

The Real Beyond Language: A Response to David R. Brockman

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I UNDERSTAND DAVID R. BROCKMAN'S PAPER TO BE A CRITIQUE OF THE PRETENSION to universality of David Tracy's epistemology in the mode of a critique of the limits of inter-religious dialogue. Brockman uncovers a tension between, on the one hand, a Christian theology grounded on the communicative power of language, and, on the other, the Buddhist idea of an Ultimate Reality grounded on a Real beyond language. He refers to this tension as "the Mahâyâna challenge." I agree with the overall trajectory of Brockman's paper. And I think that the concerns he raises are valid. However, I believe that the strength of his critique is weakened by the fact that he, like Tracy, fails to consistently differentiate between "language" and "hermeneutics." But these are two different things.

"Language" refers to a horizon and hermeneutics refers to a particular position within this horizon. "Hermeneutics" is a science – an art if you prefer – rooted in Giambattista Vico's equivalence between the *verum* and the *factum*.¹ Inaugurated by Friedrich Schleiermacher's "empathetic" recreation.² Systematized by Wilhelm Dilthey's *Geisteswissenschaften*.³ And

¹ Vico's principle was intended to replace the classical equivalence between the *verum* and the *esse*. It claims that we know the truth of things we make better than we know the truth of created things. That is, in other words, that the knowledge of things we make is the basis of all our knowledge, the basis, for example, of the knowledge of created things. Or again, that nature is always known in and through history. Giambattista Vico, *L'Antique Sagesse de l'Italie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), 71-82.

² Drawing on the German Romantic tradition, against Kant's cognitive reductionism, Schleiermacher argues that knowledge is an interpretative task made possible through "empathetic" recreation, that process by which the interpreter transposes him- or herself into the world from which the text derives its mean-

radicalized by Martin Heidegger's analytics of *Dasein*.⁴ The horizon of language refers to a particular configuration of the field of thought, an "epistemic" space, a "paradigm" that sets the rules for knowing, and provides the conditions that make knowledge possible.⁵ That what today is normally referred to as "hermeneutics" should, from the point of view of intellectual history, be more accurately called the "linguistic-turn in hermeneutics" makes the distinction that exists between the two nomenclatures clear.

The failure to properly differentiate between "language" and "hermeneutics" is the fundamental problem of Tracy's epistemology. It is the epistemological symptom of the limits of inter-religious dialogue: Indeed, the pretension to universality of Tracy's epistemology most radically manifests itself as the reduction of the horizon of language to the hermeneutic conception of language. This failure to differentiate between "language" and "hermeneutics," reappears in Brockman's critique as an ambiguity: It is not clear whether Brockman's critique is intended to be a critique of the fact that Tracy situates himself within the horizon of language, or rather a critique of that particular conception of language Tracy labors under, namely, the hermeneutic conception of language. For my response I would like to suggest that the ambiguity of Brockman's critique can be overcome by thinking of "the

ing. Thus, for Schleiermacher, the universality of concepts are not grounded on transcendental categories, but rather on the transcendental of empathetic recreation. Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Hermeneutics* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press for the American Academy of Religion, 1977).

³ Dilthey systematizes Schleiermacher's critique of the cognitive reductionism of transcendental philosophy in light of the tension between the nomological and hermeneutical sciences (*Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften*). Epistemology, Dilthey argued, should not be grounded in cognition, but rather in the being-there-for-me of the totality of lived-experience. In this way he opens up the possibility of understanding the problem of hermeneutics as the most primordial of all problems of knowledge. Indeed, for Dilthey, nomological explanations are ultimately always grounded on hermeneutical interpretations. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Introduction to the Human Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁴ It is Heidegger's shift from the transcendental of consciousness to the transcendental of time which makes this radicalization possible. The *locus classicus* of this move is the fifth chapter of the second part of *Being and Time* where Heidegger argues that the purpose of the analysis of the historicity of

Mahâyâna challenge” not as a critique of the linguistic-turn, but specifically as a critique of the hermeneutic conception of language, that is language as presence, disclosure, and understanding, or – to use Martin Heidegger’s well-known metaphor – the idea of language as “the house of being.”⁶

