The Meaning and Power
of Negativity

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edited by

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Preface

The theme of the 38th Annual Philosophy of Religion Conference in Claremont was *The Meaning and Power of Negativity*. It attracted considerable interest far beyond Claremont and brought together participants from different religions, traditions, and academic disciplines for three days of fruitful conversations. The present volume documents our discussions and reflections. It includes the reworked versions of the papers presented at the conference as well as additional material from the 2017 Forum Humanum competition. Together the diverse contributions to the volume constitute a compelling introduction to the remarkably fecund subject of negativity in contemporary philosophy of religion.

We are grateful to the *Udo Keller Stiftung Forum Humanum* (Hamburg) who has again generously provided ten conference grants to enable doctoral students and post-docs to take part in the conference and present their work on the theme of the conference. Five of those papers are published here along with the other contributions to the conference. We gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of Claremont Graduate University, Pomona College, and Claremont McKenna College and the assistance of the Collegium Helveticum in Zurich in handling the *Forum Humanum* competition. We are indebted to the contributors to this volume, to Mohr Siebeck who has accepted the manuscript for publication, and to Marlene A. Block (Claremont) who helped to get the manuscript ready for publication.

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tally open nature of the practice of democracy in that it never receives a final form. The root issue, I think, is to hone in on an expression of democracy that is decisive and allows for dissent.[9]

Pritchard's use of Adorno's negative dialectics is also complemented by the preferential option for the poor and most vulnerable within Liberation Theology. The work of Gustavo Gutiérrez, Jon Sobrino, Leonardo Boff and others are examples of ethical thinking that as the situation of victims as the starting point of the discussion, a way of thinking that aims to affect the status quo in politics. The actions of individuals such as Archbishop Óscar Romero, who was killed for taking a revolutionary stance against the political cast in El Salvador, made a concrete difference in the political and social landscape. Like Adorno, and even Meister, Gutiérrez and Romero recognized the need for immediate and revolutionary changes in the political.

As with the emphasis on negative dialectics in Pritchard's discussion, Adorno and the liberation theologians recognized the need to keep the ethical and political in ongoing tension, working through difficult decisions for the sake of a more just world.

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[9] Chantal Mouffe suggests imagining "the people" as a political construct instead of viewing the category as a given, to see "the people" as a result of the political process instead of the condition of its possibility. If viewed as a process then the identity of those living under one form of liberal democracy is but one instantiation that is also open to contestation. Politics is not defined merely by the friend/enemy or us/them but also involves a healthy self-awareness and self-critique of the identity of that which makes up "the people."

Negative Hermeneutics

Between Non-Understanding and the Understanding of Negativity

EMIL ANGEHRN

Hermeneutics is the art of understanding, the theory of interpretation. Yet it is an art or theory in a special sense. It is an art in a different sense than rhetoric is the art of speaking or than architecture is the art of building. Hermeneutics does not simply teach techniques of understanding and methods of interpreting. It is genuinely not only concerned with understanding, but it is equally concerned with its contrary, with non-understanding: It is a quarrel with non-understanding, a confrontation with the limits of sense. Yet, hermeneutics is in an additional, more specific sense 'negative hermeneutics': It is not only concerned with the limits of sense, but with understanding the negative. It reflects the problem that understanding is not only limited, but is directed at understanding that which genuinely resists understanding and appears as unintelligible and irrational. In this paper I will try to clarify these two aspects of understanding, understanding in its limitedness (1) and understanding the negative (2). The aim of my clarification is to discuss in which sense negativity is both a challenge to hermeneutics and in how far it is at its very core (3).

1. Non-Understanding and the Limitations of Sense

Understanding is limited. Beyond its limits, there are areas of non-understanding and areas of the unintelligible. In hermeneutics, it has been a controversial question as to whether understanding or non-understanding is more fundamental. That is, whether understanding in fact only consists of avoiding or overcoming misunderstandings or whether, the other way round, every misunderstanding only presents a deviation from or an obfuscation of a principally understanding way of relating to the world. It would be easy to find examples for both alternatives. The point however is that we do not know one without the other. Understanding *is* a way of coping with the limitations of sense. Understanding occurs dialectically between the poles of succeeding and failing, of sense and non-sense. Heidegger relates this fact to life as such: According to him, human existence essentially is a kind of disclosedness, of understanding the world and oneself, but equally a kind of concealment and missing oneself.

It should be noted at the beginning that 'limitation' here means more than a quantitative limitedness or an extrinsic limit. The limitations of sense are different from the limits of sight or hearing. That our senses as well as our physical strength are limited is a basic natural fact which is not further problematic for our self-conception. Humans may be concerned with perfecting their abilities and pushing the limits of their powers. Yet they do not strive to sharpen their sight and hearing, to enhance their velocity beyond what is possible for them by nature. In contrast, the limitations of cognition and understanding present a substantial provocation. Men want to understand something comprehensively, and they want to understand everything. An obscure verse in a poem, a meaningless ritual, or an instance of pathological behaviour initiate questioning and investigating. Understanding and interpreting are open, infinite processes. They are guided by the 'anticipation of completeness' (Gadamer), but their final completion will and can never be reached. In this sense, the limitation of sense, the non-understood and the non-articulated present something negative we run into and which offers us resistance.

Now, my thesis is that there is not a single limit to understanding, but that understanding has several limitations differing in kind, and that each of them involves its own constitutive relation between understanding and non-understanding. I suggest to consider four ways in which we more and more radically encounter the other of sense.

1.1. Senseful and Senseless

The most fundamental difference is that between the senseful and the senseless, the meaningful and the meaningless. The pair of antonyms is here used to designate that which can be judged with respect to its sense, and that which cannot but falls beyond the category of sense. It primarily represents an external border of hermeneutics, one which is commonly taken to be rooted in an ontological difference of objects. Classical conceptions correlate the duality of understanding and non-understanding methods with the dichotomy of two ontological categories of being (culture and nature, mind and matter). We access the world in two fundamentally different ways. On the one hand, we encounter states of affairs in the realm of nature which we describe from the outside and whose development and functioning we seek to explain. On the other hand, we are concerned with topics in the human world whose sense we seek to understand in some way. We understand the President's speech — yet we do not, or still in another sense, understand a crystal's structure.

