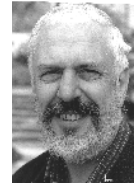




PSY 748b: Transcendence and Reduction

Joe Ferguson – January, 2005



I took it as a sign of progress when I found myself confused, somewhere between Jaspers and Merleau-Ponty, about the idea of transcendence. I am still confused about it, although I have given it a great deal of thought. I suspect that the idea is central to both the philosophical and the psychotherapeutic applications of phenomenology and existentialism. My problem is in envisioning the boundaries that are transcended in each instance, especially when those boundaries are transcended by means of a reduction. What is the essence of the discontinuity that constitutes transcendence?

This question is particularly troublesome in the case of transcendental consciousness, when we seek a boundary to delineate subject from object. As we discard perceptual constructions and other psychological artifacts by means of the epoché and by means of scientific and eidetic reduction, subjectivity either evaporates or else becomes indescribable which, for purposes of analysis, is the same thing. Here we seem to seek transcendence by means of a descent, as we legitimately seek to understand life by means of autopsy, subatomic physics by means of particle collision, or anxiety by means of psychosocial assessment. Is it merely ironic nomenclature, or actual contradiction, to seek transcendence by means of a reduction?

Does an essence like the transcendental ego *underlie* the constructions that are built upon it, and that are revealed by some sort of reduction, or rather does it *consist* in them? Certainly, transcendence can also consist in a construction, which at some point leaps out of its context as an exception, in the sense that Jaspers seems to use the word (Jaspers, 1971). In fact, this is the essence of all emergent phenomena. Emergence occurs when the aggregate process of some system manifests a property which is not meaningfully reducible to its elements. Heat is irreducible to the particles that happen to manifest it in any particular volume, just as consciousness is irreducible to the physical and psychic processes that manifest it, and just as *Existenz* is irreducible to personal history.

The emergent phenomenon transcends its own origins and requires a larger frame of reference for its understanding. Larger frames are always available, at least in principle. That principle has been most rigorously demonstrated in the form of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem (Gödel, 1931), which establishes the following remarkable properties of any formal system more complex than arithmetic:

1. Expressions can be formulated which are self contradictory but which satisfy the criteria for truth within their own syntax. An English expression in this category is "This statement is false." We can see the problem with such a statement because we are thinking within a frame of reference which transcends the syntax of our language. Perhaps more significantly for philosophers, Gödel also demonstrated that true statements can also be formulated in any system which cannot be proven to be true within that system.
2. A more comprehensive formal system can *always* be constructed which resolves the meaning of such statements, without limit.



Note that in this sort of transcendence there is an invariable “upward” shift in perspective, in the sense that the transcendental perspective always completely encompasses that which is transcended. The incompleteness of a system is revealed by an exploration of that system, often by means of a reduction, but its resolution is always a constructive transcendental act. Science progresses precisely by means of such transcendence, which has its roots in an induction that reaches beyond the empirical data from which it arises. Any hypothesis reaches, quite literally, beyond its origin to postulate a transcendental order that encompasses and extends it.

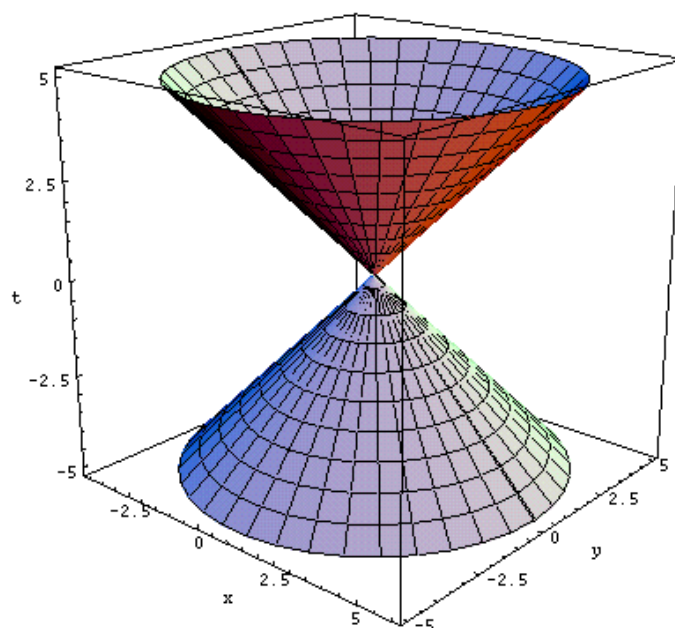
It is in this sense that the phenomenological reduction exposes the transcendence of perception over sensation. When the reduction is successful the gestalt is breached and the leap that perception has taken beyond sensation is revealed (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). This realization casts perception in a new light and opens the way to a reinterpretation of its underlying elements, hitherto obscured by the apparent unity of the gestalt. There is then a choice of perspective which did not exist before. This is the mechanism of the perceptual rivalry that is provoked by ambiguous figures such as those that follow.