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How are we to understand Tracy’s claim “all understanding is linguistic through and through”? Brockman’s paper is a struggle with this question. Yet Brockman does not address what seems to be the fundamental impediment to properly understanding this claim: namely, that Tracy fails to consistently differentiate between “language” and “hermeneutics.” Tracy vacillates between two contradictory positions: On the one hand, he differentiates between the “linguistic-turn” and “hermeneutics” understood as one among a plurality of different positions within the linguistic-turn. But, on the other hand, Tracy understands the plurality of these positions from within the limits of the hermeneutic tradition. This tension manifests itself most acutely in the third chapter of *Plurality and Ambiguity* “Radical Plurality: The Question of Language.”⁷

Tracy begins this third chapter by acknowledging the “radical plurality” of the “linguistic-turn”: “There are many theories that attempt to explain the uneasy relationships among language, knowledge, and reality. For the moment, let us simply call this the ‘linguistic turn.’ That turn has become an uncannily interruptive exploration of the radical plurality of language, knowledge, and reality alike.”⁸ Yet, two paragraphs down he slips into the hermeneutic conception of language: “As postmodern science emerged...it became clear that science was...a hermeneutic enterprise.”⁹ And again a few lines further: “The alternative to understanding science as a hermeneutic enterprise is to understand it as the one enterprise freed from the complications of interpretation.”¹⁰ But that Tracy situates himself within the limits of the hermeneutic conception of language is most evident from the

Dasein is not to show that *Dasein* is temporal because s/he exists in history, but rather, inversely, its purpose is to show that *Dasein* exists historically because, from the bottom of his or her being, *Dasein* is temporal. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 424-455.

⁵ Michel Foucault, *L’Archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969) and Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Third Edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996).

⁶ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in *Basic Writings* (New York:

claim: “We understand in and through language.”¹¹ This claim, which is almost identical to the one Brockman takes issue with, epitomizes what we shall see is the hermeneutic conception of language as what discloses and thus makes being present to the understanding. Indeed, it is from the perspective of the hermeneutic conception of language that, in the remainder of this third chapter, Tracy engages in a “conversation” with all those other approaches to language that, according to him, have constituted the “linguistic-turn” – e.g., the linguistic (Ferdinand de Saussure), structuralist (Claude Lévi-Strauss), post-structuralist (Jacques Derrida), and discursive (Michel Foucault) conceptions of language.¹²

This obfuscation between “hermeneutics” and “language” is not a subtle terminological issue that can be overcome by a nominalistic point of view, nor is it an arbitrary genealogical question that can be relegated to the history of ideas. This obfuscation is rather the epistemological symptom of the limits of Tracy’s conceptions of “plurality,” “otherness” – indeed, it is the epistemological symptom of the limits of Tracy’s idea of “inter-religious” dialogue. For Tracy posits a “plurality” but excludes the possibility of a radical incompatibility among this plurality. Tracy posits “otherness,” but excludes the possibility of a radical otherness that undermines “inter-religious dialogue.” It is the hermeneutic conception of language, and specifically the assumptions that all differences can be liquidated by a “meta-language” and that all particulars are driven by a “communicative interest” in reaching understanding, that grounds and legitimates this perspective. The claim “all understanding is linguistic through and through” is not just an epistemological fact for Tracy that it does not simply refer to the conditions of doing theology within the horizon of language. It in addition carries the normative weight of the hermeneutic tradition.

Indeed, the tension between Tracy’s epistemology and Mahâyâna Buddhism does not stem from the fact that Tracy situates himself within the linguistic-turn. The tension uncovered by Brockman stems rather from the fact that Tracy labors under the hermeneutic conception of language: The claim, “all understanding is linguistic through and through” is a problem because it is developed from the hermeneutic point of view. It is the hermeneutic conception of language that is incompatible with the Buddhist idea

HarperCollins, 1977), 213.

⁷ David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 47-65.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

of an extra-linguistic reality. The fact that Tracy situates himself within the linguistic-turn simply refers to the latest moment of the movement of modern theology. It simply means that Tracy negotiates the problem of finitude within the horizon of language.