In this light, we are here concerned with an external border that is as unproblematic for understanding as the limitedness of our senses is. However, the realms of the senseful and the senseless are not simply neighbouring like foreign territories. It is possible that they interrelate in ways which are relevant

to hermeneutics. I mention two such ways. On the one hand, the confrontation with the senseless can turn into a provocation to the mind's will to understand — as the eternal silence of the infinite spaces to Pascal,[1] the mindlessness of the Alps to Hegel,[2] the senselessness of natural life to Sartre.[3] On the other hand, the senseful and the senseless permeate one another. To understand thus exactly means to be able to see the ruptures in a text as well as to capture the sediments, even the sense, of the meaningless woven in the tapestry of life. In the last decades, the exteriority of sense — the materiality of communication — has repeatedly been attended by phenomenology, cultural theory and deconstructivism. Eminently, the entanglement of the inner and the outer has been reflected by psychoanalysis. Taking the clearing of one's throat during the analytic session as a message, reading a dream's ostensible nonsense "like a sacred text", as Freud demands,[4] these approaches regard the interdependence of both realms of being as the heuristic key for understanding. Paul Ricoeur has addressed the transformation of 'force' into 'sense' as the core of mental activity. Bernhard Waldenfels has traced the interaction of 'desiring' and 'meaning' within human existence.[5] In general, conceptual constellations like these bring to mind that the meaning of our action, inasmuch as it is understandable, is embedded and grounded in a context which we cannot make sense of in the same way. The threshold between sense and nature needs to be reflected upon as a demarcation within the horizon of sense. It remains a desideratum to explain how sense roots in something that is not senseful in itself.

1.2. Covert sense

Secondly, we encounter the other to sense as that which is not per se alien to sense, but which is not or only partially comprehensible for a reader or listener in a concrete situation. This is basically the normal case in a hermeneutic situation. The other to sense consists of the incomprehensible, the alien, the fragmentary; that whose meaning we cannot grasp without difficulty: ancient texts, exotic cultures, silent gestures, unclear symbols. Here, a limitation of understanding is at issue that is normally due to the temporal,

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[1] "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me." PASCAL, *Pensées*, (New York: Dutton Paperback, 1958), Fragment 206.

[2] G. W. F. HEGEL, *Tagebuch der Reise* in die Berner Oberalpen 1796, in K. ROSENKRANZ, *G. W. F. Hegels Leben* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1969), 470–489.

[3] J.-P. SARTRE, *Nausea*, trans. R. BALDICK (London: Penguin Books, 1963).

[4] S. FREUD, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. A. A. BRILL (New York: Macmillan, 1913), 163.

[5] P. RICŒUR, "Une interpretation philosophique de Freud", in *Le conflit des interpretations. Essais d'hermeneutique* (Paris: Seuil, 1965), 160; B. WALDENFELS, *Bruchlinien der Erfahrung. Phänomenologie, Psychoanalyse, Phänomenotechnik* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2002), 22–45.

cultural or social distance between the production and the reception of sense. Hermeneutic work aims at mediating the two of them through translation, reconstruction and interpretation, striving for ideally effectuating congruence between sense as it was originally generated and sense as it is reconstructed by the understanding. Interpreting something as it was meant seems the most plausible norm for the success of understanding. In the simplest case, non-understanding results from unfamiliarity with the facts and is removed by giving additional information. In addition, all hermeneutic techniques apply here inasmuch as they refer to internal and external factors and make a text, a physiognomy or a story decipherable. In which respects and according to which logic intelligibility can be achieved depends on the issue at hand as well as on one's methodical orientation – and this question itself constitutes the object of the dispute on methods in hermeneutics.

The point indicates the more fundamental question as to whether and in how far understanding is capable of absorbing alienness and dissolving opaqueness. Many conceptions claim that sense cannot be universalised. Accordingly, every hermeneutic process comprises something constitutively incomprehensible, every interpretation retains an insurmountable border. Against the possibility of a definite interpretation, critical conceptions set the fragmentariness and openness of understanding. Against the possibility of coinciding they set the difference between speaker and interpreter. The pathos for otherness stands in contrast to the gesture of seizure and the tendency towards claiming universal communication. Whether or not one finds the accusation of hermeneutic seizure justifiably raised is a matter of the case at issue and of one's own position. On the whole, the discussion concerns the treatment of something incomprehensible which ideally is something 'not yet' understood, but which is *per se* senseful and which can be turned into something comprehensible through hermeneutic operations.

1.3. False Sense

In contrast to the foregoing, the other of sense appears, thirdly, as something unintelligible which is not understandable even for the subject uttering it. The hermeneutic problem in this case does not concern the distance between reader and author, but the latter's distance from himself. What has to be clarified are utterances which appear obscure and incomprehensible to the speaking and acting subject himself. Again, this phenomenon is paradigmatically familiar from the psychoanalytic context. Paul Ricœur addressed it more generally as a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' and presented Freud alongside Marx and Nietzsche as masters of suspicion: 'Suspicion' refers to the reservation about the claim to truthfulness and meaningfulness utterances assert to have. As is the case with the unconscious, class interest and the will to power function as covert authors

within the framework of sense whose meaning lacks transparency for the acting and speaking subjects themselves. Psychoanalysis, critique of ideology, and critical genealogy present instances of critical hermeneutics. They aim at making the obscure utterance, i.e. the pathological symptom or the ideological belief, intelligible not only for the observer, but for the subject himself by means of reconstructing the way in which its sense became distorted.

Meanwhile, the point of the hermeneutics of suspicion is not only that it concerns exceptional situations, but also that it makes a typical trait of the problem of understanding discernible as such. That utterances are opaque in themselves belongs to some degree to normal communication, and it is this fact that Gadamer defines as the inmost core of the hermeneutic problem. Being unclear about my own intention whilst speaking, being unable to restlessly express what I mean – and having to search for the right words – amounts to the normal condition of expressing oneself. We are seeking what was actually meant and intended not only in others, but also in ourselves. The idea that understanding is concerned with something opaque to others as well as to oneself is explicated by conceptions of critical hermeneutics – such as genealogy or deconstruction. There understanding means to open or perhaps break the surface of the framework of sense, reconfiguring the message and rewriting the text in order to make the articulation of the subject in question possible. The act of mediating the inner and the outer, the text and the context, is concerned with interferences between sense and its other. Such interferences do not simply imply a binary interpretation, but rather they enter interpretation *as* interferences, and as such they are themselves considered elements of sense.

