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AND IS IT YET ANOTHER ATTEMPT TO OVERCOME THE TRAUMA OF MODERNITY?*

ANDREW HAAS

UNITY AND ASPECT

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SVETLANA NIKONOVA

DSc in Philosophy, Professor.
St Petersburg University of Humanities and Social Sciences.
192238 St Petersburg, Russia.
E-mail: laresia@yandex.ru

Haas' *Unity and Aspect* reveals a philosophical impulse that leads to the creation of a new form of language for posing the questions that belong to first philosophy. This philosophical intuition should be appraised within the historical and philosophical development of metaphysical thought which demonstrates its self-destructive nature (as Heidegger argues with respect to "European Nihilism") through a critique of traditional concepts and questions, which subsequently leads to the deconstruction of metaphysics as such. The experience of metaphysical thought—its critique as well as the deconstruction of its critical impulse—can be defined as traumatic; and in a certain sense, Haas' work is an attempt to overcome the trauma underlying the entire project of contemporary philosophical searching. *Unity and Aspect's* turn to metaphysics is a consequence of an opposition to the language of rational thought and its deconstruction. Haas introduces new concepts, therefore, such as implication and illumination, in order to problematize and "suspend" the idea of human consciousness and personality in its special stance towards the world. It is certain that the questions of first philosophy and metaphysics are extremely relevant for the contemporary thought, yet, the privileged stance of consciousness is radically rejected by some schools, as for instance, by speculative

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realism. Thus, we try to show that the language posed by Haas brings, in a certain sense, the problems of phenomenology closer to those of speculative realism by sublating the difference in their intentions.

Key words: critique of metaphysics, deconstruction, first philosophy, trauma, modernity, phenomenology, new language practices, speculative realism, consciousness, correlationism.

ЕЩЕ ОДНА ПОПЫТКА ПРЕОДОЛЕТЬ ТРАВМУ МОДЕРНА?*

РЕЦЕНЗИЯ НА КНИГУ ЭНДРЮ ХААСА

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СВЕТЛАНА НИКОНОВА

Доктор философских наук, профессор.

Санкт-Петербургский Гуманитарный университет профсоюзов.

192238 Санкт-Петербург, Россия.

E-mail: laresia@yandex.ru

Разбирая книгу Андрию Хааса, мы старались показать, в чем мог состоять философский порыв автора, ведущий его к созданию новой формы языка, на котором он намеревается ставить вопросы, являющиеся вопросами первой философии. Философская интуиция Хааса должна оцениваться исходя из контекста историко-философского развития, в ходе которого метафизическая мысль показала свою саморазрушительную сущность, приведя (как М. Хайдеггер указывал в «Европейском нигилизме»), к тотальной критике традиционных философских понятий и вопросов, а далее — к полной деконструкции самой метафизики. Опыт метафизической мысли, ее критики, а также деконструкции критического порыва можно оценить как травматический. Мы полагаем, что книга Хааса в некотором смысле является поиском соответствующих новых языковых возможностей, а стало быть, попыткой преодолеть травму, лежащую в основе современных философских исканий. Обращение Хааса к метафизике можно назвать следствием его оппозиционности по отношению к деконструктивным характеристикам языка рационального мышления. Вызывает интерес применяемая Хаасом терминология, связанная с понятиями импликации, или причастности, вовлеченности, а также иллюминации, посредством которой он проблематизирует и «подвешивает» идею человеческого сознания и личности в его особой позиции по отношению к миру. Учитывая, что вопросы первой философии и метафизики крайне актуальны для современной мысли, но в то же время именно привилегированная позиция сознания вызывает существенные возражения, скажем, в спекулятивном реализме, мы стремимся показать, что язык, предлагаемый Хаасом, до некоторой степени сближает вопросы феноменологии с вопросами спекулятивного реализма, снимая различие их интенций.

Ключевые слова: критика метафизики, деконструкция, первая философия, травма, современность, феноменология, новые языковые практики, спекулятивный реализм, сознание, корреляционизм.

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We would like to start by characterizing the stance adopted by Haas in the opening of *Unity and Aspect*. In this vein, we should refer to editors of the book, as well as to Mark Tanzer's review. All of them (author, editors, reviewer) initially understand the book as dedicated to "first philosophy" or "metaphysics." Tanzer writes: "Andrew Haas' *Unity and Aspect* is a work in an area philosophy that is rarely addressed any longer [...] Haas sets the tone for his own foray into metaphysics" (Tanzer, 2018). The editors state that it is

...a work of first philosophy, however much this approach has fallen out of favor. However, we do not think this would constitute an argument against the work, but far more for it, as the problems of first philosophy have neither "gone away" nor been resolved. (Haas, 2018, 9)

In a similar vein, Haas defines the project as "a way that would, nowadays, probably not be deemed scientific, but rather represents something that might have previously been named first philosophy or metaphysics, or simply philosophy, if there is such a thing" (Haas, 2018, 16). Early on, Haas even claims that the project of first philosophy or metaphysics seems to be completed or accomplished—but he also states that there still remains some sense of its incompleteness, which inaugurates his meditation (Haas, 2018, 16).