The problem of finitude is what has driven modern theology. This is the problem of a finitude that has annihilated the analogy of being, a finitude that, no longer situated inside the infinite, must now think the infinite as limit. The problem of finitude emerges with the Kantian inversion, with the so-called “Copernican Revolution in Metaphysics.”¹³ After Kant theology is forced to come to terms with the conditions of critique, with the conditions of knowledge as crisis.¹⁴ The trajectory of modern theology can be understood as different ways of negotiating the problem of finitude.¹⁵ Thus, to say that Tracy negotiates the problem of finitude in terms of the horizon of language is to situate him in a particular moment of the movement of modern theology.

Tracy does not negotiate the problem of finitude, like Friedrich Schleiermacher and Joseph Maréchal, within the Kantian horizon of consciousness, the horizon of the relative synthetic activity of the knowing subject. That is, he does not formulate the problem of finitude as the Neo-Kantian problem of the historical interpretation of the essence of Christianity or as the Neo-Scholastic problem of the speculative affirmation of the noumenal object.¹⁶ Nor does Tracy negotiate the problem of finitude, like Karl Rahner and Paul Tillich, within the Heideggerian horizon of time, within the horizon of the transcendental imagination’s aperture to the being of being as the totality of *Dasein*. That is, he does not formulate the problem of finitude as the philosophico-anthropological problem of the a priori aperture of the human spirit-consciousness to the luminosity of being nor

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 48.

¹¹ Ibid., 49.

¹² Ibid., 54-65.

¹³ Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1966), 327-328.

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

¹⁵ Manuel J. Mejido, “Reflections on a Theological Crisis,” *Social Compass* (Forthcoming, 2004).

as the culturo-historical problem of what undergirds and gives ultimate meaning to the situation.¹⁷ Neither does Tracy negotiate the problem of finitude, like Jürgen Moltmann and J.B Metz, within the Hegelian horizon of the sublation of becoming, within the horizon of the perpetual movement of coming-to-be and ceasing-to-be. That is, he does not formulate the problem of finitude as the problem of the dialectical unfolding of the eschatological in and through society and history.¹⁸ No, Tracy does not negotiate the problem of finitude within the horizon of consciousness, *Dasein*, or becoming. Rather he, like, for example, Gordon Kaufman,¹⁹ negotiates the problem of finitude within the horizon of language. Finitude for Tracy means that, from an epistemological point of view, whether we like or not, we are all dependent on language, we are all constituted in and through language. Indeed, finitude for Tracy means that “all understanding is linguistic through and through.”

This horizon of language, moreover, always already implies for Tracy two other epistemological elements: namely, a plurality of particulars and alterity. The first in the sense that it is always a plurality of particular beings that negotiate language. And the second in the sense that the plurality of particular beings discover their finitude by coming- to- terms with one another as Other.²⁰ Language, plurality of particulars, and alterity, these are the basic epistemological coordinates of post-modernity. By situating himself in the horizon of language, Tracy is also situating himself in the postmodern horizon. Or we could simply say that Tracy situates himself in the postmodern horizon of language.²¹

The postmodern horizon of language is the latest way of framing the problem of finitude, it is the latest movement of the problem of knowledge. A modern theology that is worthy of its name is a theology that has come to terms with the conditions of critique. And today a theology that has come to terms with the conditions of critique is a theology that has situated itself within the postmodern horizon of language. Indeed, the fact that Tracy situ-

¹⁶ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Le statut de la théologie* (Paris: CERF, 1994). Joseph Maréchal, *Le point de départ de la métaphysique*, Cahier V, Le thomisme devant la philosophie critique (Louvain: Museum Lessianum, 1926).

¹⁷ Karl Rahner, *Hearer of the Word* (New York: Continuum, 1994). Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology I & II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63).

¹⁸ J.B. Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979). Jürgen

ates himself within the linguistic-turn is not a problem. Again, the tension uncovered by Brockman emerges rather from the fact that Tracy reduces the linguistic-turn to the hermeneutic conception of language: The claim, “all understanding is linguistic through and through” is a problem because it is developed from the hermeneutic point of view. But why this incompatibility between the hermeneutic understanding of language and the Buddhist idea of an extra-linguistic reality?

