

pilgrimage of life

studies in honour of professor René Gothóni

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Table of Contents:

<i>Riku Hämäläinen, Mari Rahkala, Heikki Pesonen, Tuula Sakaranaho</i> Foreword	7
<i>Raïli Gothóni</i> Personalia: Stories and Glimpses of René Gothóni's Life	10
<i>Nils G. Holm</i> Monasticism and Pilgrimage as Scientific Interests: The Research Profile of Professor René Gothóni	15
Part One UNDERSTANDING	
<i>Jean Grondin</i> Philosophical Hermeneutics and its Significance for the Study of Religion	23
<i>Tarmo Kunnas</i> Heidegger and Gadamer: One or Two Hermeneutics?	43
<i>Elisa Heinämäki</i> The Secret of Madame Edwards: An Exercise in Interpretation	57
<i>Alexandra Bergholm</i> Past Meaning and Present Significance: Understanding the Alterity of Medieval Textuality	68
<i>Teuvo Laitila</i> "The Essence of Insanity Is Love": Rumi and the Understanding of Mystical Text	80
<i>Jan-Ivar Lindén</i> Understanding Disposed Existence	96
Part Two ETHNOGRAPHY	
<i>Simon Coleman</i> Pilgrimage as Field: Space, Time and Text	109
<i>Terhi Utriainen</i> Ethics and Embodiment in Ethnographic Interactions	120
<i>Mira Karjalainen</i> It takes only a Matchstick: Fieldwork in a Closed Community	133
<i>Juha Pentikäinen</i> Northern Encounters – Field Work among the Indigenous Peoples	145
<i>Risto Pulkkinen</i> "With One's Ass Ahead Up into a Tree": The Bipolar Semantic Field of Folk Religion	161

<i>Juha Janhunen</i> The Holy Shamaness: Some Additional Notes on a Turko-Mongolic Etymology	175
<i>Riku Hämäläinen</i> Transition of Purification: The Anatomy of the Native American Sweat Bath	187
<i>Marja-Leena Heikkilä-Horn</i> Thai Politics and Asoke Buddhist Economics	200
<i>Nora Ahlberg</i> Feast as Trauma: Gynaecological Intervention in a Hospital Outpatient Setting	215
<i>Raimo Harjula</i> "Life Has Its Seasons": African Wisdom for Those Having Seen Many Rains	230
<i>Tom Sjöblom</i> "Man Gave Names to all the Animals": Animals as Cognitive Tools in Religious Communication	241
Part Three PILGRIMAGE AND MONASTICISM	
<i>Alice Mary Talbot</i> Cult and Pilgrimage: The Translation of Relics in the Palaiologan Period	271
<i>Grigorios Chrysostomos Tympas</i> A Critical Review of the Psychological Underpinnings of the Eastern Christian Monasticism: From the Safety of the Past to the Challenge of Post-modernism	283
<i>Kallistos Ware</i> Obedience and Freedom in Greek Monastic Theology: St Mark the Monk and St Symeon the New Theologian	296
<i>Graham Speake</i> St Paisy Velichkovsky and Mount Athos	313
<i>Ambrosius</i> Monastic Prayer and Spirituality in an Eastern Orthodox Perspective	326
<i>Katja Ritari</i> "Pilgrims in the World": Monastic Life as a Quest for Heaven in Early Medieval Ireland	336
<i>Ismo Pellikka</i> How Did the Holy Mountain Become Holy?: A Close Reading of Some Russian Pilgrims' and Travelers' Accounts on Mount Athos	346
<i>Mari Rahkala</i> Women, Pilgrimage, Everyday Life Experience: A Contemporary Greek Convent as a Pilgrimage Site	360
<i>Mitra Harkonen</i> (Com)passionate Enlightenment: On the Soteriological Significance of Tibetan Monasticism	371
<i>Heikki Pesonen</i> Mad Sisters and Evil Mothers: Representations of Nuns and Convents in Western Films	385