For our part, we would like to start by posing the same observation: the book is written for today, but it addresses issues of first philosophy and problematizes the sphere of metaphysics. However, we would like to interpret such a double-movement in a positive way: such a theme is relevant, even essential, for contemporary thought. Metaphysics comes to light in modern philosophical theory in the same way as religion, for example, might be re-thought and re-evaluated in a post-secular world. If it could be said, therefore, that we are currently entering the epoch of post-post-metaphysics, or post-anti-metaphysics, then the project of *Unity and Aspect* is timely. Thus, the primary question is not how anything (such as this book) is possible nowadays; but rather, why this book is necessary in the current context.

Consequently, although reversing or rephrasing Haas' critique of what is "necessarily or even possibly" to be thought (Haas, 2018, 19), we believe that we have not contradicted the author's intention. For *Unity and Aspect* actually claims that possibility is something more complicated, higher and harder to reach than necessity (in opposition to the traditional system of modalities). And it is such a position that can be considered our common ground. On the one hand, we see that everything is possible in our world (for instance, everything could be written): possibility is wide open, but it awaits someone who would translate it into action. On the other hand, we believe

that something necessary, logically predicated or determined, does not necessarily become actual, if there is nobody to actualize it. Hence, naturally, the real possibility, the practical action which appears to be possible in one or another situation, is much more rare and exciting than any logical or even mental, cultural or historical necessity. And that is what we consider to be a key point of Haas' work. But let us start by delving into necessity.

*THE TRAUMATIC DIMENSION OF
POST-ANTI-METAPHYSIC THOUGHT*

Actually, readers faced with *Unity and Aspect* risk encountering some obstacles, especially if they anticipate a text with a consistent and clear statement of problems and solutions. But the matter here is not that the work is inconsistent or that its original issues lack clarity. It is rather that its questions and answers do not resemble anything habitually meant by these words. For although Haas has articulated problems and solutions, declaring that they belong to the sphere of what is usually referred to as “first philosophy” or metaphysics, he does not so much provide a new solution as a new way of problematizing. Indeed, problematization—and that which is genuinely problematic in any particular problem—has been an essential theme for Haas, who published, “What is a Problem?” in 2015 (Haas, 2015). While some philosophers have resorted to analyzing fundamental problems and posing solutions (often within a wider philosophical context), Haas addresses the very fact of their problematization. This is what he calls “suspension,” which is a crucial achievement of his work, and which is why it is the very chapter on suspension that completes the main part of *Unity and Aspect* (Haas, 2018, 320–327).

It is obvious then, that we are dealing with a philosophical text which is, by no means, composed in a traditional way, and the same goes for the manner of stating a problem therein; which could leave readers at a loss, frustrated, even traumatized. We would define such a context as the situation of post-anti-metaphysical thought. Analogously, even if the epoch in which we live is post-secular, this does not necessarily mean that such an epoch is religious, as traditionalists might claim. Likewise, even if we define our epoch as “post-anti-metaphysical,” this does not simply presume a return to metaphysics. Here, with *Unity and Aspect*, we are rather dealing with a critique of a metaphysics that would turn it into an historical project, or a reflection on what once happened to metaphysics itself. We should note, therefore, that Haas has no intention of going back to old metaphysical principles. On the contrary, he is aware of their incompleteness and imperfection, yet he is cognizant of the incompleteness

and imperfection of all concepts and principles attempting to replace metaphysics in our critical (post-metaphysical) epoch—especially of those which are not so different from the traditional metaphysical ones.

Metaphysics, however—that is, questioning the being of all things and its characteristics, such as continuity or integrity, temporality or eternity (as is time and again posited in critical thought, at least over the previous century)—is a kind of traumatic experience for human life and thought; it divides what exists as a whole, and unifies or mediates what exists as immediate. In this way, it represents an act of rational thinking. And it is this radical activity of the human mind, as Hegel argues, which authorizes its absolute power (Kojève, 1998, 149–151). This is obvious even to the Chinese sages, who reproach it with sadness as a departure from the Way. Rational-thought *qua* metaphysical-questioning separates thought from existence, the true from the visible, the substantial from the accidental, the ideal from the real, the subjective from the objective; and it introduces a multiplicity of oppositions posed by different epochs and strands of thought.