The reason for this incompatibility stems from the fact that Post-Romantic hermeneutics grants language onto-theological status. For post-Romantic hermeneutics the *logos* is no longer mediated by the Scholastic analogy of being, the Kantian transcendental consciousness, the Hegelian Absolute Spirit, or the early Heidegger’s analytics of *Dasein*. It is rather mediated by language. Hermeneutics still has faith in the universality of the Western *logos*: It is language that discloses the *logos* and makes it present. Indeed, the universality of the *logos* manifests itself in the hermeneutic tradition through the presupposition that everything can be linguistified, the presupposition that in the end language will set things right – a presupposition that is valid only if we accept the onto-theological claim that in the beginning was a meta-language, and that in the beginning this meta-language spoke, constituting the being of all beings.²²

With his delineation of his “phenomenological method” at the outset of *Being and Time*,²³ Heidegger had already laid the ground for his later turn

Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).

¹⁹ Gordon D. Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

²⁰ Emmanuel Lévinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité* (Paris: Brodard et Taupin, 2001), 59-80.

²¹ See, for example, Tracy, *Dialogue With the Other* (Louvain: Peeters Press, 1990).

²² Here it is evident the affinity (or homology?) that exists between this onto-theological conception of language and the opening verse of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (1:1).”

²³ This definition needs to be understood as part of Heidegger’s critique of the Neo-Kantian idea of the synthetic activity of the knowing subject which, for example, Ernst Cassirer would defend at Davos in 1929. Against the Neo-Kantians, Heidegger calls for a return to the Pre-Socratic passive openness to *theoria*. From here he defines “phenomenology” as “to let that which shows

to language: "Language is the house of being... [I]n thinking being comes to language."²⁴ But it was Gadamer who, in Part Three of *Truth and Method*, "The Ontological Shift of Hermeneutics Guided by Language," secured the onto-theological status for language with the claims: "Language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs" and "[t]he linguisticity of understanding is the concretion of historically effected consciousness."²⁵ It is precisely this onto-theological idea of language as what discloses and thus makes present being to the understanding that is incompatible with the Mahâyâna Buddhist idea of an Ultimate Reality that exists outside language. While in the West the hermeneutic conception of language may have the positive role of uncovering being, it has in the East the negative role of covering-up Ultimate Reality. Indeed, contrary to the Post-Romantic hermeneutic tradition, it could be said that for Mahâyâna Buddhism not language but rather its absence, *silence*, "is the universal medium in which understanding occurs."

This incompatibility that exists between Post-Romantic hermeneutics and Mahâyâna Buddhism has its radical explanation in the fact that the onto-theological conception of language represents a retreat from that horizon that provided the conditions of possibility for a dialogue between

itself be seen from itself in the very way in which it shows itself from itself." *Being and Time*, 49-63. The failure "to let that which shows itself be seen from itself..." is precisely what generates the eclipse of "the question of being," the reduction of the ontological to the ontic. See, for example, Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology," in *Basic Writings*, 307-341.

²⁴ Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism" in *Basic Writings*, 217. For the mature Heidegger *Dasein's* openness toward the being of being (i.e., ontological) becomes *Dasein's* openness vis-à-vis language as what mediates the being of being. Indeed, the problem of the reduction of the ontic to the ontological becomes the problem of the manipulation (i.e., objectification) of language, that is the reduction of language to technical language, to the language of technique. Thus, for example, in "Building, Dwelling, Thinking," Heidegger states: "Man acts as though *he* were the shaper and master of language. While in fact *language* remains the master of man." *Ibid.*, 348. And, in a less well-known essay on theology and language, Heidegger poses the question: "Is the human being that being that posses language? Or is it rather language that possess the human being...?" "Quelques indications sur les points de vue principaux du Colloque théologique consacré au 'Problème d'une pensée et d'un langage non objectivants dans la Théologie d'aujourd'hui,'" in *Débat sur le Kantisme et la Philosophie* (Paris:

Western philosophy and Buddhist thought, namely the horizon of nihilism.²⁶ Buddhism takes as its point of departure what Nishida Kitarô and the Kyoto School have called the “place of absolute nothingness” (*mu no basho*).²⁷ Western philosophy by contrast has historically taken as its point of departure the doctrine of being, a doctrine that has never been far from the Judeo-Christian creationist horizon.²⁸ It was the horizon of nihilism as expressed, for example, through Friedrich Nietzsche’s ideas of the “death of God” and “the eternal return of the same,”²⁹ as well as the early Heidegger’s claim that “the possibility of metaphysics” is “a natural disposition of *Dasein*,”³⁰ that provided the conditions for a Western-Buddhist dialogue to the extent that, as a return to the radical finitude of the human being, nihilism was at the same time a critique of the onto-theological underpinnings of Western philosophy, a critique of, for example, the division of being into eternal and temporal beings, infinite and finite being.³¹ By favoring the transcendental power of language over the “thrown-ness” of *Dasein* Post-Romantic hermeneutics smuggles in a conception of being that fills in the “place of absolute nothingness.”