At the neural level, perceptual rivalry seems to emerge from a mechanism that is isomorphic to the conscious experience of it (Blake, 1989), and these mechanisms emerge from lower levels still to the presumable limit of quantum indetermination, where God apparently rests in the ontological basement. The transcendental progression also extends “upward” to encompass the largest scientific or philosophical questions for which we have sufficient visibility to recognize incompleteness (Jaspers, 1951, 1971; Macann, 1993), where God apparently rests in the ontological penthouse. In every system, some reduction always seems to provide the mechanism by which its incompleteness is revealed, and in every case it is by a constructive transcendence that the apparent contradiction is resolved. Perhaps my confusion about transcendence stems from its constant association with some reduction, perhaps it is a problem in translation, or perhaps the incompleteness of my understanding will yield to a transcendental insight in the course of this winter session.

In any case the ongoing dance of reduction and transcendence constitutes a means of mobility among the many possible perspectives of the natural, scientific, eidetic, and phenomenological attitudes. It is precisely in this perspectival mobility, and in the definition of its range by existential criteria, that EPICP offers to inform the psychotherapeutic discourse. The mechanism of psychotherapy always involves some reduction of the client’s perspective, which permits the construction of some transcendental insight about his situation, which finally renders it malleable. The phenomenological attitude is the vehicle of reduction. Ironically, the existential perspective, by delimiting personal freedom, makes freedom apparent.

I understand *Existenz* as the full range of potential actualization that is open to a person at any point in time (Jaspers, 1971). I understand psychotherapy as the exploration of that *Existenz* in pursuit of some resolution or development. I have come to visualize *Existenz* as a philosophical variation of what physicists call a “world line” or a “light cone”, which is usually represented as follows.



A world line represents the potential range of positions that a photon can possibly occupy as it moves through time from its origin *into either its future or its past*. At its origin in the instantaneous present there is only the singular immanent reality; the situation as it is. As the light cone projects into the future the range of potential actualization “expands” with time, which is referred to as its degree of freedom. As a metaphor for *Existenz*, this is the range of existential freedom. In the physical case the actual trajectory of the photon is determined by quantum electrodynamics, within the natural limits of the light cone. In my existential metaphor the trajectory of *dasein*, within natural limits, is determined by free will.

The past of the world line represents the alternative histories which *could* have given rise to the present immanent situation. Dasein perceives its situation and its range of potential futures, as a constructive *interpretation* of its past. Although the arrow of time indicates that the past is immutable where the future is open, the *perception* of that past holds the same degree of freedom as expectation for the future. Reinterpretation of the past is also an aspect of existential freedom. What it requires, of course, is some reduction of perception followed by a new, encompassing, transcendental synthesis.

It seems that the reduction does not actually *lead* to transcendence, but only stimulates it by revealing the degrees of freedom that are always available to consciousness, both in the interpretation of its past and in the choices that it makes for its future. Existential phenomenology informs the clinical discourse in such a way as to encourage a reduction of naïve perception, which *always* obscures the degree of freedom in *Existenz*.

References

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