Here, it should be noted that such a separation, to some extent, is grounded in a certain structure of language. Heidegger, as we know, determines the foundations of what he calls “European nihilism” in the very origins of metaphysical language. And it is new language practices through which he addresses the issue of language itself, and by which he looks for the possibility of overcoming metaphysics. He hopes that the very language so fatally used by metaphysics may be salutary in its origins, even capable of healing the wounds inflicted by its own logical violence. Probably, the same aspiration guides the thought of philosophers who belong to different movements: for example, those who deconstruct language in order to demonstrate its complete impossibility (or to show that self-destruction of a referential system is a way of communication), simultaneously seek another language, free from those structures and limitations, whether poetic or not, phallo-logo-centric or not, etc. This may be precisely what arouses the contempt and derision aimed at metaphysics. Its methods are recognized as fatal. However, this applies only to methods, not questions, although its questioning seems to have destroyed its own possibility. But actually, in the course of self-deconstruction, it suspends and problematizes their formulations and names. If metaphysics, as such, is actually traumatic, the next traumatic act is the critique which declares it to be pure fantasy (as Kant seems to claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason*). It is amazing that such a traumatic blow against human thinking and reasoning is struck for the sake of absolute dominance—and it bears repeating that it is a metaphysical claim even though it asserts a rational, clear, non-fantastic, scientific status.

Then there is the final traumatic blow, that is, the collapse of the project of the Enlightenment, of rational critique, and the total deconstruction of meaning and sense, which prevails both in metaphysics and critical thought today. Here, deconstruction can be considered the direct opposite of metaphysics; therefore, it does not aim at constructing any theory which would not be self-destroying, since deconstruction acts within the language, which it applies to speak about itself—it is not a statement about something, but self-referential. As Groys argues: it is something immortal, for it comes from the direction of death, from the dehumanized structure of language, destroying its own sense (Groys, 2006, 80, 88). Naturally, such language does not provide any answers, but somehow contains an answer within itself; it riddles the metaphysics and metaphysical possibilities of language. Or, as de Man puts it: categorical and affirmative statements and modes of speech (assertoric and apodictic, as an editor of *Unity and Aspect* argues, with reference to Kant (Haas, 2018, 10)) are privileged—for they claim to be clearer in their own self-de(con)struction, even aware of it, not being deceptive and seductive, like more complicated versions of language (de Man, 1979).

In this regard, it becomes clear that the main context and opposition of Haas' thought, or rather of his language, is also constituted by deconstruction. And it is only natural that he turns to metaphysics in his attempt to invent a new way of speaking which would be non-traumatic and non-self-destructive, in the hope that it will insert self-destruction into its new fluid unity. For although the very method of posing questions or solving problems is destroyed or de(con)structed, this does not mean that the object of that question or problem is eliminated. Rather, the object of first philosophy still has not even been formulated in thought or captured in words. Therefore, the first objective of an alternative language would be to find words for such a formulation, to pick up appropriate terms for the objects of first philosophy. This is the goal of *Unity and Aspect*, and the reason why it resorts to metaphysics, and to non-assertoric and non-apodictic modes.

THE EXPERIENCE OF PHENOMENOLOGICAL ONTOLOGY

Nevertheless, *Unity and Aspect* does not seem to be a book about a pre-defined problem, even that of unity and aspect. It is primarily an attempt to formulate the questions of first philosophy in a new style and a new manner of speech, and then to find what really represent the objects of first philosophy, or at least what they could be. It has little in common with old versions of metaphysics, although Haas certainly relies on the history of philosophy for the simple reason that his thought comes from it, and in the wake of it, and originates from its destruction. It is noteworthy that such

resorting to first philosophy—and new attempts to define it—is characteristic, generally speaking, of the present age (for example, the definition of first philosophy as aesthetic by Welsch (1997), albeit for different needs and from a different angle, but conveying a similar aspiration to coin new terms for questioning first philosophy).

This is why Haas' terminology of problematization and suspension, which applies to both method and language, still speaks of something that seems traditional, i.e., being, unity, time, aspect. Yet he avoids separating and defining them through classifications and systematizations. Instead he draws our attention to how they *imply* each other, even when he deals with traditional oppositions like being and nothing: for instance, “nothing as well, which it is not, or its negation, may have to be somehow, at least if it is and is not nothing” (Haas, 2018, 18). And

just as being might somehow have to be implied even by something like non-being, so too unity may somehow be implicated in disunity, although the implications of this have yet to be worked out, as well as implication itself, and that of the unity of unity, and of other things, especially if being and unity are only implied. (Haas, 2018, 19)

It seems that the main term of *Unity and Aspect* is “implication,” which may also somehow suggest healing the wounds, filling the gaps and overcoming the traumas of human language and thinking.