Not understanding oneself and not understanding the other can overlap and amplify one another. Being opaque to oneself is possible on both sides, the speaker's and the hearer's side, and the physician's and the patient's side. It aggravates the difficulty in understanding one another. Whoever is at odds with himself will have an even harder time to unravel the other's alienness. In special cases, as in the interaction of transference and counter-transference addressed in psychoanalysis, the double self-opacity can be productive in that the dialogue between one unconscious and the other unconscious becomes the vehicle of understanding. In both ways, by disabling and enabling understanding, distorted sense thus becomes a pivot of existential hermeneutics.

1.4. Nonsense

A fourth form of the negation of sense consists of that which directly opposes being understood, i.e. manifest nonsense, the absurd. In question is an issue that is not only inaccessible, but explicitly hostile towards the will to understand. Contradictory sentences and performative contradictions are beyond the space of possible understanding. They behave offensively, so to speak, in their

escaping rationalisation as well as comprehension. This is true for the breach of basic constitutive rules, as in the case of a grammatically incoherent sentence, and maybe analogously for the violation of artistic rules or the deviation from customary practices. Here, we are not concerned with an inability of understanding, but with a definite rejection of the possibility to be made sense of. Linguistic nonsense plays a paradigmatic part inasmuch as speaking underlies the most consequent codification of all activities. The alternative between sense and nonsense seems unambiguous in the realm of conceptual language use, whereas it might be less clear in other contexts, such as art, whether an unintelligible utterance presents a simple negation or a creative extension of sense. Still, such deviations do not only occur as linguistic or theoretical rule violations. From the perspective of hermeneutics, they precisely do *not* constitute the core of the negation of sense as addressed here. The negation of sense in practice is more important. Here, the confrontation with something that cannot be understood because it resists every attempt of justification and emotional comprehension becomes a challenge in its own rights. We are concerned with something intrinsically negative that opposes the longing for sense and which understanding on its part resists. Thus, we come from the limit of understanding to the second topic: understanding the negative.

2. Understanding the Negative

2.1. Theoretical and Practical Negativity

We are concerned with a subject that due to its negativity cannot be understood. Its immanent negativity, not its distance or alienness, is the obstacle to comprehension and understanding. Now there are two fundamentally different ways in which we are concerned with negative states of affairs and acts of negating in speaking and acting.[6] Negation appears once in a theoretical and once in a practical sense. We can say of something that it is not (or deny that it is) and we can say of something that it should not be (or resist acknowledging that it is). We can say 'no' to an assertion or to a demand just as we can say 'yes' in a double sense – as affirmation that something is (thus-and-so) or that it should be (thus-and-so). The negative in one case presents something that is not, in the other case it presents something that should not be. Both are constitutive of our understanding of reality and of our relation to the world. Both affect the problem of understanding and non-understanding, each in its specific way.

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[6] For the following, cf. E. ANGEHRN, "Dispositive des Negativen. Grundzüge negativistischen Denkens", in *Die Arbeit des Negativen. Negativität als philosophisch-psychoanalytisches Problem*, ed. E. ANGEHRN and J. KÜCHENHOFF (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2014), 13–36.

We encounter the paradigmatic connection between non-being and non-understanding with respect to theoretical negation in ancient times. According to Parmenides, "it is necessary to assert and conceive that this is Being," but it is impossible to "know what it is not [or] talk of it."[7] This idea of Non-Being resonates with the mythical chaos which presents an area in which all definiteness dissolves, a realm of darkness and speechlessness. The original Parmenidean-Platonic thinking is based on the intuition that being is discernible whereas non-being is indiscernible. The early thinking has difficulty grasping the logic of negative sentences (i. e. the difference between saying that not and saying nothing), and until the classical doctrine of transcendentals, the sentence *ens et verum convertuntur* has articulated the belief that something is discernible to the same degree as it is. It implies that something intrinsically deficient is but insufficiently discernible and sayable, or, more radically, that the unintelligible eventually *is not*.

The antithesis to this line of thought is that the negative is literally constitutive of understanding. We always refer to something definite in contrast to everything else (*omnis determinatio est negatio*); every assertoric sentence contains the possibility of being true or false. Understanding a linguistic utterance means being capable of judging if it is true or false, every proposition entails its virtual negation for both, speaker and hearer. Ernst Tugendhat has worked out this connection in detail and strengthened Wittgenstein's view that "the key to understanding the essence of the sentence lies in the 'mystery of negation.'"[8] The constitutiveness of negation however has to be revealed not just in predicative language, but already when intentionally relating to objects. Against Parmenides' rigid fixation on being, Plato sets out to prove in his dialogue *The Sophist* that there is no speech without a mingling of being and non-being because every being is the same as itself as well as not the same as others.[9] Similarly, modern theories point to the system of differences as the medium in which language and cognition refer to definite objects. Negation is thus genuinely a constitutive moment of reason and sense.

Things are different with understanding practical negativity. It can appear as an object to an unproblematic understanding as well as as a fundamental obstacle to understanding. A negative fact, a deficiency, a prohibition can be stated, grasped in their genesis and meaning. Their validity can be accepted or denied. But there are other varieties of negativity which resist being rationally understood, varieties of suffering and evil, which in philosophy have ever

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[7] PARMENIDES, *Fragments, Diels-Kranz 28 B 6.1, B 2.7–8*, trans. A. H. COXON (Amsterdam: van Gorcum, 1986).

[8] E. TUGENDHAT, *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1976), 518; L. WITTGENSTEIN, *Notebooks: 1914–1916*, ed. G. H. VON WRIGHT and G. E. M. ANSCOMBE, trans. G. E. M. ANSCOMBE (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 15.11.1914.

