

Field Nocturne 37

Desire Undistanced : Light

In Field Nocturne 32 I raised the question of the comparison of two books each by two authors working in what apparently are quite different domains.¹ The domains, of course, overlap, and I symbolize the overlap in the single word in the title, *light*. I raised the question again in the previous essay by calling your attention to a statement in Renaud Barbaras's first book, on the character of space and time. This essay was meant to be the relevant follow-up, and at time it took on the dimensions not of a single short essay, but of a set of very long essays, a substantial book.

Indeed, only two very substantial book would be of serious value in dealing with the two books of Barbaras, and those books would have needed to bridge three traditions to be of permanent consequence: there would have to be added the tradition represented by Lonergan's effort in chapter five of *Insight* and the lead up to it, lifted into the context of functional collaboration, and contextualized further by a sublation of the work of Lochlainn O'Raifeartaigh into these contexts. Altogether a mammoth task, a life's work, and not something for the end of a scattered series of essay, much less for the end - at 77 years - of a life.

Yet, I did envisage moving forward in that zone, and perhaps I can at least add here pointers towards beginnings.

¹It is useful to list them again here. [1] Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon. Merleau-Ponty's Ontology*, translated by Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor, Indiana University Press, 2004. To be referred to below as **RBMP**. The original French version (please excuse missing accents) is *De l'être du phénomène: l'ontologie de Merleau-Ponty*, edition jerome Nilton, Grenoble, 1991. [2] Lochlainn O'Raifeartaigh, *The Dawning of Gauge Theory* Princeton University Press, 1997. Both authors have what may be considered parallel foundational or systematic reflections in their respective areas.[3] Renaud Barbaras has *Desire and Distance: Introduction to the Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by Paul B.Milan, Standford University Press, 2006. The French original is *Le desir et la distance* (Paris, Vrin, 1999). [4] Lochlainn O'Raifeartaigh's equivalent is *Group Structure of Gauge Theory* (Cambridge University Press, 1986).

The beginning for me would have been - and indeed was, for I pushed on from there through the full section of Barbaras book - the paragraph that I quoted in the conclusion of the previous essay. I ended with a scribbled-upon text that made quite clear that the task was something for some other later worker. Take even that single paragraph, which I repeat here in boldface:

“Merleau-Ponty’s reflections on space, which several paragraphs of ‘Eye and Mind’ provide, is implied by his interrogation of vision. Vision alone gives me access to what is not me, to what is ‘fully and simply’. To see is not to coincide blindly with the object, but to unfold an interiority. Insofar as they are seen, the things do not rest in themselves at an absolute distance, but they nonetheless remain far away, thick. They recede into a distance which, measured from me, is nevertheless proximity. Spatiality is then synonymous with the ‘being-there’ [*l’etre-la*] of the thing, with its appearance as thing. The attempt to conceive spatiality is an attempt to draw a little nearer to the heart of the experience, a little nearer to the carnal chiasm.”²

Every sentence would required another paragraph, and that for and to someone tuned to the contexts mentioned. A later culture will put Merleau-Ponty’s struggle into the context of a $UV + GS + FS_2$, where the subscript 2 refers to the specialization of interpretation. Have I not already lost most present readers at this stage, with the strange view of interpretation that is to emerge through the efforts of some group seeking to follow up the task set by *Field Nocturne 117*?

But you might think much more simply, about “interrogation of vision”. Have we not been doing some of that, with the neuroscientists? But is that what is meant by Barbaras? And so on. Can you even vaguely place this task in the context of the canons of hermeneutics, or equivalently into the project described by *The Sketch*?

Is Merleau-Ponty in a world that overlaps in some way with Lonergan’s struggle with the ABC of a vision-field, where you may take field to point in some ordinary

²**RBMP**, 204. It is the first paragraph of the subsection of the chapter “Originary Spatio-Temporality”, with title “Philosophy and Space”.

fashion or in the remote fashion of a full heuristic of being and desire?³

And so on, into those first pages of the text. Page two winds us into the problem of “the autonomous order of the composite of body and soul”⁴: is that the order in which, were I cut, I would bleed, indeed an aggregate of leaking molecules? Then one turns the second page with the at once magnificently right and magnificently wrong sentencing of meaning: “Because the philosophic character of a spoken word is measured by its submission to the requirements of geometrical understanding, because clarity and distinctness remain the criterion of a discourse of truth, the only way to conceive vision is to make a thought of seeing, the only way to conceive space is to reduce it to pure extension. In Descartes’s eyes, to think vision is to think it as thought. Such is the situation from which Merleau-Ponty seeks to escape. The possibility of reaching that point depends on transforming Cartesian space, of thinking an originary space.”⁵

Thinking vision: we have certainly been trying stumbingly to do that with and beyond the neuroscientists. Thinking space? We did not attempt that here. There is the ABC thinking of Lonergan which one might imagine as reducing it to pure extension. But there is also the thinking of Einstein and Eddington and Schrödinger that transforms Newton’s and Descartes’s putterings into “abstract relation fields” that somehow fills originary space with Marsian flights.

The title of this non-essay mentions *light*, for I wished to keep things simple,

³The full heuristic would, of course, include a sublated Schroedinger, both Schroedinger of *Space-Time Structure* and of *What is Life?* It seems worthwhile, too, to note that the way in which Schroedinger’s starts *Space-Time Structure*, with a naming of dispersedness, resonates with Lonergan’s start altogether better than many contemporary mythologies of strangely pre-structured spacetime. A context for reflection on the broader problems here is P.McShane, “Elevating Insight. Space-Time as Paradigm Problem”, *Method: Journal of Lonergan Studies* 19 (2001), 203-229.

⁴RBMP, 205.

⁵RBMP, 205-6.

bringing in only symmetric and anti-symmetric tensors. But vision and originary space involve much more.⁶ Think then back to that simple page of **Neuroscience** on light⁷: certain not the stuff of reaches for serious explanation. Are the present front-line neuroscientists any better tuned to the reality of light or vision? And is that last question utterly alien and beside the point of a phenomenology of perception for Merleau-Ponty and Barbaras?

But enough of this rambling. At least you can sympathize with my abandoning this interrogation of, this **attempt to draw a little nearer to the heart of the experience** of, seen print. And does the ramble not nudge us towards seeing the need for us to slope up together from different takes on the experience, so that the slopes might take us towards a full presence in originary space?

⁶One must consider negentropic geometries from the level of physics up.

⁷**Neuroscience**, 282-3.