world (thus solving "the problem of the interdependence of belief and meaning"[37]). For Malinowski, this would be an untenable assumption — he is interested precisely in the situations where this assumption fails, those involving magical practices, for example, which are binding and powerful for the Trobiander and incomprehensible superstition to the European. Furthermore, Malinowski eschews a view of language in which the central property of an expression is to have some relationship to truth, opting instead for the thematization of the pragmatic function or effect of language in context.

Ultimately, Malinowski presents two meanings; that which is narratively situated by the ethnologist, and that which is actually experienced and lived by the person whom the ethnologist studies. Although the former makes the latter intelligible, the two meanings are clearly different in nature — the explicitly specified context, made intelligible by the ethnographist, is already intelligible to the ethnographic subject, who, living within a world of situated meaning, has not practiced a naive form of ethnography on their own speech community in order to arrive at their own interpretative capacity, but rather acquires this capacity in the course of socialization. This process which starts with the infant, who clearly does not have the conceptual resources necessary for the disinterested descriptive work ethnography, but rather emerges into language guided or even driven by biological needs and emotional affects. Davidson's T-Sentence translations, and Malinowski's ethnographic narratives are fundamentally different — neither side of Malinowski's 'biconditional' makes any intrinsic reference to truth. The discourse in the language to be translated has its 'native' meaning in its socially situated effect and not its correspondence to a universally objective reality, and the translation taking the form of a discursive 'making-intelligible' of the foreign "context of cultural reality"[38] which supports the use of a language which is precisely *not* translatable into an equivalent utterance in the tongue of the ethnographer. The effect of language is not the same as the description of this effect. The results of this difference can be seen perhaps most clearly by comparing Malinowski's thought with Davidson's comments in "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme", in which the idea that language organizes reality is held to be incoherent precisely because the possibility of translation is maintained. Malinowski, on the other hand, while rejecting the one-way projection of the form of language onto the form of the subject's concep-

[37] "Radical Interpretation", p. 137

[38] *Coral Gardens*, II, p. 22.

tual apprehension of the world, understands language and world to be inextricably intertwined — the world is composed to a large extent not by rabbits which merely bound across our perceptual field, but by the social effects of language, whether magical or pragmatic.[39]

Malinowski's understanding of meaning as effect or use is even more radical than Wegener's. Where the latter's theory remained dependent on the psychological machinations of the mind, insofar as meaning was understood as the influencing of the will of the other, Malinowski generalizes this notion of meaning as force, so that what is acted upon by language is not merely the will of the other, but the socially-constructed world itself[40]. It is this understanding of the utterance as an act which is an end in itself and not merely an act which has another act as its *telos* (as in Wegener, where the will of the other mediates between the meaning of my utterance and the world I wish to alter) that represents Malinowski's most significant contribution to the philosophy of language. In *Coral Gardens*, he offers an analysis of "the meaning of meaningless words" which parallels and extends the argument given about "the translation of untranslatable words", focusing primarily on the interpretation of magical language. Malinowski distances himself from what he sees as the excessive Hegelian abstraction of Durkheim's theory which understands magical or religious behavior as referring to the absolute as concretized in the society or the crowd. For Malinowski, magical incantations depend on the social context for their meaning, but in a more fine-grained way: the social context appears as the world to those within it and the effect of words is to control and change this world directly. When Malinowski writes "...the meaning of any significant word, sentence, or phrase is *the effective change* brought about by the utterance within the context of situation,"[41] he has something different in mind than the rational update of an information state — words, considered in their context, have the power to change the context as force. Interestingly, Malinowski links this magical power of words to what Austin would later call the performative, similarly an utterance that, in the correct or felicitous context, calls a changed reality into being by virtue of being said.

The basis of context in Malinowski seems to lie less in rational co-existence than in shared illusions, in a sort of social myth. In Wegener, the presence of

[39]It is important, while in some way setting Malinowski up against the formal tradition, to remember that Malinowski's position is flawed as well. The next chapter will consider the continued privileged and foundational position occupied by the subject within Malinowski's "ethnographic theory of language", but it is also important at this point to note the difficulties that would emerge once Malinowski's account of significant practices within a cultural context was used to interrogate the very practice of ethnography itself. At the same time that his account insists meaning is not expression of knowledge but effect in a cultural horizon, his own discourse operates in a mode which seeks to truthfully present the knowledge of the cultural other acquired through fieldwork. One is immediately tempted to attempt a translation of *Malinowski's discourse* in order to make *its* context of culture intelligible, and to understand it in terms of *its* effects. Foremost among these effects would perhaps be the constitution of the ethnographer himself, a magical/performative conjuration, and the concomitant conjuration of the cultural other as object.

[40]Malinowski, to be sure, still maintains that this socially constructed world has no reality outside psychological and behavioral effects, but there is an important distinction to be made between influencing the behavior of another through language (thus changing the world in the intended way) and changing the world through language.

[41]ibid., p. 214

meaning without the concomitant presence of rational deduction of that meaning from the premises of knowledge was dependent on the internalization of these logical processes within the mechanized and inaccessible realm of the unconscious. Malinowski fleshes out and radicalizes this proposal in his understanding of the world on which language operates directly, understanding context as not just something given empirically, but conditioned and shaped by the significant practices which operate within it. It is this propensity of language to call a world into being — to project, instantiating its own condition of meaningfulness, a myth in place of reality, or perhaps rather to obscure the incommensurability of a reality inaccessible to language and and the obviousness of the cultural myth in which we live, in short, the potentially negative and vertiginous aspects of the "ontological significance of the hermeneutic circle"[42] — that I will investigate in the next chapter.

[42] The phrase is Gadamer's, from his *Truth and Method*.

2 Beyond Context: The Philosophical Attack on Meaning

2.1 Wittgenstein and the immanence of meaning

In the previous chapter I established, if only provisionally, the hypothesis that 'context', in order to function as an element of a theory of meaning in the formal *and* ethnographic explications of semantics/pragmatics, must be in some way present to the communicating subject, either as a separate object of conscious knowledge, or presented through the force of an utterance and inextricably bound up with this force. This general conclusion about context follows from the assumption that meaning exists and is effectively accomplished in the communicative act. Once the phenomena of meaning is understood to be given, any investigation which seeks to circumscribe what is arbitrary or conventional yet nevertheless significant is forced to understand a supplemental presence which grounds or motivates this semiotic relationship between the intrinsically meaningless sign and the intrinsically non-concrete meaning. Without this supplement, the semiotic relationship from expression to meaning remains at the level of observation, not explanation. Context, as a technique of science, allows linguistic data to be explicated through the systematic social/pragmatic structures and relationships which motivate that data — it is context, whether understood as the system of difference out of which is condensed the identity of signifiers and signifieds, or as the compositional machine which logically operates on its own transparent constitution in discourse, or the plenitude of a properly cultural reality, which makes *la parole* a sign of *la langue*, and so makes a science of meaning, whose object is the latter, possible. Following for the moment the still provisional logic of the "crisis of meaning", it can perhaps be said that the very solution to the crisis (context as supplement) is what makes possible the object which provokes the crisis (the conception of meaning as the signified counterpart to the utterance).

The exposition above traced two prominent conceptions of the functioning of this supplement, the formal semantic/pragmatic approach, which understands context as significantly present to the rational subject, and the psychological/ethnological approach, which understands context as present to the (social) unconscious of the communicative subject and recoverable by the semiotic analyst. In the former, context is the sign which supplements the meaningful sign; in the latter, context is the origin of the force by which meaning is presented through and inseparable from the sign and the 'world of meaning' of which it is a part. What is common to both of these approaches is the assumption of the existence of meaning as an object of investigation and the consequent inability to interrogate this fundamental presupposition within the terms established by either scientific discourse. This is not an indictment of these disciplines, merely an observation regarding the internal logic of their investigations and concomitant presuppositions. Without 'meaning', semantics and ethnographic translation would both be impossible.

The question then arises: is a science of meaning possible when the very existence of 'meaning' has been called into question? It is within the field opened by this question that one might locate the later works of Ludwig Wittgenstein, which can be viewed as a sort of prolegomena to this future science that, paradoxically, would lack a proper object. This assessment is a difficult and provisional one — Wittgenstein's work, especially in his later writings, lacks the coherency of an explicit argument, and admits of a multiplicity of interpretations (especially when the writings which were never intended for publication are placed along side the more 'coherent' posthumous canon is centered around the *Philosophical Investigations*). It is possible, and perhaps more commonplace, to read Wittgenstein as espousing essentially the Malinowskian viewpoint sketched in the last chapter. This reading would perhaps be encapsulated by a certain interpretation of Wittgenstein's explication of meaning as use, an interpretation in which this explication is taken as equating meaning with function. This reading would take Wittgenstein as attacking the centrality of the proposition in theorizing meaning, seeing him instead as insisting that the only meaning words had would be *the use to which they are put* within a particular language game; for example, the meaning of "slab" in the first game of the *Investigations* would be the coordination of the movement of building materials. While this is certainly part of Wittgenstein's argument, this reading seems less than satisfactory — the ruthless, at times even desperate dialectic gymnastics of his work seem to belie a more difficult and rewarding project.