[9] PLATO, *The Sophist*, 256d–e.

since posed a challenge to thought and comprehension. When asking for the relationship between theoretical and practical negation, it seems plausible to consider them as logically and empirically distinct acts and their relation as a contingent one at best, for instance as a criticism of a negative state of affairs (a deficiency or dysfunction). Taken by itself, such deficiency can be grasped in a neutral way, it can be asserted or denied; approval or criticism on a higher level, so to speak, presupposes a descriptive statement. Theoretical negation seems to be logically more basic than its practical counterpart; at the same time, denial and disapproval seem to be heterogeneous kinds of negation without an internal connection.

Interestingly, there are conceptions that do not share this commonsensical view but contradict it in two respects. On the one hand, they proceed from the priority of practical negation in typical cases. They take saying 'no' to what should not be as the pivot of thinking. On the other hand, they set the internal connection of both types of negativity against their division to the effect that, reversely, practical denial becomes the basis and core of theoretical negation. I want to illustrate this view with two examples.

The first one can be found in Sigmund Freud's classical essay on negation.[10] The text asks for the psychological origin of logical judgement and draws the remarkable conclusion that negation is "the intellectual substitute for repression."[11] Freud tries to make his thesis, which also holds for affirmation,[12] more plausible by interpreting negation as a neutralising translation of a threatening fact into a simple negative statement ("it is not the mother"). A repression is thereby overruled without admitting the repressed content. Nonetheless, a considerable distance remains between this special relation and the general relation between affective rejection and negative thinking and speaking.

Such a general relation is addressed by Klaus Heinrich and exemplified by Parmenides' conception of being.[13] According to Heinrich, the vehement elimination of every kind of negativity, deficiency and change from the true being expresses a primitive anxiety, a deep, practical kind of resistance. This resistance is not directed at conceptual confusion, but at the real phenomenon of dissolving the limitations of being, of contaminating being by the powers of

non-being. The speech act expressed in the poem is eventually not a dogmatic assertion, but an invocation and resembles an act of reassurance in the face of utmost danger ('fear not!').[14]

2.2. Fundamentality and Unintelligibility of the Negative

Yet in the context at hand, the question of tracing theoretical to practical negation is not of primary interest. 'Negativistic' conceptions emphasise the centrality of a way of thinking *ex negativo* that proceeds from criticizing the false and that which should not be.[15] Thinking means taking issue with the negative, with human finiteness as well as with historical experiences of destruction, injustice, and suffering. Doing them justice, "lend[ing] a voice to suffering"[16] is, according to Adorno, a condition of all truth. This is a kind of thinking that understands itself as proceeding from and directed against the negative, as a protesting criticism and "unswerving negation."[17] It is rooted in the belief that post-metaphysical thinking cannot build on an affirmative fundament and cannot recur to a reconciling totality, but that it reassures itself of its standards alone in criticizing the negative.

Such a way of thinking faces a twofold problem. One lies in the possibility of a radical criticism, the other in thinking the negative itself. The first issue centres around the question of how criticizing should be possible without referring to a positive fundament and an independent criterion of truth. Total criticism proves as aporetic as the absolutized diagnosis of negativity. This is a familiar dilemma that has already been addressed by critical theories. Replies in the tradition of Hegel and Marx, for instance, refer to the figures of immanent criticism or definite negation. They result in anchoring criticism in some way in the criticized and its covert normative structure. Other replies refer to fundamentals beyond the logic of the criticized object, to the utopian potential of sensibility, the original desire of wholeness and happiness, the "remembrance of nature within the subject."[18] Such replies remain aporetic to the degree to which they simultaneously maintain the "experience of metaphysi-

[10] S. FREUD, "Die Verneinung," in *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. XIV (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1948), 11–15. Cf. J. LACAN, "Zur 'Verneinung' bei Freud", in *Schriften III* (Olten: Walter 1980), 173–220; J. HYPPOLITE, "Gesprochener Kommentar über die 'Verneinung' von Freud", in *Schriften III* (Olten: Walter 1980), 191–200.

[11] FREUD, "Verneinung", 12.

[12] Ibid., 15. "Die Bejahung – als Ersatz der Vereinigung – gehört dem Eros an, die Verneinung – Nachfolge der Ausstoßung – dem Destruktionstrieb."

[13] K. HEINRICH, *tertium datur. Eine religionsphilosophische Einführung in die Logik* (Basel / Frankfurt: Stroemfeld / Roter Stern, 1981); PARMENIDES and JONA. *Vier Studien über das Verhältnis von Philosophie und Mythologie* (Basel / Frankfurt: Stroemfeld / Roter Stern, 1982).

[14] HEINRICH, *tertium datur*, 44.

[15] Drawing on Kierkegaard, Michael Theunissen has used the concept of negativism to characterize a main strand of post-metaphysical thinking. M. THEUNISSEN, "Das Selbst auf dem Grunde der Verzweiflung. Kierkegaards negativistische Methode," (Frankfurt: A. Hein, 1991); "Negativität bei Adorno," in Adorno-Konferenz 1983, ed. L. v. FRIEDEBURG and J. HABERMAS, (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1983), 41–65.

[16] T. W. ADORNO, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. ASHTON (London: Routledge, 1973), 17, 362.

[17] Ibid., 159.

[18] M. HORKHEIMER and T. W. ADORNO, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. E. JEPHCOTT (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 32.

cal negativity,"[19] i. e. the impossibility to confirm the course of the world as a senseful one in theory or in art.

The other problem lies in the difficulty of understanding and articulating the negative itself. It relates to a classical problem that has been framed in metaphysics, philosophy of history, and theodicy. The Parmenidean inconceivability of non-being is replaced by the incomprehensibility of what should not be, that is, of suffering and evil. The questions for the origin of evil and the justification of God given its manifestations in the world remain an unanswerable offence to rational thinking. It is not possible to present a sufficient reason for the negative, for non-being, and evil, when we proceed from a positive principle, as a rational explanation necessarily does. Be it as *malum physicum* or *malum morale*, as an experienced mischief or as something (morally) evil, real negativity has ever since posed a provocation to the claim for reason. It is echoed by Job's lamentation just as by Voltaire's outrage at the sight of the earthquake of Lisbon and by Adorno's remembrance of Auschwitz. According to Emmanuel Lévinas, innocent suffering represents the refusal of sense *per se*;[20] for Adorno, physical agony embodies the decisive rejection of any attempt of rationalisation.[21] But even prior to rational understanding, which always also means justifying – *comprendre c'est pardonner* – bringing the negative to consciousness and articulating it already encounters limits. They are exemplarily shown in the blockade of remembering past suffering. The difficulty or impossibility of remembrance was addressed particularly with respect to the terrors of the 20th century and the experiences of the Holocaust. The impossibility of remembering is a paradigm of the inability to say and to understand the negative.