It is thus not surprising that, understood as a critique of the logocentric metaphysics of presence and thus as an attempt to reinsert Western thought in the horizon of nihilism, post-structuralism has greater affinities with Buddhist thought than does the Post-Romantic hermeneutic tradition. For example, Jacques Derrida’s “*différance*,” as that which creates an empty place for meaning, as that trace of absence, is a better Western approximation of the Buddhist concept of “absolute nothingness.”³² But, perhaps it is the Lacanian conception of language – that is language as lack, dissimulation, Beauchesne, 1972), 128.

²⁵ Geory, *Truth and Method*. Second Revised Edition (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), 389.

²⁶ Nishitani Keiji, *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (New York: State University of New York, 1990), 180-181.

²⁷ Nishida Kitarô, *Intelligibility and the Philosophy of Nothingness* (Tokyo: Maruzen, 1958), 134-141.

²⁸ Xavier Zubiri, *Sobre el problema de la filosofía* (Madrid: Fundación Xavier Zubiri, n.d.).

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (New York: Penguin Books, 1961).

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, “Sur la Critique de la raison pure de Kant et sur la tâche d’une fondation de la métaphysique,” in *Débat sur le Kantisme et la Philosophie*, 24.

and alienation, or, to paraphrase Jacques Lacan, the idea of language as the torturer of being – that, in years to come, will prove to be more appropriate.³³ The end of Lacanian psychoanalysis is to liberate the subject from language, or stated positively, to achieve the Real beyond language. It seems to me that a theology grounded upon the Lacanian poststructuralist conception of language would be better suited to engage in a dialogue with a tradition that posits an Ultimate Reality beyond language than is a theology grounded upon the hermeneutic conception of language.

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David Tracy himself has suggested that the post-structuralist conception of language is better suited to serve as the epistemological foundations for the Christian-side of a Christian-Buddhist dialogue than is the hermeneutic conception of language.³⁴ He has, however, made this claim from within the limits of the hermeneutic tradition. By so doing he undermines the notion of “inter-religious dialogue.” For Tracy does not see that the idea of a “conversation” across the different conceptions of language (what he calls, for example, the hermeneutic, linguistic, structuralist, poststructuralist conceptions) is the pretension to universality of a hermeneutic tradition that has expanded to include the idea of “communication.”³⁵ Indeed, to assume that all conceptions of language are driven by a “communicative interest” is to reduce the horizon of language to the hermeneutic conception of language.

The spurious universality of the hermeneutic tradition generates the spurious belief in a universal communicative interest that cuts across religious traditions. But not all religious traditions want to communicate. Some, for example, wish to remain silent, while others wish to transform. This false universality of “inter-religious dialogue” is today generating on the one hand “Western Buddhism,”³⁶ and on the other the historical-hermeneutic reduction of the critically-oriented theological sciences of liberation.³⁷ Both of these dynamics, now as the Westernization of the East (which began with

³¹ Consider, for example, Heidegger’s “task of destroying the history of ontology” at the outset of *Being and Time*.

³² Jacques Derrida, “La différence,” in *Marges de la philosophie* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1972), 1-29.

³³ Jacques Lacan, *Le séminaire*, III, Les psychoses (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1981), 276.

³⁴ David Tracy, “The Buddhist-Christian Dialogue,” in *Dialogue With the Other*, 69-94.

the Meiji Restoration) and the assimilation of the Latin American periphery by the Anglo-American center (which has been most recently expressed through the idea of a “free trade area for the Americas”), are today being perpetuated in and through another real that exists beyond language, namely the hegemonic fusion of global liberal-democratic capitalism and post-modern thought.

³⁵ Jürgen Habermas, *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990).

³⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *On Belief* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 13-15.

³⁷ Manuel J. Mejido, “Reflections on a Theological Crisis.”

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