Let us note that the Malinowskian conception of meaning, despite subsuming reality under culture, still depends on a certain transparency which is internal to the system. Speaking subjects are aware of the meaning (function) of words, and yield these words as a power to act upon social reality. The speaking subject here remains the hinge upon which meaning is articulated, not as the transparent point of rational knowledge, but as that which acts meaning. The subject is the performer in Malinowski's proto-theory of the performative, the force of meaning is derived from the constitution of the social world, but animated by intention. In order for this theory to function, the meaning or use of language must be accessible to the subject so that an intention can be an intention. One cannot intend to use the right tool for a particular task without understanding that the tool one has selected is in fact the right tool, and Malinowski, while not according this understanding the dignity of complete logical transparency, never calls it into question (being part of a culture, being acculturated). However, I believe it would be a mistake to understand Wittgenstein's work as merely the refutation of the centrality of the proposition prevalent in the formal approach with the diversity of linguistic function which can be observed in the reality of culturally situated language use.

On a more radical reading Wittgenstein poses a significant danger to such a positive anthropology of meaning. In this reading, the equation of meaning with use would not pose a comprehensible function as the ideal counterpart of the signifier, but instead refers solely to use as *occurrences*. Sense or meaning here would not refer to the subject's animation of the sign with the intention to make it function in a context, but only the place within the language game where the sign occurs. Sense is something internal to the continuation of series of signs, which proliferate according to a logic grounded nowhere outside itself.[43]

[43] There is evidence to the contrary in Wittgenstein, which I would be remiss if I did not mention — the sense of sign-chains is anchored, in various fragments, to rather common-sensical factors. One of these anchors is the regularities inherent in the physical world — for example Wittgenstein writes that our practice of "putting a lump of cheese on a balance and fixing the price by the turn of the scale would lose its point if it frequently happened for such lumps to suddenly grow

We can see this in the way in which the later Wittgenstein refuses to formulate the transcendental connections which would tie the meaning of language to an ideal structure. In Wittgenstein's earlier *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, propositional form is the common mode of being proper to both the world and language. The structure of linguistic signification mirrors exactly the structure of experiencing the world, and the locus of this reflection is the proper object of a theory of meaning. With the devaluation of the proposition in the later works, 'meaning' crucially no longer designates a descriptive articulation which relates the structure of the expressed to the world, where such an articulation necessitates the commensurability of meaning and the world in logic. 'Meaning', in the later works, is a word with a "humble" use, that is, one which remains a word which only functions within a language game. "Your questions refer to words; so I have to talk about words. You say: the point isn't the word, but its meaning, and you think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word".[44] What counts as the meaning of an expression is dependent on the the language games within which the expression circulates, both the game to which it is 'native', and the (meta-language) game[45] in which the expression is brought into a discursive relationship with another expression (the first expression's 'meaning'). Examples of the second type of game would be writing a dictionary, translating a word for a speaker of another language, or giving an example of what a word can refer to. It is the first circulation alone, the one in which language is home in its ordinary context where it has a describable function, which is advanced by Malinowski. The second circulation, in which any such description of meaning is itself a language game, forms the dangerous kernel of Wittgenstein's 'deconstruction' of the idea of meaning. To say that the sign has no meaning outside of the language game does not mean that the sign's subsumption under its role in the game reinvests it with a positive meaning which is other than itself, like the concept of function which is linked by the communicating subject to the concrete and therefore intrinsically meaningless expression. There is no private language, no language of thought which animates signs with meaning; the proliferation of signs is itself the ultimate source of meaning. In slogan form, one could say that meaning is no longer a

or shrink for no obvious reason" [*Philosophical Investigations*, §142] Here the response from the position of my reading is simple: although the physics of substance makes the practice of weighing possible, nothing in this physics serves to imbue the practice with meaning. It is still the practice of weighing itself which *makes* sense, along with the other practices with which it enters into series, say the practice of ownership or the practice of exchange. A more serious obstacle to the 'deconstructive'-pragmatic reading of Wittgenstein is posed by Wittgenstein's invocation of the essence of man, his apparent recourse to a transcendental anthropology or biology in such claims as "The common behavior of mankind is the system of reference by means of which we interpret an unknown language." [ibid., §206] The decisive question here is then whether this common behavior of mankind is something valid and possibly knowable *a priori*, in advance of any chain of significations, or something *a posteriori*, knowable only through the multitudinous proliferation of these chains themselves.

[44] *Philosophical Investigations*, §120

[45] Also in §120 of the *Investigation*, Wittgenstein is clear to point out that a sensible meta-linguistic game cannot have recourse to an unproblematic meta-language, but must rely on language itself in all its ordinariness. "When I talk about language (words, sentences, etc.) I must speak the language of every day....In giving explanations I already have to use language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one)."

correspondence but a continuation. Along these lines, the series of propositions on the continuation of series in the *Investigations*[46] do not just serve to attack the notion that continuation depends on a communicable concept of the series, but provide a general model for semiosis itself, in which the articulation of the series is its own concept.

To give this reading of Wittgenstein a name, one can perhaps term it the 'deconstructive' Wittgenstein[47]. "I was thinking about my work in philosophy and said to myself, 'I destroy, I destroy, I destroy.' "[48] Indeed, the attack he carries out on the notion of 'meaning' as employed within philosophical thought shares much with, for example, Derrida's encounter with speech act theory in "Signature Event Context". If Wittgenstein directs his argument against the formal tradition stemming from Frege, Derrida levels his at Austin, the inheritor (or perhaps reinventor) of the tradition of meaning as effective force that I traced through Wegener and Malinowski.[49] I have argued that Wittgenstein goes beyond Malinowski's work in a significant respect, and I think it would also be fair to say that the work of Austin remains in most respects squarely within that tradition. (How close, in his theory of magical language, Malinowski was to the notion of the performative formulated in *How to do things with words*!) However, as I have argued above, the difference between the idea of meaning as information and meaning as force is not great enough to escape the common assumption that language cannot function without a correspondence between expression and meaning, as well as the theorization of context as that supplemental presence which makes this correspondence possible. Derrida examines the speech act version of this very process, and finds a logic of the sign, which, in its need for supplementation (stemming from its arbitrary nature), reveals its own meaninglessness, or better, lack of a determinable and univocal meaning. Against the idea that the speech act has a meaning only when it is uttered in its proper context (the ordinary, normal context), Derrida tries to demonstrate that the speech act can never be said to absolutely be in such a context. His argument understands the arbitrary, iterable nature of the linguistic component of a speech act to be the condition of possibility for an artificial sign. With this kernel of arbitrariness at the heart of language, the sign can never be said to be "'at home,' by and in itself, in the shelter of its essence or *telos*." [50] For Derrida, a potential citation undermines every attempt of Austin's to circumscribe a meaningful speech event. And since, following the logic of the 'significant context' we have traced above, speech act theory postulates either an intelligible or an effective context[51] as the necessary ground of intelligible or effective signs, Derrida is able to mobilize

[46] ibid., §143-147

[47] The appellation is Samuel Wheeler's, from his "A Deconstructive Wittgenstein: On Henry Staten's *Wittgenstein and Derrida*"

[48] *Culture and Value*, p. 19

[49] Derrida also offers a critique of Husserl's distinctions between meaningfulness and meaninglessness in "Signature Event Context", but it is really the section on Austin which deals most fully with the problem of context.

[50] "Signature, Event, Context", p. 17

[51] At the intelligible end of the spectrum between "intelligible or effective contexts" we could locate the effects of Gricean implicature, and at the effective end a more properly speech act context like the courtroom where the sentence has absolute institutional power over the life of the condemned.

the same critique he applies to the sign to the context, and call into to question whether "the presence to self of a total context" required to determine meaning is really a philosophically defensible notion. [52]

2.2 The crisis at the heart of meaning, the crisis is the heart of meaning

Earlier, it was demonstrated that the crisis of meaning (or perhaps of meaninglessness) took root in the soil of the attempt to attach to expressions an abstract object, their meaning, whether understood as proposition or function. In order for this attachment to be motivated, context had to be postulated as the supplemental signification which animated the otherwise empty sign. When the particular moment of the relationship between context, sign, and meaning was examined more generally, it became clear that the crisis seemed to generate and perpetuate itself — meaning was only theorizable on the basis of context, and so the 'solution' to the crisis was really its inception. With Wittgenstein, meaning is withdrawn from this circuit, and both context and sign collapse into the single dimension of the language game. One could see Wittgenstein as carrying the scientific traditions which had addressed themselves to this crisis to their limit; in effect, he gives in to the crisis, admits defeat, refuses, in all his dialectical rigor, to continue to theorize meaning. But in this defeat, he inscribes the crisis itself within the proliferation of signs. The very condition of semiosis is, for Wittgenstein, the removal of any univocal strata of 'meaning' inhering in discourse, and the systematic denial of any ground upon which such a strata could be established. The crisis of meaning acquires an onto-semiotic significance, not just the significance of a mere crisis of science.[53]

An examination of Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* may possibly substantiate this claim. In this work, groundlessness is advanced as the ultimate 'ground' of knowledge. Crucial to this demonstration is the understanding of knowledge as not a property of the interior subject, but something which ultimately is nothing more than a form or aspect of discourse, or more generally, of significant action. "My life shews that I know or am certain that there is a chair over there, or a door, and

[52] Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, in particular the chapter "Linguistics and Grammatology," fleshes out, if obliquely, this critique of the very idea of meaning, in that the argument in that book seeks to overturn the assumption of a "transcendental signifier" which functions as an ultimate ground for meaning. The section which opposes Peirce's theory of infinite semiosis to Husserl's phenomenology advances some ideas very similar to those developed above regarding the 'one-dimensional' relationship of meaning and discourse in Wittgenstein.