The withdrawal of experienced negativity from remembrance is an everyday phenomenon, manifest in psychical repression. Indeed, the psychoanalytic key concept of the unconscious does not refer to some sort of psychical area which is inaccessible to consciousness. Rather, the unconscious is excluded from consciousness because of the negativity of its representations whose repeated experience is associated with pain (or anxiety, shame, disgust). Traumatic experiences are accompanied by the victims falling silent. Such inability to speak can even petrify over time and can be conveyed to following generations. In an extreme form, reports from concentration camps treat the internalization of this kind of non-understanding and non-articulating that can augment into non-experiencing: Primo Levi describes the mussulmen as individuals who

[19] T. W. ADORNO, "Mahler. Wiener Gedenkrede", in *Quasi una fantasia. Musikalische Schriften II, Gesammelte Schriften vol. 16* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), 328.

[20] E. LÉVINAS, "La souffrance inutile", in *Entre nous. Essais sur le penser-à-l'autre* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 103.

[21] ADORNO, *Negative Dialectics*, 365.

have lost even their ability to feel pain and despair, let alone their ability to narrate and say 'no'. Claude Lanzmann does not only show the non-presentability of most extreme suffering to be the actual limit of narrating and picturing, but he has also turned this impossibility into a deprivation, a prohibition of pictures (which according to him is violated in films such as *Schindler's List* or *Holocaust*).[22] Absolute terror and death can neither be obtained nor communicated in the medium of normal language and familiar pictures. The radical unintelligibility of evil corresponds to its equally strict non-presentability, non-communicability, and non-memorability.

The limit understanding confronts here is not an external one, but one that calls understanding into question at its inmost, *as* understanding itself. And yet the impossibility of speaking and understanding does not simply mean their dismissal. Rather, it is accompanied by the desire and the radicalized demand for expression and understanding. Negativity does not only pose a limit to understanding, but a challenge.

3. The Hermeneutic Challenge

3.1. Regaining Speech

The case of remembering suffering exemplarily illustrates both the difficulty as well as the requirement and possibility of understanding. Emphatically, Walter Benjamin demands commemorating suffering. He does not only mean it as an ethical call in favour of the victims of history who should be reimbursed their right and dignity by virtue of that "weak messianic power" that was "handed down" to later-born generations and "to which the past has a claim."[23] At the same time the demand aims at conceptually revising the conception of history. It requires a different understanding of history that does not only interpret it as recounting what was actually realised, but also acknowledges the validity of repressed and unrealised possibilities.

Such a revision requires an understanding access to suffering and failure and, first and foremost, must surmount the speechlessness and repression inherent in painful experience. Such a memory must regain speech for suffering, 'lending a voice to it', to speak with Adorno. Historical research, literary texts, and works of art have attempted this regaining in different modalities. As an example we may refer to Paul Celan's poetry, which replies to Adorno's dictum that it was not possible to write a poem after Auschwitz, or to the works

[22] C. LANZMANN, *La Tombe du divin plongeur* (Paris: Gallimard, 2012), 536.

[23] W. BENJAMIN, "Über den Begriff der Geschichte," in *Gesammelte Schriften* vol. 1.2 (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp 1974), 694.

of Claude Lanzmann and Giorgio Agamben.[24] They all are concerned with an indirect perception and articulation, with diverted expression and comprehension. Adorno himself, who finds the historical experience of evil having exacerbated the classical problem of theodicy and having "paralyzed" our "metaphysical faculty",[25] refers to other resources opposing that paralysis, such as childhood memory as a memory of the oldest, though only promised, not realised, happiness. This memory does not only recur to reconciliation, but also presents an indirect way to suspend the silence and to a mediated access to negativity.

3.2. Treating the Negative

But dealing with negativity is not restricted to conceptual and theoretical cognition and articulation. Our relating to it is basically of practical kind, shaped by a practical attitude that has different manifestations. Schematically, we can distinguish three attitudes: we can repress the negative, we can accept it, or we can integrate it into a larger whole.

The negative which burdens, harms and frightens us, is primarily something we struggle against: it is something that we criticize, disapprove, flee, and push away from us. In the same way as we relate to the good by seeking and desiring it, we relate to the evil by refusing it, by aversion. Depending on the situation, we practise it as critical examination, flight and repression or irreconcilable resistance. In every case, the negative remains something different, external, and non-assimilable.

The second attitude is concerned with enduring the negative, with accepting it as negative, with acknowledging it as a limit of understanding and of one's own being. It is part of one's own finiteness, of impotence and vulnerability as well as of the world's contingency and uncontrollability which we have to accept and somehow have to cope with. Such an attitude can result from fatalism as well as from inner freedom or equanimity, it can involve enduring utmost pain and fragmentation, as Hegel declared. In every case, negativity is taken seriously as an insurmountable part of the human condition and integrated into one's understanding of human existence.

The third option consists of integrating the negative into a larger, affirmative whole, thus rehabilitating it in some sense and justifying it in its own productivity as a means to a higher purpose, as transitional or as a turning point of an overreaching process. This option is manifest in metaphysical, historical, and biographical narrative patterns of integrating the negative. They

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[24] Cf. G. AGAMBEN, Was von Auschwitz bleibt. Das Archiv und der Zeuge. Homo sacer III (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2003).

[25] ADORNO, Negative Dialectics, 362.

provoke the critical question as to the degree to which the negative here is actually taken seriously and worked through, and instead of being concealed and repressed. Demanding a non-reductive way of treating the negative asks for accommodating it *as* something unreconciled in one's understanding of the world and of oneself and thus "for relating meaningfully to what is meaningless,"[26] as Ingolf Dalferth puts it.

