The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy

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The Linguistic Turn in the German Tradition of the Philosophy of Language

Introduction

The linguistic turn in the German tradition of the philosophy of language, also known as the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt tradition, is characterized by two main features resulting from the identification of language with reason that is integral to this tradition. Such an identification goes beyond mere etymological reference to a common origin in the Greek *logos*. More than this, it entails two shifts that are both unprecedented in the tradition to which these authors react and unassimilable by it:

1. The view of language presupposed by the philosophy of consciousness is subjected to a critique. On this view, the role of language is relegated to that of a tool mediating the subject-object relation; consequently, language becomes a medium for the mere expression of prelinguistic thoughts. The critique of this standpoint arises by regarding language as constitutive of thought, and by recognizing accordingly the double status of language as both empirical and transcendental. In virtue of this status, language lays claim to the constitutive role traditionally attributed to consciousness, to a transcendental subject.

2. Furthermore, this transformation amounts to a *detranscendentalization* of reason. Reason comes to be unavoidably situated in the midst of a plurality of natural languages, which cannot guarantee the unity of reason in the same way as could the extrawordly standpoint of a transcendental subject.

These two central features have become commonplace in twentieth-century philosophy, with different philosophical traditions carrying out a similar linguistic turn along rather different paths. Given their apparent significance, it is important to examine whether these features have to be regarded as constitutive of the linguistic turn as such, or whether they should instead be called into question as consequences resulting only from an implausible reification of language.

To shed light on this issue, I will begin by examining Hamann's critique of Kant, which can be viewed as the starting point of the linguistic turn in the German tradition, the point at which this tradition makes a definitive break with the philosophy of

consciousness (chapter 1). Next, I will proceed to discuss Humboldt's view of language, which is not only far more elaborate than Hamann's brief and fragmentary remarks, but also far more influential in the context of contemporary German philosophy[1] (chapter 2). Examining the views of these authors will provide the needed background for assessing the way in which Humboldt's conception of language is radicalized by hermeneutic philosophy (chapter 3). It will also help us to understand how Habermas develops his own view from out of this hermeneutic tradition, even while trying to recover those aspects of Humboldt's standpoint that it neglects (chapter 4).

1. Precisely because this tradition inaugurates a new philosophical paradigm, it was not well received by the dominant philosophy of its time and was confined to the shadows by the preeminence of German idealism. However, its influence on German (as well as non-German) philosophers in this century has become significant.

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1

Hamann's Critique of Kant: The Role of Language as Constitutive of Our Relation with the World

The significance of Hamann's critique of Kant is certainly not due to its initial repercussions in the author's own lifetime, which were rather minimal. The weight of this critique is actually due to its anticipation of ideas that took hold only two centuries later. Hamann's critique of Kant, never read by the latter author,[1] is contained in two brief papers. The first is a review written on the occasion of the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which Hamann read while it was still in press. The second (dating from 1784) is a more elaborate if equally fragmentary paper entitled "Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft."[2]

We can see the *leitmotiv* of Hamann's metacritique in his claim that "reason is language, *logos*," or that "without the word, neither reason nor world." As mentioned earlier, this theme recurs systematically in the tradition that extends down to Heidegger and Gadamer.[3] Given its great importance, it is necessary to reflect

1. For a discussion of Hamann's relationship with Kant, see F. C. Beiser (1987), pp. 16–43.

2. In the collection of Hamann's works, *Vom Magus im Norden und der Verwegenheit des Geistes*. (See the bibliography for the complete references to all works cited throughout the present book.)

3. Herder also begins his critique of Kant by pointing out that "the Greeks refer to both reason and language with a single word, *logos*" (XXI, p. 19). Although Herder's elaborate critique of Kant is interesting in its own right, I will not

on the precise meaning of the identification of language and reason by the authors in question. For it is noteworthy that no such identification can be found in Greek philosophy, Gadamer's interpretative efforts notwithstanding.