[53] The crisis, understood in its transcendental sense as the groundlessness which underlies all 'meaning', is necessary rather than merely a uniform accident in that Wittgenstein, through his dialectical investigation, reveals an a priori contamination by the discursive(and more generally by the temporal or iterative) of the very structures that might ground meaning *finally* or *totally* — among these structures whose apparent self-evidence is put into question we can locate, at minimum, the transparency of experience of the self to self and mathematical ideality. If one sought to view the crisis underlying all meaning as accident and not necessity, and in such a way that obtaining a ground of meaning figured as a real possibility, one would be forced to rethink these metaphysical sites which offer the possibility of grounding not as abstract and timeless, but as simultaneously endowed with historical flesh and yet no less absolute.

so on—I tell a friend e.g. 'Take that chair over there', 'Shut the door', etc. etc."[54] Wittgenstein enjoins his reader (or his imaginary opponent, or even perhaps himself) to "Forget your transcendental certainty, which is connected with your concept of spirit."[55] The "certainties" which provide the ground against which language-games make sense are not absolute, it is simply that the language game which one would play by doubting these certainties does not make sense. In this way, where doubt does not make sense, the practice of not-doubting produces sense, and meaning remains entirely immanent within the system of language games: "My doubts form a system."[56] "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game."[57] Doubt, for Wittgenstein, is not the metaphysical privilege of the Cartesian subject which forms the *a priori* kernel, the *fundamentum inconcussum*, of all experience, but an effect made possible and circumscribed by the productive possibilities which inhere in the language game. In Wittgenstein, the language game precedes the subject — the subject is an effect of the language game.

This order of precedence is foreshadowed in the *Tractatus*. There, Wittgenstein makes the famous claim that "There is no such thing as the subject that thinks or entertains ideas."[58] The subject is instead a "limit" of the world, a world which is structured according to the form of (logical) language. In the later Wittgenstein, the metaphysical subject is also nowhere to be found, and again, it is language which traces its absence from the world. A comparison here of Wittgenstein's doubt and Descartes' will be fruitful. For Descartes in the *Meditations*, the subject is able to withdraw the validity of certainty in the experimental *epochē* of radical doubt. The result of this experiment is the transcendental or metaphysical subject, respectively the disclosure of self-identity through intellectual intuition in the *cogito ergo sum* and the certainty of God as universal subject. For Wittgenstein, on the other hand, such an *epochē* is not possible. "If you tried to doubt everything you would not get so far as doubting anything. The game of doubting itself presupposes certainty"[59] Doubts are bound up in the language-game in which they function, and the doubt which is introduced by the philosophical *epochē* does not make sense in the same way that other 'ordinary' acts of doubting do. Since the capacity for intelligible doubt lies within the language-game, within the significant practice, the philosophical practice of radical reduction does not reveal a subject which preceded this practice as its *a priori* condition, but rather a subject whose intelligibility and existence remains an effect of the practice itself. This is not explicitly formulated in this manner in Wittgenstein's texts, but a consideration of the relationship between doubt and certainty advanced in *On Certainty* makes this reading more plausible. Let us note the tension which animates the text, which on the one hand illuminates the groundlessness of significant practice (and here experience is to be understood

[54] *On Certainty*, §7
[55] ibid., §47
[56] ibid., §126
[57] ibid., §204
[58] *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, §5.631
[59] *On Certainty*, p. 115

as a significant practice) and on the other hand cannot escape from the system of certainties which constitute its foundation. Wittgenstein's text might be read as a sort of lament, a lament that he is precisely *unable* to carry out the Cartesian *epochē* successfully. He cannot advance a reason why a naive self-evidence (like the certainty that his hand is before him)should be not be doubted, and yet is unable to make sense of this doubt. The compromising solution, of course, returns to and accepts the anteriority of discourse or language: the possibility of doubting a certainty is understood as the possibility of imagining a language game in which this doubt would make sense. Ultimately, " certainty resides in the language game."[60] For Wittgenstein, the 'subject' could only be an effect of an interlocking system of such discursively constituted certainties.

2.3 Linguistic mythologies

> The Science of Language is a science of very modern date. Its very name is still unsettled, and the various titles that have been given to it in England, France, and Germany are so vague and varying that they have lead to the most confused ideas among the public at large as to the real object of the new science. We have heard it spoken of as Comparative Philology, Scientific Etymology, Phonology, and Glossology. In France it has received the convenient but somewhat barbarous name of *linguistique*. If we must have a name for our science, we might derive it from *mythos*, word, or from *logos*, speech. But the title of Mythology is already occupied. — Max Muller, *Lectures on the Science of Language*, 1861

Ultimately, Wittgenstein's approach is not contextual but *mythological*: "The propositions describing a world picture might be part of a kind of mythology."[61] Myth would, to the effective, grounded presence comprehended by the notion of context oppose that which is *groundless*, which is in the most general sense *a fiction*, propagated by its *iteration*. The subject, then, for Wittgenstein, appears as one *myth* among many, an effect of discourse whose only ground is its productive repetition. The non-transparency of the subject to itself (its mythological constitution) is not a threat to meaning; rather, it is its very precondition. If the description of a world-picture is the activity of the mythologist, it follows then that meaning is, essentially, a myth.

It is through the consideration of this mythic constitution of all 'meaningful' phenomena, which denies them any ultimate ground outside of their own iteration within a system of similarly constituted myths, that we can best understand the advance that Wittgenstein's thought offers over the formal and psychological/anthropological paradigms considered earlier. The formal approach needed the subject as the otherwise empty point of articulation for the presentation of the world as context and the rational operation of a logic upon that presentation. The psychological/anthropological approach similarly needed the subject as the point of application for the *force* of the meaningful world. Wittgenstein, in the theorization

[60] ibid., §457
[61] ibid., §95

of meaning as myth, postulates only subjects which are discursively constituted. Such a conception of entirely discursive subjectivity takes the tendency tentatively expressed in the anthropological approach to its limit: since subjects are constituted by and in discourse, there is no longer a need to explain how context operates on the subject. Schematically, one can understand the progression here as follows:

formal model of meaning: world+language+subject
anthropological model of meaning: meaningful world+subject
Wittgensteinian model of meaning: discourse

2.4 Crisis and totality

Wittgenstein's elevation of non-transparency and groundlessness to fundamental conditions of possibility for meaning recalls another tradition which has not yet been discussed — that of hermeneutics. Modern hermeneutics, understood as a general theory of understanding, begins with Schleiermacher[62], in whose writings hermeneutics is necessitated by the possibility of *error* in interpretation. The art of interpretation can only succeed through recourse to the meaning which is divulged through the hermeneutic circle — the meaning of the parts is given by the whole, and the whole by the meaning of the parts. The totality of the whole functions as a context which supplements or determines the unclear or incomplete meaning apparent in the part which is unintelligible when considered outside of its relationship to the total meaning. And yet this supplementation provided by the whole is not given independently from the meaning of the parts which make it up. For the hermeneutic interpreter, *the meaning of a text is its own ground.* This profoundly non-procedural approach to the interrelation of context and meaning recalls the immanence of meaning in the language game advanced by Wittgenstein. In hermeneutics, a similar groundlessness of the ground, or self-grounding is the precondition for all meaning.

The hermeneutic circle seems to present a peculiarly problematic or paradoxical model of interpretation— how does one proceed as an interpreter if every meaning by which one might divine the whole-as-ground is precisely not given until this ground is apprehended? Schleiermacher's solution to this dilemma, the intuition which allows one to correctly leap into the hermeneutic process does not really remain defensible by the time Gadamer generalizes the hermeneutic circle beyond the text to "an element of the ontological structure of understanding."[63] If the circle remains a part of understanding, then the possibility of meaninglessness, or misinterpretation, underlies meaningful experience. The way this functions is best understood with respect to the approach to the interpretation of historical texts/events that Gadamer outlines. Gadamer distinguishes here between ahistorical, historical, and historically-effective consciousness. In the first, the interpreter (mis)apprehends

[62]See Richard Palmer, *Hermeneutics*, chap. 7 for more information on locating the beginnings of hermeneutics as a *general* science of understanding with Schleiermacher. Palmer cites Schleiermacher himself, who writes in *Hermeneutik* (1819) "Hermeneutics as the art of understanding does not exist as a general field, only a plurality of specialized hermeneutics."

[63]*Truth and Method*, p. 293. Certainly Gadamer was not the first to generalize hermeneutics beyond the text — hermeneutical ontology is a major aspect of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, which explicitly underlies much of Gadamer's work.

their position as one of total scientific objectivity — the experience with the past is one which proceeds from facts to conclusions, with no hermeneutic structure in evidence. In the historical consciousness, the alterity of the past is admitted, but in such a way that the interpreter approaches this alterity from a position which is covertly objective — the pretension of the historical consciousness is to be able to survey history from a universal standpoint outside of this history. While claiming to affirm historical difference, this difference is neutralized because the interpreter refuses to consider how this alterity addresses himself. It is the final mode, that of the historically effective consciousness, that constitutes the truly meaningful or authentic form of historical interpretation. Here it becomes impossible to adhere to the relativist position which the historical consciousness pretends to, because the interpreter is himself determined by tradition.

