

GIFFORD LECTURES 1986

ON SELFHOOD

The Question of Personal Identity

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The aim of these lectures is to evaluate the *proper* place of the human self in today's thought. The oddity of this problem lies in the fact that this thought, whether in the so-called human sciences or in literary criticism and philosophy, appears to be subjected to two opposing approaches: either the self is placed too high, in the wake of the philosophies of subjectivity, from Descartes to Husserl, by way of Kant and Fichte; or it is placed too low, in the wake of systematic or structural conceptions, curiously reinforced by the post-Nietzschean proclamation of the *death of man*.

To escape this sterile alternative, we shall attempt to dissociate the claims of a *foundational* enterprise from the recognition of some typical situations in which the self appears as a primitive fact, without for all that being posited as an ultimate foundation. The first five lectures will be devoted to these typical situations, each corresponding to a specific use of language. The *self* will be *identified* successively as a person (first lecture), as an agent (second lecture), as an utterer (third lecture), as the subject of moral imputation (fourth lecture), and, finally, as a character in a narrative (fifth lecture).

This multiple identification of the self will help in finding a fair position in the properly philosophical debate concerning the fate of subjectivity in contemporary thought. Three lectures will sketch out this fate: subjectivity as it is exalted following Descartes (sixth lecture), humiliated following Nietzsche (seventh lecture), and as it becomes problematic to itself in contemporary hermeneutics (eighth lecture)

These two series of investigations will then serve as a backdrop for a fair estimation of the place of the subject on the level of Judeo-Christian religion. We shall first state how the self understands itself throughout the multiple mediations of biblical language (ninth lecture) and, finally, how, the self finds itself established as *responsible self* by a Word become Scripture, which, for faith, alone occupies the position of foundation (tenth lecture).

LECTURE I: The person as "basic particular"

Our investigation deliberately take their starting point in those inquiries must radically opposed to the reflexive method stemming from the Cartesian *cogito*, namely the study of the procedures of *identifying reference* available to thought and to language for designating individuals in the logical sense of the

term (proper nouns, personal and demonstrative pronouns, definite descriptions). The person is defined within this framework as a "basic particular" (P. Strawson, *Individuals*) and, as such, as a *primitive* structure of the description of the world. We shall underscore the primacy accorded in this way to the grammatical third person and we shall discuss the role attributed to *psychic* predicates in characterising the person.

LECTURE II : Action, agent and agency

The semantics of action is considered here as a chapter of the preceding theory. It, nevertheless, contributes important precise elements by bringing to light an entire conceptual network tied to the explicitation of the concept of action: agent, intentions, motives, circumstances, means and obstacles, results, etc. These terms take on meaning in relation to one another across the entire network. The notion of agent draws its precise meaning from the replies given to the question *who?* (just as the other notions reply to the questions *what, in view of what, because of what, by what means*, etc.). With the question *who* a problem of identity is posed, not in the sense of the same (*idem*) but in that of one's self (*ipse*), as the one on whom the action depends. The tie between the action and the agent, or agency, attests to a *primitive* structure of causation, as is expressed in the notion of *basic action* (A. Danto).

LECTURE III : Utterance and utterer

Other resources found in the philosophy of language are explored here: no longer those stemming from semantics, but those belonging to a pragmatics of discourse, applied to the conditions of the possibility of communicating messages. Based on the well-known theory of *speech acts* (J. Austin, J. Searle) and on the complementary analysis of the conditions of the reciprocity of intentions in the expression of meaning (P. Grice), we shall be concerned with the relation of interlocution between utterance as an act and the utterer as an author; we shall then separate out the function of self-designation implied in the relation of interlocution between an "I" and a "you". We shall discuss several paradoxes and aporias tied to *shifters*, at once mobile and anchored in a subject considered the irreplaceable centre of perspective on the world. This lecture will conclude in the recognition of the necessity to join together both lines taken in the philosophy of language in order to account for the fact that a third person designates himself or herself as a first person.

LECTURE IV: Moral imputation : the responsible self

The notion of *self* acquires an additional and decisive characteristic when it is placed in a moral context. The "I" appears, first, as the one to whom the prescriptive instance - regardless of its origin - is addressed as to a "you" (you shall not kill; act so as to treat humanity in your own person and in the person of others as an end and not simply as a means). The Subject called upon in this

way recognises himself or herself as responsible for his or her reply: the “I” then designates itself in the accusative: I pledge “myself”...The analysis of promises shows, in addition, that a new intersubjective relation is implied in pledging oneself, to the extent that, on the side of others, it corresponds to a right to exact what has been promised. The self, therefore, designates on the moral level the person considered the subject of imputation concerning an action subject to a moral evaluation.

LECTURE V: Narrative identity

The preceding analyses have failed to take into consideration the *temporal* dimension of the *self*. What is it that assures the identity of the self throughout the history that unfolds between birth and death? How can the permanence and the change of the personality be reconciled? The narrative function — the object of a discipline belonging to literary criticism, narratology — offers a remarkable mediation here, due to the dialectic of concordance and discordance which characterizes the development of the plot and, correlatively, that of the characters of the story recounted. By identifying itself with the *figuration* of the character, the self acquires a concrete identity, *refigured* by the mediation of narrative: a *narrative identity*.