In the view of language sketched in the first book of Aristotle's *De Interpretatione*, we already find language in its mediating role between two fixed poles, namely, the "things out there" and the affections of the soul. This inaugurates a tradition, extending down to Kant, that explains the workings of language by way of a model centered in the *designation* of objects with the help of words (or names). As Aristotle explains:

Now spoken sounds are symbols of affections in the soul, and written marks symbols of spoken sounds. And just as written marks are not the same for all men, neither are spoken sounds. But what these are in the first place signs of—affections of the soul—are the same for all; and what these affections are likenesses of—actual things—are also the same.[4]

The full workings of language are thereby reduced to its designating function, such that language becomes an intraworldly tool for "representing" objects that exist independently of it. This makes it impossible to view language in its various constituting functions, in its quasi-transcendental role for our understanding of the world. And precisely this *constitutive* view of language is what lies behind its identification with reason in the Hamann-Herder-Humboldt tradition. On this point, Schnädelbach remarks as follows in his *Philosophie* (1986):

Although Aristotle means by *logos* both reason and language, he is oblivious of any perspectivism concerning languages. For him, the diversity of natural languages is no objection against the unity and permanent

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discuss it here, for it would divert us from the general themes of the present book. For the same reason, I will discuss Hamann's critique of Kant only insofar as it anticipates central ideas of the new conception of language elaborated by his tradition, without providing an exhaustive exposition of it. For an interesting reconstruction of Hamann's critique, see J. Simon (1979), pp. 135–165.

. *De Interpretatione* I, 16a3–8.

identity of reason, because he interprets language as a set of conventional—i.e., in principle arbitrary—signs of those affections (*pathemata*) to be found in every consciousness—which are in turn (non-conventional) signs of external objects. Given the sameness of the external world and the structure of human sensibility which is common to all men, that to which signs refer also has to be the same for all men. . . . This purely instrumental view of language, linked to the idea of an invariable human reason, constituted the unquestioned foundation of philosophy of language from Aristotle to Kant. . . . In their critical confrontation with this view of language, Hamann and Herder saw that language is not a mere instrument for fixing and communicating the experience of the world, for that which we experience is determined, "constituted," by the character of our own language. The cost of recognizing this is that reason . . . cannot be thought as "alingual" either; it has to be already, in itself, linguistic reason. Hamann and Herder criticize Kant for holding fast to a "pure" reason, independent of language. . . . Since then, "reason and language" has been the systematic central problem of all philosophy of reason in general.[5]

1.1 Language as the Hidden Common Root of Understanding and Sensibility Sought by Kant

In light of the theme sketched above, we can now consider the central features of Hamann's metacritique of Kant. The core of this critique touches on the three "purisms" pursued by Kant, which in Hamann's opinion are not feasible:

The *first* purification of philosophy consists in the attempt—partly misconstrued and partly failed—to make reason independent of all tradition and belief. The *second* reaches even further in its transcendental aspiration and ends up with nothing less than the complete independence of reason from experience and everyday induction. . . . The *third*, highest and, as it were, *empirical* purism concerns *language*, that unique first and ultimate organ and criterion of reason, with no other credential whatsoever than *tradition* and *use*.[6]

According to Hamann, this triple "purity" of reason has a single origin: the illusory attempt to separate reason from the actual

5. p. 109.

6. MK, pp. 206–207.

and historical conditions of its existence.[7] He criticizes this general tendency of the Enlightenment with a systematic objection, namely, the impossibility of "purifying" reason of language in any way, since language is the "unique first and ultimate organ and criterion of reason."