3.3. The Negative as Hindrance, Requirement, and Power of Understanding

The relation between the difficulty and the requirement of understanding must be supplemented with a third *relatum*. The negative is not only a hindrance and requirement, but also a foundation and incitement of understanding. Here, too, the remembrance of suffering is paradigmatic. The unsettled past does not only withdraw from memory, it is also a resource of remembering and of desiring for remembrance. Similarly, undergone negativity is not only something hampering understanding, but equally something demanding and enabling it. Dialectic philosophy as well as psychoanalysis have acknowledged the 'labour of the negative', as Hegel called it, as a productive force of life.[27] It is identical with what averts as much as it supports and fosters life; the figure of *trosas iasetai*, which defines the labour of the concept, as Adorno says, characterises life as such. That negativity enters human life in these manifold ways constitutes its significance and power. Its hermeneutic challenge – both as challenge to hermeneutics and to life – lies in the fact that human existence proceeds from the negative in understanding itself. With respect to their way of living and their relating to the world, human beings are oriented towards sense and understanding, and are still apt to fail in both respects. Life and understanding are unsecured, always endangered by missing themselves. Existential philosophy has located this endangerment in the ontology of human existence, as a tendency to fall (Heidegger).[28] Human beings cannot free themselves from this tendency, which is both existential and hermeneutic. The negative in particular manifests the centrality of understanding for being oneself. That the latter genuinely takes place in form of self-understanding is confirmed *ex negativo* in the phenomenon of inauthenticity or untruthfulness of existence. Jean-Paul Sartre formulates its ontological precondition in his repeated, paradoxical principle that human beings are beings who are what they are not, and are not what they are.[29]

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[26] I. U. DALFERTH, Leiden und Böses. Vom schwierigen Umgang mit Widersinnigem (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2006), 162.

[27] G. W. F. HEGEL, Phenomenology of Spirit, trans. A. V. MILLER (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977); A. GREEN, Le Travail du négatif (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2011), 16.

[28] Cf. M. HEIDEGGER, Phänomenologische Interpretationen ausgewählter Abhandlungen des Aristoteles zur Ontologie und Logik, Gesamtausgabe Vol. 62 (Frankfurt a. M.: Klostermann, 2005), 356.

[29] J.-P. SARTRE, L'être et le néant (Paris: Gallimard, 1943), 97.

It is important not to focus exclusively on the side of failure. The contradictory constitution of being manifests a polarity in which there is not one side without the other. In its own failure, existence remains directed at succeeding, in misunderstanding at understanding. This tension needs to be maintained by understanding, even if it originates from the negative. The challenge is to avoid giving in to indifference and cynicism even in experiencing failure, not to abandon the will to understand. Understanding remains an open-ended, hazardous endeavour in which even the threat of failure is experienced as an element of the desire for sense and as a confirmation of the genuine will to understand.

At the Limits of Understanding

A Response to Emil Anghern's "Negative Hermeneutics"

Thomas Jared Farmer

1. Introduction

In *Wissenschaft der Logik* (1816), Hegel argues that we naturally seek to evaluate and determine the qualities of the "positive" and the "negative" under their own aspect. Nevertheless, upon reflection, we find that we are immediately thwarted in this endeavor by the realization that such qualities are of themselves irrevocably relational. Inasmuch as a concept naturally reflects its 'Other' in itself as necessary obverse, its positivity can be said to be laden with its own negation. Within the category of contingent being, therefore, there is no sense of bare positedness. Instead, following the so-called Principle of Excluded Middle (*Principium tertii exclusi*), concepts contain within themselves their logical opposite.[1]

Indeed, Gadamer intimated the idea that our irreparable conditionality and historical-cultural situatedness simultaneously serves as both a limit and a gateway to deeper understanding. He suggests, as it were, that any present affirmation (whether historical or linguistic) finds its ultimate grounding and delimitation in a corresponding negation.[2] With this context in mind, Emil Angehrn's essay, *Negative Hermeneutics*, identifies various ways in which the process of interpretation is necessarily entangled with that which itself resists understanding. Furthermore, it seeks not merely to map meaning's terminus, but rather to suggest mechanisms for coping with the power of the negative in its various modalities.

With that said, it should be noted that Angehrn's paper largely treats 'Negativity' as an umbrella term describing a nexus of interrelated ideas. These ideas are diverse and at least part of Angehrn's purpose is to point out that they cannot be spoken of univocally or treated according to the same measure. One

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[1] G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, trans. W. H. Johnston and L. G. Struthers (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1929).

[2] H. G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004). See further discussion in G. Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

unavoidable consequence of this, however, is that Angehrn's paper (and like-wise my response) may appear at times disjointed. Nevertheless, in this discussion, I will focus on what I take to be the most salient aspects of his argument and attempt to assess some of the effects of its application.

2. The Modalities of Human Limitation

Throughout the first section of his essay, Angehrn focuses on the limits of human understanding. In particular, he addresses four distinct forms of non-understanding which illustrate the Sisyphean character of hermeneutics – inasmuch as it undertakes a process which, by its very nature, resists completion. First, Angehrn discusses the senseless, or that which can be said to lie beyond the limit of our present knowledge or physio-cognitive capacities. The limitation in this respect points to an absence, an emptiness, or negativity within ourselves that we seek to fill with understanding.

Second, he refers to 'covert sense,' which he describes as the remote and the fragmentary, or that which comes to us mediated through the unfamiliar. For example, the symbolic-worlds of a past inaccessible to a contemporary audience, the customs and languages of cultures not our own, the experiences of subjects to which we have no relevant point of entrée. Each of these represent, in their own ways, something like Lessing's "ugly broad ditch" (*der garstige breite Graben*).[3] In the end, however, familiarity (no matter how acute) is ultimately insufficient to fully recontextualize the observer.

Another danger in 'covert sense,' is the relative position and privilege of the observer. This aspect cannot be discounted in relation to the act of interpretation. "Absorbing the alienness" or "dissolving the opaqueness" of the Other cannot come about by means of mere reduction. Indeed, there are dimensions of power-relation in the process of interpretation which are all too frequently unrecognized or ignored. Thus, as we seek to overcome the limitations of sensibility (or, the negativity of our understanding) when confronted by that-which-we experience-as-Other, we must resist the temptation towards a cultural imperialism which manifests itself in attitudes where binary opposition leads to the notion of unequal values.