Understanding Disposed Existence

Jan-Ivar Lindén

Introductory remarks

Much of what we read today indicates something like an ontological preference for the physical dimension at the cost of the psychological, often combined with the assumption of “matter” as something fundamental. Psychological phenomena somehow appear as an exception in reality that has to be explained. The following presentation takes the opposite standpoint, defending an ontological primacy of the psychological. The concept of *psyché* enables us to stress other aspects than those discussed in traditional oppositions like matter/idea or matter/spirit. The *psyché* is an animating principle that constitutes the life of every animal and in general of every living being, thus depending neither on (intellectual) ideas nor on (rational) spirit. The concepts of spirit and of idea are in fact both closely connected to the worldview that has transformed independent reality into epistemic material or “matter”. Taking this into account, it is meaningless to speak of an opposition between “idealism” and “materialism” as both currents represent the same tendency to reduce an independent reality to rational structures and their possible material. Ideas have been understood as real structures manifesting spirit (Platonist tradition) or as the intellectual instruments of rational spirit (ideas as representations in the semi-Platonist modern tradition).¹

These aspects of Platonism should not obscure another important strain, closely connected with the Socratic ideal of knowing that one is not knowing, the later *docta ignorantia* of Cusanus. From this perspective it is not only the ideas, but also the ineffable presence (*parousia*) that is at the core of philosophy. What could this mean, when reinterpreted inside a more naturalist “Aristotelian” context? For Aristotle, too, it was evident that the world was structured in a comprehensible way. The same Aristotle, however, is the one that keeps stressing the specific character of our belonging to the world, never rests when it comes to the description of *phainomena* and continuously warns against constructing separate worlds of pure structure. Belonging to the natural world seems for him to be the *sine*

qua non of every understanding. Like Plato, he stresses both the unchangeable and the changing character of this incarnation, but corporeal nature becomes for him a principal subject of study, nature both as unchangeable “first” nature and as “second nature”, an expression that Aristotle uses for the dispositions in the ethical and the political sphere.² In the following I will use this concept of disposition (*hexis, diathesis*) in order to describe some fundamental conditions of human understanding, but without adhering neither to Aristotelian teleology nor to the artisanal scheme of form (*morphê*) and matter (*hylê*).³

Disposed nature

We speak of dispositions in many ways, but one meaning seems quite fundamental: disposition as inclination or tendency. Sometimes we use the word predisposition in order to emphasize this aspect. What is meant is a condition of special susceptibility, or a state of being predetermined. An important form of disposition is without doubt the psychological one.

Since Frege and the early Husserl, psychology has a bad reputation in philosophy.⁴ The psychological has been discarded as simply irrelevant. Even if the philosophical reception of psychoanalysis – especially in French tradition – has changed the situation somewhat, it remains a fact that the critique of a particular form of psychology has continued to influence the philosophical attitude towards its sister science. This particular form of psychology had its heyday in the 19th century and is known as associationism. One fundamental idea put forward in most texts of associationist authors is that the subject must somehow construct unity and meaning out of atomic data. Such constructions follow certain principles like contiguity, resemblance and causality.⁵

A philosophical psychology that takes dispositions as its point of departure has no need to presuppose such constructions. If there is something like subjectivity, it can be conceived of as a specific way of inhering in a previously organized, but more or less changeable field. The individual does not connect or construct data, but he participates in processes that to a high degree transcend his individuality. Reality is given through existence. It does not need to be constituted by a subject as dispositions are real vital facts. The organization of reality expresses itself in particular beings and it is exactly these expressions that can be called “dispositions”.

Dispositions evolve. As structures of behaviour they are not immune to change, but in order to change they have to become actual. The inactual is not exposed and what is not exposed cannot be differently disposed. Change happens in the present and presence makes actual. However, presence does not only mean present time, but also intensity. Patterns that are exposed to presence can be modified precisely because of the intense, and not at all neutral character of the present. Through its exposition to the important, the disposition takes up, or imports new aspects. These aspects are neither subjective nor objective, but concern the actual situations in which the disposition takes part. Through its situational character the disposition carries the world itself within it. Reality is inside us. Everybody would agree that it is quite impossible to imagine, for example, the respiratory disposition of living creatures without presupposing that there is something like sun, earth and the air in between. Reality is sedimented in the dispositions of which we are made.

The world is full of patterns. A pattern is something distinct that manifests itself in time. It is hard to say exactly how the distinction or determination is there. Nothing forces us, however, to regard determination as constituted by a consciousness. If it is difficult to tell in what way patterns possess their specific determinations, it is even more difficult to say what happens with the pattern when it is no longer actual. For the most part it is not completely lost, but can repeat itself in a new situation. This repetition presupposes some kind of reality for the pattern, when it rests in a state of inactuality. One would like to call the function that enables such a latent reality memory. A disposition could then be called a mnemonic pattern.

How does it come about that patterns can exist even as inactual dispositions? What has no actuality, is atemporal. It does not happen. How can a dynamic pattern exist where nothing actually happens? How does a temporal process manage to become atemporal and nevertheless to find its way back into time?