To defend this point of view, Hamann chooses the indirect path of a metacritique. That is to say, he develops his critique by examining the conditions of possibility of the very analysis carried out in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. To this extent, he understands his criticism as a metareflection on that which Kant tacitly presupposed. This metareflection is carried out by Hamann by means of a question that Kant did not answer, insofar as he "forgot" to pose it: "how is the capacity to *think* possible"?[8] Only through the prompting of such a question could Kant have discovered that "the capacity to think rests on language."[9] If Hamann succeeds in justifying the implicit assumption that language is "constitutive" of thinking, the general aim of his critique will have been achieved. If thinking is inextricably bound up with an already existing language that makes it possible, the very idea of a presuppositionless starting-point, which underlies the depiction of reason as "pure," is a mere illusion. As Gründer points out, "insofar as there can be no thinking without a language, there cannot be a suprahistoric or ahistoric reason."[10]

Hamann's justification of this claim, as we shall see a bit later, lies in his view of language as that common root of understanding and sensibility for which Kant had searched in vain. Hamann's explana-

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7. The general line of Hamann's critique of Kant fits perfectly with the later critique of Hegel in his attempt to "dissolve the Kantian dualisms." This is recognized by Hegel himself, for whom Hamann's critique hits "at the core of the problem of reason" (*Hamanns Schriften*, in *Berliner Schriften 1818–1831*, p. 270, cited by Simon 1979, p. 158). However, the emphasis on the connection between language and reason that is characteristic of Hamann's critique is not followed up by Hegel. This is the aspect of Hamann's critique which is, in retrospect, revolutionary.

8. MK, p. 208.

9. Ibid.

10. Gründer (1982), p. 53.

tion of this view not only makes up the core of his metacritique, but also represents the key to any subsequent linguistic turn:

> Words, then, have an *aesthetic* and *logical* capacity. As visible and audible objects, they belong, along with their elements, to the realm of *sensibility* and *intuition*. But according to the spirit of their *purpose* and *meaning*, they belong to the realm of the understanding and of concepts. Therefore words are as much pure and empirical intuitions as they are pure and empirical concepts: *empirical* because they cause visual and auditory sensations; *pure* inasmuch as their meaning is not determined by anything belonging to these sensations.[11]

The special character of language lies precisely in its hybrid character as both empirical and conceptual, that is, in its "aesthetic and logical capacity." Insofar as language unifies these two dimensions, it is the condition of possibility of that which can only be generated *after* the acquisition of a language—namely, the conceptual domain of meanings detachable from their sign-substratum. The abstraction of such a domain can only be explained by recourse to our linguistic capacity, in terms of our ability to use signs to represent nonlinguistic entities. This is why Hamann talks about "the receptivity of language" rather than about "sensibility," as Kant does.

Such a priority of language over the transcendental aesthetic expresses the peculiar "turn" that Hamann gives to the Kantian transcendental project. The synthesis that Kant sought in the "schematism of reason" (and that led him to the insoluble puzzle of explaining this synthesis as a causal interface between the understanding and the things in themselves) is *always already linguistically realized*. Reflection always comes too late, as it were, when it tries to "deduce" such a synthesis by means of what Hamann ironically termed a "violent, illegitimate, idiosyncratic separation of that which has been put together by nature" (p. 202).

Hamann is well aware of the scope of his critique, which questions the very idea of an a priori deduction of the principles that reason "dreams" it can give to itself as if by spontaneous generation. As he points out:

11. Pp. 210–211.

no deduction is necessary to establish the genetic priority of *language* . . . over the *seven* sacred functions of logical principles and deductions. Not only does the entire capacity to think rest on language . . . but language is also *the center of the misunderstandings of reason about itself.* (italics mine)[12]

1.2   The Untenability of the Kantian Distinction between A Priori and A Posteriori

Questioning the very idea of an "a priori deduction" is one of the central consequences of Hamann's critique of Kant. Viewed in retrospect, it is surely its most revolutionary feature, remaining unparalleled until twentieth-century philosophy.

The background to this critical move can be reproduced as follows. Hamann's metacritique radicalizes the transcendental viewpoint by asking for the conditions of possibility of an allegedly "pure reason." This radicalization culminates in the discovery of something (namely, language) that is both transcendental and empirical. But this discovery necessarily renders dysfunctional the application of the basic categorical distinctions of transcendental philosophy—for these distinctions were meaningful precisely only under the exclusion of such a possibility (that of a transcendental-empirical hybrid).