This recognition emerges from the fact that texts are typically unable to properly narrate or validate the experiences of all audiences. For example, if the marginalized within a given society wish to preserve a text written from a dominant perspective as a conversation partner, this text must of necessity be approached adversarially or otherwise recontextualized in order to preserve its

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[3] G. E. LESSING, *Lessing's Theological Writings*, ed. H. CHADWICK (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1956).

meaning-ladenness for that community. Ultimately, for Angehrn, such possibilities hinge upon "the case at issue and one's own positioning" with respect to it. Thus, a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' (i. e. one's ability to read a text against itself) would seem to reside most appropriately within the community, or on behalf of the community, of readers disenfranchised by the text's narrative or its dominant interpretation. Such concerns can be captured by simply asking of the interpreter, "Whose interests are being served by your interpretation?"

Third, Angehrn discusses the notion of 'false sense,' which relates to the problem of our inability to not only fail to properly account for the Other, but also to distort or otherwise misunderstand our own intentions and motives. The negative in this way is represented by our inability to be aware of ourselves fully or to overcome our own opacity. He points to the fruitfulness of such 'false sense' in psychoanalysis' mining of the unconscious. Indeed, something similar is at work in the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, wherein Freud discusses the 'Forgetting of Intentions' as a function of the avoidance of unpleasure.[4] Interpreting one's hidden motives then finds a point of reference in such disruption or displacement of memory.

Fourth, Angehrn discusses manifest 'Nonsense,' that which resists understanding by way of deviation from the recognized parameters of cohesive thought. Lack of understanding then results necessarily from a simple lack of entailment born of the disjunction between various premises and their stated conclusions. It should be further noted that such manifest nonsense becomes dangerous when utilized as a strategy for the mendacious rhetorician. Such can be observed in the recent proliferation of so-called 'alternative facts' and the dissemination of Frankfurt-esque 'bullshit' emerging from centers of power. Such weaponized incoherence stands in as a negation because *it does not seek to be understood*, but rather is intended to obfuscate. In this context, nonsense can be seen as not simply a violation of accepted rules, but more perniciously, as an attempt to upend the rules themselves.

3. Confronting the Negative

In the second half of his paper, Angehrn discusses the negative *qua* negative. Here, he evaluates two modes of our awareness of the negative. The first, he characterizes as 'theoretical negation,' the dimensions of which inform our understanding of ontology. The second, he describes as 'practical negation,' that which describes a state of affairs which should not be – that is, a seemingly irreparable breach which defies attempts at reconciliation and integration.

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[4] S. FREUD, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, ed. and trans. J. STRACHY (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1989), 176–201.

3.1. The Dimensions of Theoretical Negation

He begins the discussion of theoretical negation with reference to the tradition following Parmenides that the categories of being are inherently rational or sayable, whereas non-being constitutes the unsayable, the irrational, or ultimately the nonexistent. This is captured in the phrase, *ens et verum convertuntur* ("Being and Truth are interchangeable"). This being the case, linguistics and metaphysics are related to the extent to which they are both manifestations of rational being. Indeed, he references Tugendhat who claimed that in order to understand the question of 'Being' in Heidegger, one needed to frame the discussion within the concrete and realizable structure of language-analytic philosophy.[5] In this way, negativity can be seen to have a rational basis as the obverse of positive statements, or as that which forms the parameters for identification and meaning. This is distilled in the phrase Angehrn references, which Hegel attributes to Spinoza, *Omnis determinatio est negatio* ("Every determination is a negation").[6]

But the rational structure of the negative and its function for ontology is not restricted to its linguistic instantiations and therefore requires further clarification. In this way, Plato also points out that the ground of every existent thing is the potentiality of its actualization as a plurality of manifestations of being and also an infinity of non-being.[7] Something similar can be seen, *mutatis mutandis*, in the operation of the negative within Aquinas. For Aquinas, there is a basic distinction between God as the necessary cause of all being[8] and the ontological status of everything determined as being not-God, namely contingent being (or, those things whose quiddity and subsistence are not coextensive and therefore owe their being to participation with the transcendent source of all being).[9]

Furthermore, within contingent being itself, one can mark a distinction between pure negation (that which cannot be – or, that which is the truly unsayable), on the one hand, and distinct forms of non-being characterizable as unrealized potentiality (that is, the ground of actualization), on the other. A being's quiddity (οὐσία; *essentia*; *substantia*), what Paul Tillich refers to as the definite power of being, is that which determines the specific form a being takes and thereby makes it what it is (τὸ τί ἐστι). This process of passing into and out of being is the movement of change, emergence, or becoming (γίνομαι). In this process of coming into and out of being, there is a dynamic quality which acts as the determining power (δύναμις, *potentia*) in the division of *what*

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[5] E. Tugendhat, *Traditional and Analytic Philosophy: Lectures on the Philosophy of Language*, trans. P. A. Gorner (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), x.

[6] Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, § 203.

[7] See Plato, *Sophist*, 256d.

[8] *Ipsum esse per se Subsistens*, "Being itself subsisting through itself."

[9] R. te Velde, *Aquinas on God: The 'Divine Science' of the Summa Theologiae* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), 131.

is from *what it is not*. The source of these dynamics relates to what Tillich calls, "me-ontic nonbeing," or the potentiality of being. This is derived from the Greek μὴ ὄν, or determinate non-being which exists as its own way of being.[10] This concept he contrasts with "pure nonbeing" (or, οὐκ ὄν, which refers to that which is beyond possibility).[11]

3.2. The Dimensions of Practical Negation

In utilizing a quote from Klaus Heinrich, Angehrn highlights the traditional metaphysical concern regarding dissolving the limitations of being as a symptom of the primitive anxiety over the power of non-being and our knowledge of our own ephemerality. Tillich likewise speaks of the various ways in which our self-affirmation as human beings is confronted by the power of ontic negation. Of the three forms of anxiety he elucidates in his book, *The Courage to Be*, the anxiety over fate and death is perhaps the most basic insofar as the fear is perceived to be both universal and inescapable.[12] In an existential manner, everyone is aware of the complete loss of self associated with death. With respect to fate, however, Tillich rejects the conventional association of fate with the concept of causal determinism. He asserts that, fate is not *necessity*, though it involves constraint.