In considering the meaning of what it means to approach the historical from within history, Gadamer locates the position of the interpreter *within* the hermeneutic circle[64] and hence within the crisis of meaning, grounding the possibility of understanding and interpreting in the very groundlessness of or, better, the immanent and insecure ground of, interpretative practice. And of course, what is at stake for Gadamer is not just the experience of the person who interprets a text, but all meaningful experience, the entirety of Being. When Gadamer writes that "Being that can be understood is language,"[65], it is not a claim that language provides a framework through which Being is understood, but that every experience is the "self-presentation" of what is Other. This self-presentation *occurs as language*, in that, in appearing for or being constituted for a subject, an object must lay a claim to intelligibility like that of the text which for hermeneutics was able to speak for itself, and, as with the meaning of a text which is understood by the hermeneutic interpreter, this meaningful experience must represent a fusion of horizons, a common zone of intelligibility in which communication between subject and object can take place. Gadamer's interpreting subject is not, like Malinowski's cultural subject, faced with a plenitude of meaning established by a context, but, thanks to the mediation of language, achieves free distance from the object and its meaning. The relationship of subject to historical Being is dialogic, in that Being addresses the subject, but does not monologically or absolutely disclose itself. Being's address cannot be ignored and is even constitutive of the subject. The dialogic language-event precedes the subject, captivates the subject, throws the subject into a relationship with that which demands to be interpreted. It is language which speaks the subject, the (language) game which plays, drawing the players within it. Being does not reveal itself as what is positively given, as the spontaneous semio-epistemology of the natural sciences might affirm, but rather interrogates the subject — it is a question, rather than an answer.

Despite certain similar conclusions about the immanence of meaning in a language whose only ground is itself, there is a world of difference between Gadamer's

[64]As mentioned in the previous note, much of this is previously developed in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, most specifically the ideas about the fore-structures (fore-having, fore-sight, fore-conception) which characterize the prejudices with which the interpreter necessarily approaches the text or experience to be interpreted and understood. See especially §32, "Understanding and Interpretation".

[65]ibid., p. 474

inscription of the crisis into the possibility of meaning and Wittgenstein's. To briefly schematize this difference, the respective approaches to totality in the two authors can be contrasted. Wittgenstein writes "A *totality* of judgments is made plausible to us. When we first begin to *believe* anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions."[66] In Wittgenstein's work, the *system*, the totality of the regime of sense which inheres in the interlocking relationships holding between significant practices, seems to ground the meaning of the individual practices in a way which is not precisely hermeneutic. Whereas Gadamer claims that humanity, unlike other living beings, has "freedom from environment" through the mediation of language[67], Wittgenstein conceives of the certainty that is supported by the total system to which it belongs as something "animal-like"[68], a form of life made possible by a symbolic environment. It is tempting to think that despite Wittgenstein's critique of the presumed grounds of meaning advanced in philosophical discourse, he reserves an absolute ground for meaning in the totality of the ordinary — the philosophical deconstruction of meaning that he performs changes nothing, "leaves everything as it is".[69] Wittgenstein's work provides a way of thinking context immanent to the discursive reproduction of sense, but doesn't provide a way of understanding our responsibility for this reproduction of context — the possibilities of sense remain anterior to our actions, even though it is these actions which create and sustain these possibilities. For Wittgenstein, context, despite its immanence, remains more of answer than a question.

If meaning is always threatened by meaninglessness — if there is nothing external to the realm of meaning to which we can appeal in order to ground meaning — the idea of context I examined in the first chapter, and which is perhaps reinstated in the end by Wittgenstein, can only serve to postpone this problem. What, exactly, is our relationship to the myth of meaning in which we live? We cannot, as Gadamer reminds us, accept an "untenable hermeneutic nihilism"[70] in which meaning's lack of absolute ground licenses unlimited interpretative possibilities. But Wittgenstein's alternative, to tremble before the abyss which hides behind the self-evidence of meaning and then to bracket this abyss in the name of life, adopting that "something that sounds like pragmatism,"[71], seems less than satisfying. The recognition of the ultimate contingency of context seems to demand a recognition of our complicity in reproducing this context as well, our perhaps unconscious perpetuation of the particular naturalized world of self-evidence in which we find ourselves — not the uneasy but ultimately quietist acceptance of the myth with which we have been confronted. In the next chapter, I will to examine possible orientations of philosophical practice that can be adopted with respect to the 'local' relationship holding between meaning and its mythical constitution, what one might term ethical responses to the crisis of meaning. Until now, the 'crisis of meaning' has been understood as a turn of phrase dramatizing several technical challenges in the sciences of language and of man, and as a designation of a per-

[66] *On Certainty*, §140-1
[67] *Truth and Method*, p. 443-444
[68] *On Certainty*, §359
[69] *Philosophical Investigations*, §124
[70] *Truth and Method*, p. 95
[71] *On Certainty* §422

petually necessary, transcendental precondition of meaning. Now I would like to examine how this ‘crisis’ might be a real crisis, how the lack of ground for meaning can present a real danger which demands a response, transposing the investigation of context and meaning from the field of scientific and philosophical understanding to that of ethical and political action.

3 The crisis and its claim

3.1 Husserl and the *Crisis*

What was first presented as a technical 'crisis' for the sciences of language (more generally for the sciences of cultural intelligibility), and was later shown to function as a permanently inscribed crisis or originary condition of meaning in the philosophical investigation of meaning, must now be considered historically. If language is understood as requiring a ground in order to be meaningful, and if this ground itself cannot be grounded — if the precondition of meaning itself is groundlessness — this suggests that our relationship to the meaning of discourse may be more complicated than the immediate obviousness or self-evidence that lived discursive experience offers. Specifically, it is possible that the relation between ourselves, meaning, and meaninglessness might be understood as a historical problem, one which can assume different continent configurations, depending on which naturalized contexts we accept and which we work to change. In this way, it becomes possible to understand the crisis of meaning as a historical phenomenon, in that the groundlessness of the meaning of a discourse might be understood as something which actually makes a claim on the praxis we engage in. We saw that the scientific approach examined in the first chapter started from the presupposition of the phenomenon of meaning, and proceeded from there to the necessary postulation of context as the supplement which makes this meaning possible within an explanatory theory. The approach which I will sketch in this chapter is, in a sense, the reverse, starting from the real historical situation in which meaning is absent, and addressing itself to the task of overcoming this real crisis through the attempt to offer a ground for meaning by changing the discursive practices perpetuating 'lived meaninglessness'.

Problematically, the conclusions reached in the second chapter, where philosophical coherence seemed to mandate that meaning could never be conceptualized as fully present or grounded outside of the event of discourse, and instead had to be thought as an immanent game-piece perpetuated by groundless discursivity, seem to threaten any project to regain meaning for discourse — such a project could not have recourse to a ground for meaning which would escape the involution of the language game. It is possible, facing the destructive insights of Wittgenstein or the deconstructive salvos of Derrida, to resort to a sort of pragmatism which would seek to elide the radical groundlessness of meaning by a recourse to the commonsense 'obviousness' of the meaning of discourse, a recourse which understands its own necessity in the necessity of language for the conduct of the everyday (Here we can locate the regressive movement in Wittgenstein traced at the end of the last chapter.) With respect to the transposition of the crisis under investigation from the domain of philosophy to that of history, this 'pragmatic' gesture seems to pull the teeth of the crisis at the very moment it acknowledges it — but only as a problem for philosophy.[72] A far more interesting field of inquiry is opened by

[72] Samuel Wheeler, in his "Wittgenstein as Conservative Deconstructor", argues that Wittgenstein's "conservative deconstruction" entails no conservative or 'quietist' political consequences. What he does not show, and which might not be possible, is that Wittgenstein's 'conservative' deconstruction has any progressive implications.

considering how a crisis of meaning, a lack of ground for meaning, figures as a part the real social-historical situation in which we live. The problem here is then not 'How can we justify our continued use of language if meaning has no essence?' but 'What must be done to recover or establish the ground of our significant practices and forms of life?'