In a disposition something is settled, placed, posed (from latin *ponere* and originally from greek *tithemi* or *tithein*) but placed in a dynamic manner. What has been placed in the disposition is a structure that is in an intimate way related to time. A disposition is a trace of past events that disposes for the future. Nevertheless, somehow the trace is placed as something no longer temporal. One could say that this is part of the meaning of every structure. Even if a structure is a result of temporal processes, it is *as a result* not temporal itself. A structure is something identical that has an immanent tendency to resist, but anyhow can change though,

or perhaps *because* it resists even when it yields. Possibly the relative resistance to change in living organisms comprises one side of that dynamic relation between familiarity and otherness that somehow keeps the vital attention awake. Where there is total flexibility, no attention would be possible.

Some dispositions are from an individual point of view that enduring that they even appear as a kind of immutable law of nature. It is evident that our existence is composed of several layers, some marked by an extremely low flexibility, others by a remarkable capacity to change. In all these cases, the difference between structure and temporal process remains fundamental.

Occasions

A structure is a definite or determinate function. In other words it is this and not that and it is what it is regardless of its possible actuality. I can swim even if I am not swimming right now. The capacity or disposition to swim is, however, the same in both cases. Determination is a question of distinctive character and not of presence. A temporal process is something fuller compared to the structure. Where there is a temporal process, something is happening. Nothing happens without an occasion and the occasion is right now. Without this presence of the *now* it would be meaningless to speak of a temporal process.

This is a theme that has been profoundly articulated by Augustine and reexamined by Bergson, William James and Husserl in the 20th century. Augustines main idea in the famous analysis of time is that fragmenterized human experience (*distentio*) can be apprehended as unity through an intense effort and thus transformed into a concentration of soul (*intentio animi*) that indicates the “inner” way to the eternal in which there is no discrete time.⁶ In the same manner, but inside a much more naturalist and pragmatist context, Bergson claims that real duration (*durée réelle*) is in the last analysis a kind of now without limits, though for him less a *nunc stans* than a (creative) *nunc currens*. William James, Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger have examined the same phenomenon in a less metaphysical way.⁷ Given the constraint for this essay, there are no possibilities to discuss these authors here, but I will state something that particularly interests me: Reality is not only more or less definite and definable, but important, too. Importance shows itself in the now and the now has duration when it is important. Kierkegaard would call this instantaneous importance *øjeblikket*, the instant.

Time needs importance just as dispositions need their actualization. Reality is constituted of these two aspects. There are more possible worlds than actual worlds and the difference between the latter and the former lies in the importance of the actual. Importance is the way of presence to articulate itself in structures. Without presence (or actuality) everything is latent and nothing important.

Matter

The concept of “matter” has created a lot of confusion in ontology. As it is closely linked to the same Aristotelian philosophy that has established the philosophical importance of dispositions, it is reasonable to make some remarks about materiality. I have no intention, however, of being faithful to Aristotle.

Aristotelian matter is something different from Cartesian matter. For Aristotle, the *hylé* is a basic substratum that enables the realization of the form. In the final analysis, the material aspect has to be regarded as something indeterminate, precisely because it *carries* determinate and determining forms and it therefore cannot be form itself. Cartesian matter, on the contrary, is extended and defined through certain qualities that Locke later called primary qualities. In other words, matter is conceived of as something determinate that exists in its own right. It is quite interesting to note that both Descartes and Locke shared this assumption, even if the tendency is in the one case rationalist and in the other empiricist.

Still one could say: If there should be matter with properties, it is not *pure* matter anymore. And if the matter has no properties, the question remains: What is it then? The Aristotelian idea of a primordial but indeterminate substratum (*proté hylé*, *materia prima*) poses a decisive ontological problem. When there is something like an underlying *hypokeimenon*, why would such an indeterminate something be precisely a substratum and not, for example, a sort of indeterminate transcendence?

In modern conceptions, the problem is different but no less acute, since they ascribe all sort of qualities to matter, yet without explaining how the indeterminate can become determinate without being formed, or informed. In fact, so called “matter” is more like an assemblance of dispositions. What is confused in the modern concept of matter are the two aspects of structure and presence.