A fateful tension already appears if one tries to apply the a priori–a posteriori distinction to language. Accordingly, this distinction is strangely transformed, as Hamann expresses in his claim that the meaning and use of words is "*a priori* arbitrary and contingent, but *a posteriori* necessary and indispensable."[13] Language is

12. P. 208.

13. P. 211. The critique of Kant's a priori/a posteriori distinction implicit in this formulation of Hamann situates his metacritique in the same line as Quine's critique of the analytic/synthetic distinction in "Two Dogmas of Empiricism," Wittgenstein's reflections on the peculiar status of "propositions that hold fast" in *On Certainty,* or the transformation of the Kantian apriorism into an "*a priori* perfect" carried out by hermeneutic philosophy. For the different consequences that can be drawn from these critiques, see footnote 12 in chapter 3.

a priori arbitrary and contingent" in its concrete realizations, for as a historical and factual reality, it cannot be "deduced" in any way. As opposed to any a priori claim, language is contingent or fortuitous, as the very plurality of languages attests. But "a posteriori," in accordance with its constitutive character, any given language is "necessary and indispensable" for those who speak it. It is insurmountable (*nichthintergehbar*).[14]

The recognition of these features enables Hamann to question Kant's attempt to distinguish genetically between concepts of pure reason and empirical concepts. In Hamann's view, such an attempt at a "critical self-determination" of reason can occur only as a revision or perhaps an enrichment of a particular language. In this case, it is the language in which Kant carries out his project, a language which is nothing but the product of a particular philosophical tradition. As Simon puts it in his excellent reconstruction of the metacritique:

The free and spontaneous use of language involves a receptive relation to the paths already traveled by a particular language. It is impossible to try to speak without thereby speaking a language previously structured in this sense. . . . No matter how much a philosophy can enrich language, it cannot produce, by itself, the initial fundamental concepts in their determinate relations with each other. For it lacks the "common root" of such concepts and, therefore, it finds itself in a receptive situation and—insofar as, following the Cartesian tradition, only that which is self-generated can be considered "clear"—in a situation of confusion about itself.[15]

To overlook reason's receptivity with respect to a historically given language inevitably leads to misunderstandings. As Hamann

14. The debate about the *Nichthintergehbarkeit* of language is already several decades old. The positions in this debate are divided into two poles. On the one hand, there are those who defend the *Nichthintergehbarkeit* thesis developed by hermeneutic philosophy: see Apel (1963) and (1976). On the other hand, there are those who reject it, either from the standpoint of developmental psychology (see Piaget 1970) or from a constructivist standpoint (see K. Lorenz and J. Mittelstraß 1967). An illuminating account of this controversy can be found in Holenstein (1980).

15. Simon (1979), p. 150.

emphasizes, language, as the channel for transmitting a particular fore-understanding of the world, has "no other credential whatso-ever than tradition and use." Insofar as this is overlooked, lan-guage remains at "the center of the misunderstandings of reason about itself."

If Kant's system tacitly presupposes a given, historically trans-mitted language, it is of course vain to think of this system as the product of "pure" reason. The problem that arises from this new view of language is how to make systematic philosophy compatible with the linguistically and historically determined character of hu-man thought. Hamann argues that a radicalization of the Kantian "critique," as an attempt to dissolve "the misunderstandings of reason with itself," has to begin with a reflection on language "just as it is." Such reflection always involves an extension if not an enrichment of the particular language in which it occurs (as Hamman remarks with respect to the terms coined by Kant). But this extension takes place in and through language itself, and therefore remains conditioned by it.

In these brief remarks on the internal problems of transcenden-tal philosophy, Hamann anticipates most of the problems and consequences now regarded as direct results of the linguistic turn as such. In this sense, our review of Hamann's metacritique of Kant can also serve as an introduction to Humboldt's view—for as we shall see, Humboldt's approach to language remains very close to the themes originated by Hamann, even if Humboldt dis-plays a far greater theoretical sophistication.