As a preliminary step in sketching this way of reconceptualizing the relationship between meaning and context, I will start with an examination of Edmund Husserl's last major work, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*. In terms of the historical task which this (unfinished) work sets out for itself, it can only be regarded as a tragic failure; Husserl's phenomenology promised it would reground the life of Europe in something deeper and more meaningful than scientific objectivity, just as Europe prepared to tear itself apart. The *Crisis* and the various manuscripts and lectures which surround and accompany it do not present merely a single tragedy. I will begin with and focus on the 'internal' tragedy of the *Crisis*, the contradictions inherent in the phenomenological project as formulated within this work which reveal the impossibility of this project's formulation. As an introduction to this impossibility, I will start with a quotation from Paul Ricoeur, who writes:

> ...in its effective practice phenomenology already displays its distance from rather than its realization of the dream of such a radical grounding in the transparence of the subject to itself....the concrete work of phenomenology, in particular in the studies devoted to the constitution of "things", reveals, by way of regression, levels, always more and more fundamental, at which the active syntheses continually refer to ever more radical passive syntheses. Phenomenology is thus caught up in an infinite movement of "backwards questioning" in which its project of radical self-grounding fades away. Even the last works devoted to the *life-world* designate by this term a horizon of immediateness that is forever out of reach. The *Lebenswelt* is never actually given but is always presupposed. It is phenomenology's paradise lost. It is in this sense that phenomenology has undermined its own guiding idea in the very attempt to realize it. It is this that gives to Husserl's work its tragic grandeur.[73]

It is this idea of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) which will most directly connect Husserl's phenomenological project with the problematics of context which have been developed above. Specifically, Husserl's analysis of the life-world recapitulates, unwillingly, the unhappy coincidence of context and mythology which the philosophical interrogation of the sciences of meaning revealed in the previous chapters. In short, context, deprived of any absolute ground, and unable to function as an absolute ground itself, must function as myth, that is, through a claim to its own self-intelligibility which hides its own contingency and lack of ground. Something similar happens in Husserl's analysis of the life-world, which Ricoeur touches upon in the passage quoted above.

[73] "On Interpretation", p. 372

The life-world, "a realm of original self-evidences"[74] is introduced as that which is there for us as experiencing subjects, the total structure of immediate certainty. Importantly, the life-world is not the same as the much maligned 'given' or 'sense-data' — for Husserl, perception is always an "intentional" effect, so that what is present in the life-world is never the 'raw' causal incidence of the world upon the sensory apparatus from which the subject proceeds via inference to models of the world, but what is always already "subjective-relative". The life-world is thus not composed of the isolated moments of perceptions devoid of sense, but already shot through with the synthetic accomplishments which have constituted objects as spatio-temporal unities. Furthermore, these accomplishments do not just present a world of physical objects, but, more generally, a world of validities which encompasses both the naïvely objective[75] as well as the ideal structures of mathematics and geometry. Finally, and most importantly, this world-horizon is a cultural and historical accomplishment, one which is a world not just for the isolated subject, but for the community of subjects. The life-world is not an object, a collection of objects, or even the field upon which objects appear, but an accomplishment of the subject (or better, an accomplishment of subjectivity).

Husserl's project is to reground discourse (specifically, that of the "European Sciences", the collective project of knowledge which arose with the Greek invention of philosophy) in this life-world by illuminating the hidden structure of this world and revealing the latent meanings of the scientific discourses which take place within it. In the figure of the crisis of these sciences, what he advances as the unshakable ground of all experience is presented as having become disconnected from scientific discourse and practice. For Husserl, science has forgotten "the original thinking that genuinely gives meaning to this technical practice."[76] Here the "original thinking" refers to the inauguration of the scientific project in the "substruction" of the life-world which makes the objective world, as that which would be independent of any subjectivity, available as a *hypothetical* object of investigation. Geometry, understood at its origin to be a subjective accomplishment which establishes shared ideal structures accessible to all and directly relevant for life-world praxis, has for Husserl, in its amazing development, increasingly alienated itself from this founding act of meaning-bestowal. This alienation has occurred as geometry has become algebraic — what began as an extension of the certainties of the life-world, (potentially) valid for all, threatens to become only meaningful considered within a system of symbols inherited by the scientific tradition. "This arithmetization of geometry leads almost automatically, in a certain way, to the emptying of its meaning."[77] While the scientist or geometer never leaves the life-world, their discourse, as it becomes more 'arithmetized', denies or forgets the origin of the universally valid world which is their object of study; namely, the ultimately *subjective* accomplishment which occurs in and with reference to the life-world. This superficialization of meaning[78] while not yet connected to the problem of 'natural'

[74] *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, p. 127

[75] As opposed to the scientific objective world which is dealt with elsewhere in the text.

[76] ibid., p. 46

[77] ibid., p. 44

[78] Husserl uses the word *Sinnesveräusserlichung* to describe this process whereby a meaning-accomplishment is made other in the symbol.

language, figures as a crisis in two distinct ways. First, inasmuch as the "European Sciences" are understood as branches of a philosophical (i.e. radically grounded and presuppositionless) enterprise which is at the root of European civilization, and in this way representative of this civilization's essential teleology, the crisis of meaning within the sciences is emblematic of the larger crisis which Husserl saw threatening Europe at the time. With its increasing alienation from the life-world, science ceases to be relevant to those who live within it. Husserl's text is intended to reopen the field of the ultimate subjective grounding of lived experience alone from which universal, rational truths can emerge, especially those which "concern man as a free, self-determining being".[79]

At the same time, the crisis of inauthenticity in meaning seems in Husserl's text to acquire a transcendental significance as the explication proceeds. And if the crisis itself is an intrinsic aspect of the life-world, one is led to wonder about the chances for success of Husserl's phenomenological *Aufklärung*. He writes:

> ...in my naïve self-consciousness as a human being knowing himself to be living in the world, for whom the world is the totality of what for him is valid as existing, I am blind to the immense transcendental dimension of problems. This dimension is in a hidden [realm of] anonymity. In truth, of course, I am a transcendental ego, but I am not conscious of this; being in a particular attitude, the natural attitude, I am completely given over to the object-poles, completely bound by interests and tasks which are exclusively oriented toward them.[80]

Bracketing the question of what exactly a "transcendental ego" is for the moment, it is nevertheless clear that for Husserl, the subjectivity whose acts are supposed to constitute the life-world is not apparent to the human subjects who live within it. *The intrinsic condition of the life-world is its misrecognition.* This becomes clear in Husserl's clarification of his philosophy with respect to that of Descartes: rather than the *ego cogito* functioning as the certain ground of knowledge about the world, it is the certainty of the world which can lead the practitioner of the *epochē* to the recognition of the transcendental structures of the ego. "The point is not to secure objectivity but to understand it."[81] Since all experience in the life-world seems to depend on the *lack* of transparence of the subject to itself, the crisis of meaning that Husserl describes seems itself to be transcendental. (Here we can see an unexpected convergence of Husserl's thought with that of the later Wittgenstein, in that the groundlessness of meaning seems to be its very precondition.) With all experience within the life-world necessarily concealing its ultimate apodictic ground, Husserl's phenomenological project, which seeks to make this ground appear through the practice of the radical *epochē*, seems to be, following Ricoeur's suggestions, a fundamentally impossible task, always presupposed yet never present as such. If the philosophical sense of the crisis admits no escape, the tragedy of the work would then consist in the *a priori* inability of the proposed philosophical solution to effectively address the crisis in its more important historical sense.

[79] ibid., p. 6
[80] ibid., p. 205
[81] ibid., p. 189

3.2 Language and the crisis

But perhaps I have moved too hastily in equating Husserl's crisis with the one elucidated in the previous chapters. The 'discourse' whose meaning was threatened by Husserl's crisis[82] is not language in the general sense, which has previously figured in this paper as the bearer of a meaning made possible only by context, but a scientific discourse. In fact, the general problem of language and its meaning is, on first inspection, almost entirely absent from the text of the *Crisis* proper. As an example or symptom of this apparent omission, one can consider the use of the term 'meaning' within the text. Husserl uses 'mean' and 'meaning' to refer generally to all intentional accomplishments, not just those which connect an ideality with a piece of discourse; for example, when an object is perceived as a spatio-temporal unity, the object has been 'meant'. It would seem that the certainties afforded by the life-world have nothing to do with language and are entirely the accomplishment of a transcendental ego.

But as Husserl works out the implications of the *epochē*, this situation becomes more problematic. First, it is asserted that transcendental subjectivity does not remain bound to the individual human ego, and that "universal intersubjectivity, into which all objectivity, everything that exists at all, is resolved, can obviously be nothing other than mankind...."[83] The transition from an individual ego as the subject of intentional perception to an intersubjectivity constituting a shared world remains obscure at this point in the text; it is assumed, in order that the notion of mathematical praxis which operates on idealities valid for all can be made comprehensible, but the question of the origin of this intersubjectivity is not yet clarified. However, at this stage in the argument, Husserl addresses a more pressing paradox: "How can a component part of the world, namely, its human subjectivity, constitute the whole world, namely, constitute it as its intentional formation...?"[84] His solution to this difficulty is to underscore that the human "I" is the unity of an object-pole, which is the world, and the ego-pole, which transcendentally constitutes this world intentionally, and that, because the phenomenological *epochē* brackets everything in the world such that the structures of this ego-pole might be revealed, "nothing human is to be found, neither soul nor psychic life nor real psychophysical human beings; all this belongs to the 'phenomenon,' to the world constituted as pole."[85] At this point, Husserl surprisingly invalidates or qualifies his earlier comments about transcendental intersubjectivity — claiming that it is only on the basis of individually functioning transcendental egos that the "communalization" of these egos into a universal subjectivity, constituting a shared life-world, can proceed. This move is surprising, because the life-world which exists as obvious for the individual ego extends into the domain of cultural accomplishments, its "concreteness ... extends

[82]Has Husserl's crisis, formulated in his terms, ever really been overcome? Does science (and even philosophy) proceed today firmly within a teleological project of the rational self-realization of the world, or does it proceed, as Husserl would say, as merely one "vocation" among others, concerned unreflectively with its instrumentalized field of study whose true nature it neither knows nor cares about?