LECTURE VI: The exalted *Cogito*

With this lecture and the two that follow it, the analysis moves from the descriptive level, where the self was characterized by some *primitive* features, multiple yet interrelated, to a *foundational* level, where subjectivity (to give it henceforth this philosophical title) is raised to the level of a unique foundation. Taking for our guide Descartes' first three *Meditations*, we shall show how the *crisis* of the *Cogito* is contemporary with its claim to posit *itself* as an absolute. This gesture, inaugurating modern philosophy, is already contained in the methodical doubt, which, through the tale of the evil genius, profoundly shakes all former presuppositions. By immediate reflection, out of doubt springs the first truth: I am, I exists as *res cogitans*. Out of this first truth, however, no subsequent truth can result without the guarantee of the divinity. Whence arises the debate over the "Cartesian circle": how can one found on the *Cogito* a higher truth that, in turn, founds it? In order to move out of this circle, the philosophy of the *Cogito* had to become ever more radical, from the Kantian *Ich denke*, the Fichtean *Absolute Ich* to Husserl's egology in his idealist phase.

LECTURE VII : The broken *Cogito*

If Descartes is the father of the *Cogito*, Nietzsche is the father of the anti-*Cogito*. The destruction of the *Cogito* is itself but one aspect of the destruction of the will to truth with which the *Cogito* identified itself by reason of its foundational claim. This destruction begins with the rhetorical — or, more precisely, — *tropological* — character of the so-called categories of thought; it

then continues with the application of the *genealogical* method to ethics; it culminates in the "disarticulation of the self" in the *Will to Power*. We shall discuss Heidegger's appropriation of the Nietzschean critique of the illusions and lies of the identity of the *ego* in the *Letter on Humanism*, *Holzwege* and the section on the *Cogito* in *Nietzsche II*.

LECTURE VIII : The wounded *Cogito*: towards a hermeneutic of the "I am".

We shall attempt, in the third lecture in this series, to move outside of the dilemma that opposes the humiliation of the *Cogito* to its exaltation. We shall first consult psychoanalysis concerning the manner of treating, first in Freud, the concepts of consciousness and the unconscious, the ego, superego, and id, and then the manner of dealing with the very concept of *self* in certain post-Freudian analysts. We shall then confront the wounded *Cogito* — which is neither broken nor exalted — which appears to result from this teaching with phenomenological investigations concerning one's own body, the pre-eminence of the other, and temporality. Starting from this double basis — psychoanalytic and phenomenological — we shall ask what sort of ontology, having parted ways with the *Cogito's* claim to found itself, is capable of encompassing the conclusions of the first five lectures attesting to the *primitive*, hence irreducible, character of the question of selfhood. In conclusion, we shall attempt to characterize the *hermeneutics of "I am"* within the framework of which similar investigations could be carried out.

LECTURE IX: The self in the mirror of the Scriptures

By passing from the descriptive analyses of the initial lectures and from the propositions of hermeneutic phenomenology stated in the eighth lecture to the meditations of a religious turn which will occupy the last two lectures, all the features of the self that have been collected up to now are at once intensified and transformed.

In this ninth lecture, I shall state by means of what *mediation* this twofold effect is intended. While readily conceding that something like a religious experience exists — the feeling of absolute dependency, unlimited trust, hope without any guarantee, universal compassion, etc. — I hold that all these "moments" of the religious experience require a specific mediation through language. It is a Word, received through the Scriptures, which has the value of articulating this experience from within. The philosophy of religion must, therefore, draw up a balance sheet concerning the forms of discourse and the literary genres — such as narratives, laws, prophecies, writings of wisdom, hymns, letters, parables, etc. — which, together, constitute the network of primary religious language. Through this network the communities involved in the questioning and the interpretation of this language, and the individual members that make up these

communities understand and interpret one another and themselves. *Liber and Speculum* – Book and Mirror – establish through their union the religious Self.

LECTURE X: The « commissioned » self

We shall examine, in conclusion, some typical structures of the religious self in the biblical lineage. As our first reference, we shall take the narrations of prophetic vocation (Gedeon, Moses, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezechial, the disciples of Jesus, Paul, etc.), in which are clearly expressed the relation of correspondence between the divine pole of the call and the sending forth, and the human pole of the “commissioned” self (“Here I am!”, but “I do not know how to speak”). We shall then examine some internalised forms of this polarity (conforming to the figure of Christ, the Augustinian notion of the inner master, the religious interpretation of “conscience” (Gewissen). To these we shall join other, more externalised forms of the same polarity (bearing witness, moral and political commitment, etc.). In conclusion, we shall attempt to say, on the one hand, in what sense the phenomena placed in the beginning lectures under the successive titles of person, agent, utterer, subject of imputation, and narrative identity are found to be at once intensified and transformed in the structure of the “commissioned self”, and, on the other hand, in what sense the hermeneutic of “I am” leaves the path open for this *refiguration* of the self on the religious plane. “O my prophetic soul!”