It seems to me, that the concept of disposition enables us to discard “matter” in the substantial sense of the word. It is quite evident, however, that the verb

remains legitimate. It does matter how you are disposed, but this does not mean that matter in the substantial sense must be involved. Even the primary qualities (place, figure, direction etc.) are qualities and that means that there is a *qua* that qualifies. Quality is not existence, but a way of being disposed. Where there are qualities, there are dispositions, too. Dispositions are not necessarily dispositions to act – this would presuppose an agent – but they can also be dispositions for something which only happens – this does not imply any agent. In fact, we can regard all dispositions as ways of being determined for certain situations.

Privileged access

But still, there is some difference between the psychological and the physical, isn't there? If so, how is this difference to be explained, if not with the purely material character of the physical? Material things, one could suppose, do not behave in the same spontaneous manner as psychological beings. Things just remain or change without these processes meaning anything particular for those involved.

This way of regarding reality is far from evident. In some cases the intentional correlate of the experience transcends all our hermeneutic possibilities and thus appears accordingly, i.e. as something without immanent meaning that simply evolves in a certain way. For the chemist it is, I suppose, impossible to figure out how the substances involved in a chemical process experience their belonging to this same process. In biology the case is different, even if there are many life scientists who tend to exclude all understanding and restrict themselves to purely objectifying explanation. The debate on animal consciousness shows, however, that meaning is no human privilege.

In short, reality is in varying ways accessible to understanding. Where it is not understandable at all, it appears only as a more or less predictable process. This inaccessibility permits no ontological conclusions concerning the existence or non-existence of meaning in the process. The only thing we can say is that some areas of reality are that far removed from what we understand, that only the objectifying approach remains possible. This approach is in fact, as history shows, extremely important, since it allows us to master what is not comprehensible. Through definite predictions, the capacity for orientation in a transcending world is improved for a certain life form like the human.

Yet, in some cases we are able to comprehend tendencies as immanently

important and capable of being disturbed, i.e. as tendencies inside a meaningful context for the tendencies themselves and then have a privileged access to the inner life of the tendencies in question. We know something about the feelings involved. We know that something matters, that something is important. The question concerning the temporality of dispositions has to be understood in this context, as a way of articulating fundamental characters of being without using either Aristotelian, Cartesian or some modern physicalist conception of matter.

The transition to actuality

What is this strange phenomenon that makes the latent determination actual? One can suggest: Something without determination, i.e. something indeterminate, but not some kind of underlying substratum. Inside the psychological dimension of reality, to which we have indeed a privileged access, there is an undeniable fact of indeterminacy in affective presence. We all know how difficult it is to define affections, both those related to our senses and sentimental ones. We also know how we can use sensations in order to check if something is actually there or only imagined as structure. (We pinch ourselves in order to gain assurance.) If one refuses to subjectify affective life, what could this imply for ontology?

One thing is sure. Presence could not be an ontologically important category if it were only the presence of some particular individual. In a radical empiricist conception of reality, and I will here choose to defend such an anti-materialist position, experience is, however, something more than particular experience. It is a fundamental dimension of reality. In this experience, presence plays an important role, as it constitutes the actuality of what happens. The individual presence manifests itself as a participation in this given presence, which can have a completely different duration on the non-individual than on the individual level.

Individual presence is, in other words, no special quality that has to be created *ex nihilo*, nor is it an emergent fact that creates an exception in nature. It is no mystery at all, because presence was there from the beginning. Through his affections the individual takes part in this primordial instantaneous fact, but in a particular manner that is marked by its hermeneutic character of privileged access.

Without presence, no organization would be possible, since nothing could happen. What makes the difference between the inactual structure of a disposition and its actual presence lies in the instantaneous *stimulus* (the spur) for some being

in the world. In fact, Augustine uses exactly this word *stimulus* to describe the absolute *now* that is apprehended in the *intentio animi*, a sort of stretching of the soul that deepens the reality of the individual. (When behaviourists speak of “stimulus” and “response”, they apparently ignore this conceptual fact.)

What does this mean? What would be the difference between actualisation through matter and actualisation through presence? Experiential indetermination is not – as material indetermination is meant to be – whatever can be formed, but instead *that which brings forming or determining activity to life*. What presents organization to beings, what gives dispositions presence is not material, but rather something like the original impulsiveness of reality, the *now* of time. Without this *now* a disposition would remain forever structure, marvelous perhaps in its distinction, but without the clarity and openness of that which actually happens. Dispositions are the structural responses to presence that matters.