[83]ibid., p. 179

[84]ibid., p. 179

[85]ibid., p. 183

further than that of 'things'."[86] It seems that in order for culturally inherited structures to be native to the life-world some form of transcendental intersubjectivity is already implicated in the individual transcendental ego (or at the very least in the object pole which is intentionally constituted by this ego).

The unexpected reintroduction of language into this already complicated field of investigation does not make things any easier on the reader who wishes to find coherence in Husserl's argument. Husserl writes:

> In the naïve attitude of world-life, everything is precisely worldly; that is [there is nothing but] the constituted object poles — though they are not understood *as* that. Psychology, like very objective science, is bound to the realm of what is prescientifically given, i.e. **bound to what can be named, asserted, described in common language — in this case, bound to the psychic, as it can be expressed in the language of our linguistic community** (construed most broadly, the European community). **For the life-world — the "world for us all" — is identical with the world that can be commonly talked about.** Every new apperception leads essentially, through apperceptive transference, to a new typification of the surrounding world and in social intercourse to a naming which flows immediately into the common language. Thus the world is always such that it can be empirically, generally (intersubjectively) explicated and, at the same time, **linguistically explicated.**[87]

It seems that, in the end, language functions as an essential precondition of the already intersubjective life-world. Even in Husserl's attempts to provide an absolute ground for meaning in the naïve certainty of the life-world and make that certainty intelligible by means of its reduction to the intentional functioning of the transcendental ego, language itself has slipped back into the constitution of meaning, albeit in a way different from the way in which discourse was grounded for Wittgenstein as an self-enclosing and self-justifying system of mythological certainties.

When Husserl considers the problems of the origin of ideal objectivity in the manuscript entitled the "Origin of Geometry", generally considered to be intended for inclusion within the text of the *Crisis*, this dependence of the life-world on the functioning of language appears all the more strikingly. In this text, Husserl isolates a difference between bound and free idealities. A bound ideality is like the identity on the level of the type of all the tokens of the German word 'Löwe', which, despite its ideal functioning, is bound to the particular spatio-temporal phenomenon that is the German linguistic community. A free ideality is something like the substance of the Pythagorean theorem considered apart from its formulation in image or language — something valid for everyone, accessible to all. And yet the point of Husserl's text is to illuminate the historical origin of these "free idealities", which are to be understood as cultural accomplishments. Since, as I have pointed out above, language is a precondition of the transcendental intersubjectivity which constitutes the world of culture (a claim which the text of the *Origin* makes perfectly, even

[86] ibid., p. 130

[87] ibid., p. 209, emph. in bold mine

insistently explicit), language lies at the origin of geometry. Regarding this move in the "Origin", Derrida writes:

> We might be surprised. After having so patiently extracted the thematic truth of *Sachverhalt* from linguistic ideality and from all "bound" idealities, Husserl then seems to *redescend* toward language as the indispensable medium and condition of possibility for absolute ideal Objectivity, for *truth* itself, which would be what it is only through its historical and intersubjective communication....Speech is no longer simply the expression (*Aüsserung* of what, without it, would *already* be an object; caught again in its primordial purity, speech *constitutes* the object and is a concrete juridical condition of truth.[88]

In Husserl's *Crisis*, then, we see that language is necessary to ground the very world which contains it, and even the subjectivity which constitutes this world. But at the same time, this language is part of this world, and Husserl's thought is once again dragged down into a series of paradoxical reciprocal determinations. Without being able to establish any clear order of ontological 'precedence' between language, the transcendental ego, and the world, Husserl's project of bringing about the recognition of an apodictic ground seems to have little chance of success. The situation instead seems to be one similar to those examined in the last chapter, where meaning remained immanent to a context constituted ultimately by discourse, and where our understanding of meaning necessarily proceeded from within this immanence and was hermeneutic in character.

3.3 Demythification

Yet there is something which sets Husserl's thought apart from hermeneutics, which is precisely his *effort* to ground the hermeneutic circle in something transcendental. Successful or not, Husserl is noteworthy for taking the crisis of meaning as a philosophical problem that necessitates a form of praxis as a response. The theoretical attitude, which receives its ultimate clarification in Husserl's programmatic formulation of phenomenological research through the *epochē*, represents an advance over the "mythological" thinking that he claimed characterizes mankind outside of the heritage of the Greek discovery of the properly philosophical.[89] Whether or not this project is successful or even coherently formulated, in critically addressing the re-emergence of the mythological within the project of a universal rationalism and offering phenomenology as a solution, Husserl explicitly connects the lack of ground

[88] *Introduction to the Origin of Geometry*, p. 76-77

[89] If we focus our attention on this conception of philosophy as the bearer of the *eidos* of European civilization, which Husserl understands as superior to all other civilizations, we arrive at the second tragedy of the *Crisis*, which is elucidated by Paul de Man in his essay "Criticism and Crisis". Regarding "Crisis of European Humanity and Philosophy", a lecture delivered by Husserl in 1935, de Man writes: "Reading this text with the hindsight that stems from more than thirty years of turbulent history, it strikes one as both prophetic and tragic." De Man locates the tragedy in Husserl's inability, at the very moment he claimed the philosophical necessity of critically examining everything one takes for granted, of privileging European civilization above the rest of mankind "at a moment when Europe was about to destroy itself as center in the name of its unwarranted claim to be the center."["Criticism and Crisis", p. 17]

for the meaning of discourse with his understanding of the political situation of his day, and proposes philosophical practice as a means of addressing this situation. Although many of the conclusions which can be drawn from the *Crisis* (or rather against it) regarding the incompleteness of any attempt to ground discourse in anything but history ultimately resemble conceptions advanced by the work of the later Wittgenstein as I presented it in the previous chapter, it is clear that Husserl's intent, unlike Wittgenstein's, was to reject the lack of a ground as a precondition for meaning and instead to establish this ground or bring about its recognition.[90] We can take Husserl as an example, perhaps one not to be emulated, of how to situate the philosophy of meaning and its relationship with context within the progressive political project of "demythification".

3.4 Myth Today

Here I would like to turn to the work of Roland Barthes in his book *Mythologies*, in particular the theoretical essay "Myth Today" which serves as the postscript for this collection of short, incisive essays on the life of signs in 1950's France. If the idea of context, and the problems and aporias to which it gives rise, had not led us, through Wittgenstein, hermeneutics, and Husserl, to the consideration of context as myth, it would be hard to justify concluding an investigation of the role of context in determining linguistic meaning with Barthes' text. This concept of context, whose possible configurations as a supplemental and significant mediation between language, world, subject, and meaning have been examined here, is largely absent from Barthes text. Furthermore, meaning in a basic linguistic sense, what one might call 'literal meaning', does not (at first) pose a problem for Barthes; on the contrary, it is only because a semiotics of literal meaning has been presupposed that Barthes' investigation of second-order phenomenon of signification can proceed. However, the concerns of Barthes' text parallel and extend those difficulties and aporias encountered while unraveling the figure of the crisis of meaning. Let us say that, having examined attempts to ground the meaning of language in context, and having seen these attempts run aground (or, in Wittgenstein's case, put to shore) on a strange and irreducible primacy of language, which seems to constitute its own ground, we can understand Barthes' text as a critique of this groundless constitution of his social world, and an examination of the possibilities of opposing the mythic self-perpetuation of a total system of cultural signs.

Unlike Husserl, who never quite makes the claim that modern civilization is in danger of slipping into mythological modes of thought and discourse, Barthes reads the mythological into all of modern culture. Regarding the approach taken so far, in which the 'crisis' has been understood as the absence of meaning without the presence of a ground in context, and in which, as has been shown, the postulation of context made possible the conception of meaning which provoked this very crisis,

[90] This is not to disparage Wittgenstein's awareness of the problems facing Europe at the time of his writing, nor to say that Wittgenstein did not consider his philosophical work to have a role to play in alleviating these problems (there is ample evidence to the contrary in his less strictly philosophical notebooks, especially *Culture and Value*.) What is important to recognize is that, nevertheless, groundlessness functions very differently as part of the political engagement of the respective writer's philosophies.

it will now be be necessary to turn this crisis on its head. Whereas before the meaninglessness of language was understood as virtual, and led to the discovery of context, understood as real, Barthes' starting point will be *real* meaninglessness (or a real groundlessness for meaning), posed not as a theoretical difficulty to be explicated away, but as a concrete historical phenomenon to be addressed through praxis and struggle, as this meaninglessness will be implicated in the perpetuation of an unjust social order based on domination and exploitation. As in Husserl, Barthes' critical science of meaning will understand itself to be active demythification. But here the mythological, more than in Husserl, should be understood in a way that is almost interchangeable with a Marxist understanding of the 'ideological' - a (false) belief structure which is the product of a subject's own activity and yet which appears as something alien or opposed to that subject. Strangely, it is conceivable that the confusion surrounding the "objective world" in Husserl figures as such an ideology — the objective world is an intentional 'substruction' performed by the ego, and yet appears, within the discourses of the sciences, as preceding that ego[91] ontologically. Unlike Husserl, however, Barthes situates his efforts at a science of meaning explicitly within an unorthodox Marxism (or at least a critique of the social relations of production which takes the alienation of labor as a basic starting point and the transformation of these relations as its goal).