Likewise, he maintains that, "contingent does not [simply] mean causally undetermined but it means that the determining causes of our existence have no ultimate necessity. They are given, and they cannot be logically derived. Contingently we are put into the whole web of causal relations. Contingently we are determined by them in every moment and thrown out by them in the last moment."[13] Nevertheless, that does not mean that we lack choice. Anxiety concerning fate derives rather from our awareness of this lacking ultimate necessity in terms of the very structure of our being. This existential anxiety can ultimately lead to despair.[14] This is because despair presents us with a horizon which we cannot seem to cross.

For Tillich, courage is the necessary and universal affirmation of one's own being. In this sense, we can see the ontological dimension of the concept.

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[10] See Plato, *Sophist* 256; and M. Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*, trans. R. D. Metcalf and M. B. Tanzer (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 214–217.

[11] Among the ancient Greeks prime matter (ὕλη), the inert and amorphous raw material of beings, was an ultimate principle. The principle described that element of the world which resisted the determinate shape of the forms, but which nevertheless shared in the universal quality of being.

[12] This connection can be seen in ancient discussions of the μοῖρα θανάτοιο, or the fixity or necessity of death.

[13] P. Tillich, *The Courage to Be*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 44.

[14] Etymologically speaking, despair (*dēspērāre*) means "to be removed" or "to be away from" (*dē*) "hope" (*spērāre*).

The 'courage to be' is conceived of as an act which affirms one's fundamental being regardless of those elements of our existence which militate against such an affirmation (i. e. nonbeing). Within the very concept of being, its negation (nonbeing) is eternally present. The existential dimension of awareness arises when one becomes aware that this negation (nonbeing) is a part of one's own being. This anxiety is the experience of finitude as one's own finitude. The courage which is able to take anxiety into itself cannot be rooted in human beings or in the world. If it is to overcome anxiety, it must overcome finitude. Courage, according to Tillich, therefore must rely upon the divine *qua* transcendent power of being in its confrontation with the negation of nonbeing in order to overcome such existential anxiety.

Perhaps most importantly among the various topics Angehrn explores surrounding the topic of negation and its impact on human understanding is his discussion of the incomprehensibility of evil and undue suffering. This he refers to as a form of "practical negation," but which the tradition following Kant has called 'radical evil,'[15] or which Paul Draper has referred to as 'gratuitous evil.'[16] Unlike theoretical negation which forms the necessary rational basis for actualization, practical negation in this respect indicates a state of affairs whose actualization itself seems an affront to reason. The challenge to understanding presented by events like the Shoah, the Middle Passage, or the systematic extermination of indigenous peoples is not one of conceptual limit, but of unassimilable rupture. No amount of acquired knowledge concerning material causes, psychological motivations, or historical circumstance bring us any closer to reconciliation within the frame of rational understanding. In many respects, to *understand*, to submit such events as candidates for rationalization, itself appears an affront to moral sensibility. Instead, we want to speak with the voice of Ivan, from Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*, where he proclaims:

[I]f the sufferings of children go to swell the sum of sufferings which was necessary to pay for truth, then I protest that the truth is not worth such a price … I don't want harmony. From love for humanity I don't want it. I would rather be left with the unavenged suffering. I would rather remain with my unavenged suffering and unsatisfied indignation, even if I were wrong. Besides, too high a price is asked for harmony; it's beyond our means to pay so much to enter on it. [I want no part of it.] And so, I hasten to give back my entrance ticket [to Heaven], and if I am an honest man I am bound to give it back as soon as possible. And that I am doing. It's not God that I don't accept, Alyosha, only I most respectfully return him the ticket."[17]

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[15] See I. KANT, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. A. W. WOOD and G. DI GIOVANNI (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[16] See P. DRAPER, "Pain and Pleasure: An Evidential Problem for Theists," *Noûs* 23, no. 3 (1989), 331–350.

[17] F. DOSTOEVSKY, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. R. PEVEAR and L. VOLOKHONSKY (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), 236–246.

In terms of the religious response to such suffering, thinkers such as Heschel, Moltmann, Gutiérrez, as well as the wider tradition of Liberation Theology, have met human suffering, less with rationalization than with witness and protest. As Heschel has said:

I pray because I refuse to despair … The irreconcilable opposites which agonize human existence are the outcry, the prayer. Every one of us is a cantor; every one of us is called to intone a song, to put into prayer the anguish of all … We pray because the disproportion of human misery and human compassion is so enormous. We pray because our grasp of the depth of suffering is comparable to the scope of perception of a butterfly flying over the Grand Canyon. We pray because of the experience of the dreadful incompatibility of how we live and what we sense … Dark is the world to me, for all its cities and stars. If not for my faith that God in His silence still listens to a cry, who could stand such agony?[18]

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Dr. Angehrn's paper presents an insightful overview of the various dimensions of negativity as they impact the topic of understanding broadly and the discipline of hermeneutics specifically. As already mentioned, the paper itself covers a considerable amount of terrain in a relatively short space, which is helpful insofar as it provides a taxonomy of what he takes to be the various dimensions of the topic. Nevertheless, owing perhaps to the limited length of the paper and the complexity of the topic, his discussion of these features only rarely rises above a cursory treatment.

He does make it clear, however, that one cannot speak of the concept of negativity in any transpicuous way. Instead, he intimates that at every level of meaning-making humans are confronted by negation. Nevertheless, he also maintains that this confrontation with the negative can be productive inasmuch as it grounds the parameters of linguistic expression, ontological delimitation, and the very conditionality of experience as beings in the world. Our own individual confrontation with the negative will ultimately terminate in the event of our deaths. Yet, as we persist we need to take courage in the face of non-being. Likewise, we should see limitation as a provocation to understanding and refuse to become feckless in the face of unknowing. In this way, hermeneutics as a means of reducing the limitations of our understanding by examining the negative dimensions of reality functions as an extension of the self-affirmation of our being.

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[18] A. J. HESCHEL, "On Prayer," in *Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity: Essays*, ed. S. HESCHEL (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), 257–267.