Embedded subjectivity

Through the idea of an essentially disposed existence, human beings can thus be regarded as embedded in nature and conceived of neither with any assumption of a pure, active subjectivity nor with any primacy of the physical or material. In fact, these two apparently opposing conceptions are two sides of the same coin. The purely active subjectivity has as its direct counterpart the material, i.e. the object of the subjective act. This reciprocity remains exactly the same in those cases where, through some strange oblivion, the subject begins to claim its own materiality (in the shape of a reductionist materialist). In this way to forget the origin of the material certainly expresses an ontological confusion, but for the same reason, it appears to be a fruitless strategy to defend an irreducible psychological dimension through some form of spontaneous, active subjectivity, which constitutes its objects. Precisely this kind of subjectivity is what has accentuated the role of matter as a substratum, what has made a material of which we dispose out of an indeterminate something. To dispose of something in this sense is certainly one aspect of dispositionality, but for sure, it is not the only and not the essential one.

Disposed existence precedes the classical distinction between *actio* and *passio*, *poiein* and *paschein*, doing and undergoing. Things are settled for the disposed, but neither does he constitute them in pure spontaneity nor is the settled something that he merely undergoes. What is settled is more like an essence, that

opens a field of limited, but possible activity. Through the limitations that are in fact nothing other than the dispositions, there is a freedom *to* that has gained its freedom precisely because it, as a disposition, is *not free from*. The incarnate, disposed and not particularly autonomous human being lives in a meaningful world, quite regardless of any accidental distinction between activity and passivity. In this world some aspects offer understanding of why they matter, others not.

Notes

- ¹ Concerning the explicitly Platonist aspects of early modern tradition, see Gilson 1984. The peculiar Platonism of Descartes, strongly influenced by the Augustinian tradition of the Jansenist movement, is in fact part of a general platonic revival. Through the exodus of byzantine scholars after the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and Marsilio Ficino's translation of Plato's works, many of them inaccessible to medieval scholasticism, a new brand of Platonism became influential. Cf. Mahoney 2001: 142–54. Concerning the general background, see Schmidt-Biggemann 2004.
- ² Because of the central role of habitual dispositions in Aristotle, it is difficult to give any precise references, but the place of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is obvious.
- ³ The concept of *psyché* is explicitly understood as an animating principle by Aristotle and even the rational spirit (*nous*) remains an aspect of the soul, even if he seems to think that the *nous* somehow has an existence independently of the souls animating function. In *De generatione animalium* 736 b Aristotle uses the expression *thyrathen* (through the door) for the way in which spirit enters the human being and in *De anima* 413 b he speaks of reason as the surviving element in the soul. These remarks contrast with the strongly incarnated character of soul “that is not separable from the body” (*ouk estin he psyché choristé tou somatos*), *De anima* 413 a. In the scientific works this naturalist inclination is even more evident, but it must be added that Aristotelian nature is not an object of desincarnated spirit, but rather an ontological dimension in which intelligent and other animals *inhere*. The concept of matter is accordingly different and means that which is particularly apt to be informed in a certain way, is thus relative and not objective: “matter belongs to those things which are ‘related to’” (*toon pros ti he hylē*), *Physics* 194 b. Cf. the clearly relative character of matter in the description of a saw, that has to be of iron, if the saw is going to be a saw. *Ibid.* 200 a. Even relative, matter remains, however, a substrate (*hypokeimenon*). Concerning my understanding of these central concepts, see Lindén 2004: 171–189.
- ⁴ Frege 1995 and Husserl 1993.
- ⁵ See for example Bain 1894.
- ⁶ Augustine, *Confessiones* XI 29.39–30.40. It should be noted that the Augustinian concept of *intentio* differs from intentions in the phenomenological or pragmatic sense, as it concerns presence itself and not a content, a *noema* (Husserl). This difference in terminology does not exclude the influence of Augustine on phenomenology, noticed even by Husserl himself (that rarely mentions his own predecessors). As concentrated unity of different temporal dimensions the Augustinian *intentio* resembles Husserl's act that unites past experience (retention) and

coming experience (protention) in the same consciousness and in this way enables perception. Husserl is however much more interested in the constitution of intentional objects, whereas Augustine seems to regard the perceptual world of the *homo exterior* as something secondary. For a phenomenological reading of Augustine, see Schmidt 1985. Kurt Flasch, on the other hand, stresses the differences between Augustinian ontotheology and modern philosophies of subjectivity, Flasch 1993.

- ⁷ Still classical sources are Bergson 1969, James 1983, Husserl 1980 and Heidegger 1976.

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part two
ethnography