Surprisingly[92], parallels abound between Husserl's phenomenological method and Barthes' semiology, once the irreducible primacy of language which makes itself felt only hesitantly or reluctantly in the *Crisis* is acknowledged as the starting point.[93]

[91]Or more properly preceding the subject which is the objectification of that ego, although to hold the hypothetical mistaken European scientists to the rigor of Husserl's conception seems unfair and besides the point.

[92]Only if one forgets the synthesis of Husserl (and Heidegger) and Hegel exemplified in the work of Kojève and Hyppolite, or the Husserlian foundation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological work, which both had tremendous influence on the development of postwar French thought. Such a genealogy is beyond the scope of this work.

[93]A rather long quotation from de Man makes the mutation here particularly clear. (de Man is speaking of Lévi-Strauss, but, at least for the Barthes' of the 1950's, extending these comments is perfectly valid — see for instance Barthes' essay "Sociology and Socio-Logic", where the project of a critical semiology of the present is formulated as an extension of Levi-Strauss' structuralist anthropology.)

> The fallacy of a finite and single interpretation derives from the postulate of a privileged observer; this leads, in turn, to the endless oscillation of an intersubjective demystification. As an escape from this predicament, one can propose a radical relativism that operates from the most empirically specific to the most loftily general level of human behavior. There are no longer any standpoints that can be *a priori* considered privileged, no structure that functions validly as a model for other structures, no postulate of ontological hierarchy that can serve as an organizing principle from which particular structures derive in the manner in which a deity can be said to engender man and the world. **All structures are, in a sense, equally fallacious, and are therefore called myths.** ["Criticism and Crisis", p. 10-11 (bold emph. mine)]

Although it seems difficult to reconcile "radical relativism" with Marxist critique, it should be noted that for Barthes, the material stratum which is produced and which facilitates production is not subject to this relativism, only the cultural stratum, what might be called superstructure. This ideological superstructure is, for Barthes, underdetermined with respect to meaning despite the non-relative character of the base precisely because the possibility of multiple readings is the

Barthes' text begins:

> What is a myth, today? I shall give at the outset a first, very simple answer, which is perfectly consistent with etymology: *myth is a type of speech.*[94]

Here is, of course, the etymological specter which has haunted the problem of the relationship between language and context from the start: namely, that meaning, which is originally theorized as necessarily appearing to the subject as a presence, reveals itself to be a false presence, an ungrounded presence, in short, a myth. Barthes' text addresses this dilemma, revealing a groundlessness of meaning tied to his own particular socio-historical configuration. But he also investigates the reverse side of this dilemma: how is it possible for the mythic, despite a ground which would secure it as meaning, to continue to function? How is myth's imaginary or false presence nevertheless an effective presence? For the conscious producer of myths (say an advertising executive), the myth straightforwardly functions as any other piece of language, an empty form with an efficacious connection to the intended meaning. For the mythologist, who pierces the mythical constitution of this efficacious unity, the myth is powerless. The situation of this mythologist is uncannily similar to that of Husserl's phenomenologist performing the *epochē*: take this description of method from Barthes' "The Advertising Message":

> ...we must adopt a position *immanent* to the object we wish to study, *i.e.* must deliberately abandon any observation relative to the emission or to the reception of the message, and place ourselves at the level of the message itself,: semantically — that is, from the point of view of communication — how is an advertising text constituted...?[95]

The difference, of course, is that what is revealed through this bracketing is not the functioning of a transcendental ego, but the structure of a semiological operation. The question that Barthes poses regarding this operation is: given that myth's effectiveness depends on the mobilization of a literal meaning in the service of a reading which goes beyond the literal, and yet to grasp the functioning of this mobilization is precisely to deny the myth any validity by unmasking it, how is myth possible? "Either the intention of the myth is too obscure to be efficacious, or it is to clear to be believed."[96] Myth, for Barthes, will therefore occupy a strange space in which meaning is at once present and absent, a space which should be recognized as that of context understood as necessarily mythological: what is signified by a myth is obvious, but this obviousness is without any ground and the myth is only fully constituted by the alibi this groundlessness offers.

It is worthwhile to examine Barthes' theory of myth in more detail. An example of what Barthes considers a myth might prove helpful. He gives the example of a photograph of a black man, dressed in the uniform of a French soldier, giving a salute. Beyond the purely literal signification of what is depicted — "black-soldier-saluting", Barthes understands this image to mythically signify "that France is a

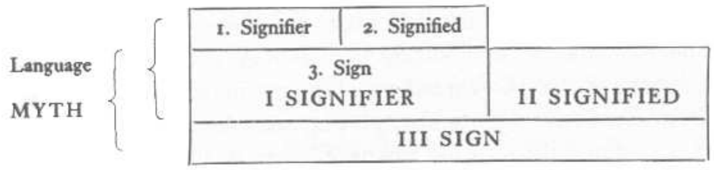
essential precondition for the ideological operation of the superstructure.

[94] "Myth Today", p. 109

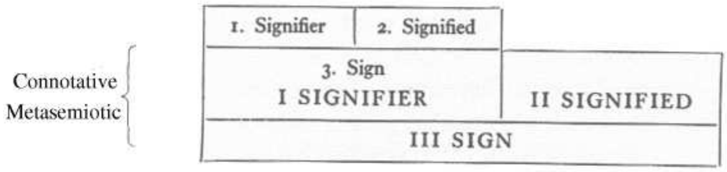
[95] "The Advertising Message", p. 173

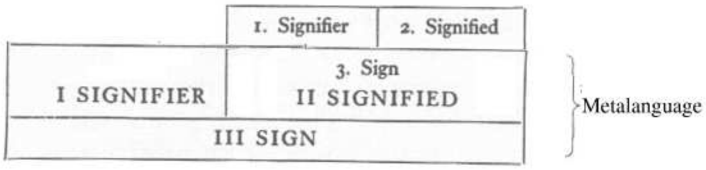
[96] "Myth Today", p. 129

great empire, that all her sons, without any color discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag, and that there is no better answer to the detractors of an alleged colonialism than the zeal shown by this Negro in serving his so-called oppressors."[97] The basic pattern is given in the diagram below (reproduced from " Myth Today, p. 115":



Interestingly, Barthes labels the operation that takes a first order sign and uses it as as the signifier for the mythical signified as *metalanguage*. On first inspection, the use of this term is highly inappropriate. In Hjelmslev's *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language*, a set of two diagrams is presented, one the same as Barthes, and the other in which **3.**, composed of **1.** and **2.**, i.e. the first-order sign, is correlated with **II**, the second order signified.





It is the type of signification which this second diagram represents, in which what is *signified* is a sign relationship holding in a lower-level language, which is termed *metalanguage* by Hjelmslev. (This is in accordance with the Tarskian conception of metalanguage, for example — the metalanguage sentence **T iff "T" is true** is understood to signify the relation holding between the expression "T" and its meaning.) What Barthes labels metalanguage, however, corresponds to what Hjelmslev labels as the *connotative metasemiotic*. Can this terminological inversion be understood as mere sloppiness on the part of Barthes, the frivolous deployment of technical terminology in the service of non-scientific criticism? The answer to

[97] "Myth Today", p. 116

this question is no, but to understand why Barthes uses the term metalanguage requires a better grasp of his Marxist critique of language.

For Barthes, there is precisely one form of language which is meaningfully grounded: the language of *labor*, which "speaks things", rather than speaking about things. This is language which is directly operative in the transformation of the material world.[98] Barthes writes:

> Here we must go back to the distinction between language-object and metalanguage. If I am a woodcutter and I am led to name the tree which I am felling, whatever the form of my sentence, I 'speak' the tree, I do not speak about it. This means that my language is operational, transitively linked to its object; between the tree and myself, there is nothing but my labor, that is to say, my action. This is a political language, it represents nature for me only inasmuch as I am going to transform it; it is a language thanks to which I '*act the object*'; the tree is not an image for me, it is simply the meaning of my action.[99]

Myth exists for Barthes as the discursive appropriation of this labor and its product. If the relationship of myth to the act of actual historical production was exactly as it appears in the diagram above, the producing subject would have a "transitive" relation to the production of the mythological signification. Barthes, however, insists that this is precisely not the case — it helps here to remember that this diagram is not the diagram of the functioning of myth, but the diagram of the structure unmasked by the mythologist. In the alienation of the meaning of labor and the grounded language which accompanies it, myth proceeds to use what has been historically produced in a sort of puppet theater, taking the contingent product of labor as ready-made and essential, emptying it of its real meaning and leaving a form which can then be used to convey the myth. It is in this sense that the myth functions as *metalanguage* — although the myth does not signify the real accomplishment of meaning grounded in labor, what has been produced in the accomplishment of world-transforming labor is spoken *about*. Barthes continues:

> But if I am not a woodcutter, I can no longer 'speak the tree', I can only speak *about* it, *on* it. My language is no longer the instrument of an 'acted-upon tree', it is the 'tree-celebrated' which becomes the instrument of my language. I no longer have anything more than an intransitive relationship with the tree; the tree is no longer the meaning of reality as a human action, it is an *image-at-one's-disposal*. Compared to the real language of the woodcutter, the language I create is a second-order language, a metalanguage in which I shall henceforth not 'act the things' but 'act their names', and which is to the primary language what the gesture is to the act.[100]

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[98]Here we can see the mutation which has taken place between Husserl and Barthes most clearly. Where for Husserl, ultimate grounding occurs in the spiritual moment where the ego constitutes the world, for Barthes, this grounding occurs in the material act in which the world is transformed/created by the subject.

[99]ibid., p. 145

[100]ibid., p. 146

The myth speaks about what has been accomplished, but it does so while this produced object is made to *appear* to speak for itself, about itself. The object, once entered into the mythic system of signification which is culture, loses its meaning as the product of human labor and instead proclaims its own myth. The strange space in-between the presence and absence of meaning mentioned above, then, is the way in which myth alternately presents its mythical signification, but immediately retreats into the self-evidence of the already constituted unity of the first-order sign; in effect, the sign which is appropriated by myth serves as culture's alibi. In this way, what is contingent, the act of production that is this first-order sign, is naturalized, "de-politicized". It is as if myth performatively constitutes the world, and the 'felicity conditions' for this performative's success include the hiding of the historical process which has made it possible. "In passing from history to nature, myth ... abolishes the complexity of human acts, ... it organizes a world which is without contradictions because it is without depth, a world wide open and wallowing in the evident, it establishes a blissful clarity: things appear to mean something by themselves."[101] For Barthes, almost everything we might be accustomed to call language is already metalanguage, and it is through this mythic language that the mythologist must proceed. This false world of cultural essence, of objects which signify themselves, which appear as images of themselves, is Barthes' mythic context — myth is for him precisely that by which capitalist society perpetuates itself in its own image.

> Its expansion [myth] has the very dimensions of bourgeois ex-nomination. The bourgeoisie wants to keep reality without keeping the appearances...The oppressed is nothing, he has only one language, that of his emancipation; the oppressor is everything, his language is rich, multiform, supple, with all the possible degrees of dignity at his disposal: he has an exclusive right to meta-language. The oppressed *makes* the world, he has only an active, transitive (political) language; the oppressor conserves it, his language is plenary, intransitive, gestural, theatrical: it is Myth. The language of the former aims at transforming, of the latter at eternalizing.[102]

3.5 The task of the mythologist

Of course, this meaninglessness which inheres in any discourse which is not directly tied to the real transformation of the world does not bode well for the enterprise of the mythologist, who seeks, in discourse, to unmask myth. Barthes is clear to underscore that the work of the mythologist, as a sort of third order semiological phenomenon, does not escape myth; at best, the mythology is an "artificial myth". And, although these artificial myths are intended politically, there is no guarantee that they function as such — any escape from language of myth (as Barthes' discussion of poetry, which tries to signify things in themselves and winds up signifying poetry, makes clear) is always open to the perils of reappropriation as a term of a

[101] ibid., p. 143
[102] ibid., p. 149

myth itself.[103] The mythologist, furthermore, in rejecting and unmasking a falsely naturalized history, is thereby cut off from those who naïvely identify themselves within this image of history, much in the same way that Husserl's transcendental philosopher, having bracketed the entire world in the *epochē*, is unable to return to this world in the same way, and risks incomprehensibility in trying to communicate what he has understood. For Husserl, these insights are perhaps even *a priori* incommunicable, the *epochē* is likened to a mystical-religious conversion which escapes language. The mythologist, on the other hand, has no choice but to proceed in language, never creating, but opposing to the negativity of the alienation present in a world of essentialized and essentially false or ungrounded meaning the negation of a destructive discourse — the sabotage of the cultural significations which, in their totality, present an intelligible world. The mythologist, as presented by Barthes, offers us the model of a praxis which can be carried out from within 'context', within the self-grounding, performatively constituted historical totality whose mode of appearance is self-evidence and whose condition of possibility is self-obscuration, a praxis which accepts the magnitude and intractability of the historical crisis of meaning which it is confronted with, unlike the praxis of phenomenology, which mistakenly supposes that it can with certainty and the immediate efficacy of reflexion regain the lost ground upon which a sense to the world can be regained. To be sure, this praxis of demythologizing is perhaps unsatisfying, both in its prospects for concrete success and in its assumptions[104], but it does present a possible ethical relationship to language and its study which demands serious consideration.

4 Conclusion: Responsible Poesis?

> It seems that this is a difficulty pertaining to our times: there is as yet only one possible choice, and this choice can bear only on two equally extreme methods: either to posit a reality which is entirely permeable to history, and ideology; or, conversely, to posit a reality which is *ultimately* impenetrable, irreducible, and, in this case, poetize. In a word, I do not yet see a synthesis between ideology and poetry (by poetry I understand, in a very general way, the search for the inalienable meaning of things). — Roland Barthes, "Myth Today"

If the context in which our language has meaning is ultimately mythic, that is, self-grounding in its continuing performance (not only in the sense of the performative as understood by speech act theory, but in the sense that social relations are only reproduced through their continued expression in practices, and in the most general sense that, as for Husserl, the world itself is a performance — "the total performance running through the whole of natural world-life and through the whole network ... of validities — precisely that total performance which, as the coherent

[103] The languages of the sciences fare no better in Barthes' view. Despite all their attempts at precision, they are condemned by myth to signify scientificity.

[104] The primary concern here would be that Barthes, in elevating labor to the status of the absolute ground of meaning, mythifies it. If it is possible to "do things with words", can his distinction between "meta-language" and the "active" language of labor be upheld?

'natural attitude', makes up 'simple' 'straightforward' ongoing life"[105]), this suggests that our relationship to the meaning of our own discourses is tenuous and contingent. Furthermore, this mythic nature of context, which implicates our own speech in its reproduction, suggests that practices which do not recognize their role in propagating context are neither logically coherent nor ethically viable.

What remains problematic here is how a critical practice, one which seeks to change its own context, can be coherently formulated. If the price of intelligibility is the discursive reproduction of the very context which one would like to change, it would seem that the only alternatives (both unsatisfactory) would be ineffectual and unintelligible action, or the mythic/ideological perpetuation of the *status quo* in the name of the *novum*. Here it seems that the crisis of meaning understood in its most general and transcendental sense can be of value; by recognizing the 'active groundlessness' of meaning, the ground of *ergon* in *energia*, it seems possible to think the primacy of language over meaning in a way that escapes the idea of context as a static condition which necessarily precedes our discourse, and to understand the linguistic event as that which can call into existence both context and meaning. The crisis, rather than mandating paralysis, might be seen as offering freedom, the possibility of self-invention.[106]

In the very groundlessness of meaning, the possibility of a responsible poesis is opened. This possibility of poesis, of the institution of self and collective in performative discourse, is not limited to the restricted field of practice called 'literature', but exists everywhere that language (and more generally the significant) does; the possibility of language is the possibility of poesis, of that which provides its own ground. We do not elect to enter into poesis: poesis is rather the crisis, whether understood in its a priori and formal aspect, or its historical and political aspect, which problematizes any use we might make of language. In the end, it is difficult to distinguish clearly between these two senses of the crisis, as the 'historical' crisis depends upon the space opened by the 'formal' crisis for its performative perpetuation, and the 'formal' crisis cannot but occur within an already historical matrix of real language. This dual crisis, the performative self-grounding of language in its most general sense, should be understood not only as dangerous but also as a reason for hope. As Judith Butler emphasizes in her deconstructive analysis of performativity and the social construction of gender, the performative character of the categories of the social world does not imply that the social world is founded on an absolute and unchallengeable speech act (like Althusser's interpellation) which constitutes us absolutely as subjects before we can have access to language. Rather, this performative character necessitates that these categories be iterable and iterated in order to be maintained, and this iterability is a site of potential resistance

[105] *The Crisis of European Sciences*, p. 150

[106] Jean-Luc Nancy summarizes this condition eloquently in his explication of the two senses of the sentence "Myth is a myth." In the first sense, the first 'myth' is read as the origin of a community, the naturalized collective self-image which founds culture, and the second 'myth' is understood derisively, as what is untrue, only a myth. This first sense of the sentence then: "foundation is a fiction" — any story which we try to tell of our own origins, any ground which we hope to relate will inevitably be a fiction. The very idea of such a ground is itself a fiction. But at the same time, this sentence has another reading, in which the senses of 'myth' are transposed: "fiction is a foundation", Nancy calls this sense "an onto-poetico-logical affirmation." ["Myth Interrupted", p. 55]

and critique.

The question remains: how can resistance and critique be manifested within the tradition of the sciences of meaning, language, and context, which, in the substruction of "ordinary language", deny both the poetic and the political? Although I cannot give a full answer here, it must at least be remembered that the discourse of any science is already political (in the most general sense): there is no such thing as apolitical knowledge. As Husserl writes, whether in the opening of its field of epistemic possibility or in the passing down of the knowledge which is acquired within that field, a science functions by reference to a transcendental subjectivity, that is to say a collective subjectivity, one extended beyond the present into past and future, constituting itself (however non-obviously)and recognizing itself (however obliquely) in the products of its labor and in the productivity of its practice. In this view, the task of the sciences of meaning could be to oppose to the poesis of myth, which functions by obscuring its self-instituting activity and naturalizing the world it conjures, a critical poesis, one which grasps its entanglement in the institution of its own context.

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