And this is perhaps why Haas designates his project as phenomenological. In fact, it could be said that he tries to invent a new mode of language for phenomenological ontology, speaking of being, not in the sense of basis, substance, ἀρχή; but rather, *qua* the being of phenomena, for it is implied in them, and they are implied in being, as well as in each another, in their own situations, and in our thinking and dealing with them, all of them being one, temporal and aspectual, as he argues throughout *Unity and Aspect*.

As a phenomenologist then, Haas is interested in thinking creatures who perform intentional acts—and in intentionality as such, although he does not use this word. But in his attempt to create a new language for first philosophy, he is nevertheless unprepared to be as anti-anthropocentric as some contemporary philosophical schools insist that we should be. *Unity and Aspect* does not hesitate to recognize the position of a human as special with respect to the thinking of being and the universe in which the human being is implied, and which is implied in its thinking. Haas uses the word “illumination” to describe this intention or attitude. And he terms “improvisation” the act in which it results, which semantically stands quite far from, for instance, perception and construction. They differ because they are neither extracted from situations, from things, from being; nor are they merely involved in them—but, as he states, implied by them. Haas resorts, therefore, to a Greek word, an ancient

term, which is essential for the attempt to avoid the history of the rational metaphysical tradition's definition of Man, or human being, or ourselves:

And if the Greeks found a way of taking up this problem, at least of naming illumination, that which illuminates itself and others, it might not be surprising that it was called φῶς, just as coming to light or being lit was φαίνω or φαίνεσθαι. Yet somehow this would also suggest that they had a way to illuminate us, not merely as alive or dead, mortal or immortal, natural or artificial, nor as masters and possessors of nature, nor simply as knowers or thinkers, whether of concepts or forms or ideas or what lies beyond them, or not. For it seems that even before we were rational animals, or those living creatures which have speech or language, they named us φῶς, or what we will just call phos. (Haas, 2018, 24)

He proceeds to connect illumination with implication:

And yet, if we are light in some way, it might not just be because we can be illuminated, nor just because we, or light, are implicated in that which we illuminate, and not because we somehow light up the objects of the objective sciences, nor just ourselves, completely or not, although we seem to do so. Rather it could be that we seek to shed light on things because that is how we are one, so not simply the illumination of self, nor self-illumination. And it might only be because we are attempting to illuminate, that we could switch things, like lamps, on or off. (Haas, 2018, 24)

Then later, he refers to his own attempt to save such human traits as thinking and speaking, while avoiding the traditional opposition of subject and object, consciousness and the world:

For then phos is probably not just something like that which is alive in us, switched on through some kind of electric or spiritual current, constantly present throughout our lives, and switched off at death, at least insofar as this translation may perhaps tell us nothing about how we are one, temporally and aspectually. And so too with respect to the claim that phos is the personhood or personality of the person, or the agency of the agent, whether in psychology or anthropology, sociology or history, law or politics. For our words and deeds, when translated into this kind of language might rather appear to be objects belonging to subjects, or the presence of the subjectivity of subjects, not just mechanical or not, free or determined, but still not implied by phos. (Haas, 2018, 83)

Similarly, the idea of consciousness with its privileged position represents the focal point for critique in contemporary theory as well; it is the main obstacle on the way to the possibility of new versions of metaphysics, or object-oriented thought, as opposed to what could be called—in the words of Quentin Meillassoux—correlationism, which is (as the so-called speculative realists posit) characteristic of Continental post-Kantian philosophy, and primarily, phenomenology. From the perspective of correlationism, we are only capable of accessing the correlation between conscious-

ness and being, but not each one of them taken apart from each other; which is why we cannot access things as such. As Graham Harman argues (reading Meillassoux with reference to Husserl and Heidegger, as well as to Kant): we are dealing solely with an imaginary access to things—for we gain this access only in an intentional act of consciousness; just as, for Heidegger, the world appears only as a correlation of *Dasein* (Harman, 2019, 400–402).

And yet, such a critique lets us see just one side of the phenomenological gesture, which actually results from a radical development of the post-Kantian philosophical tradition. It is worth noting that its other side involves the same aspiration which is found in the speculativists. The difference, therefore, between phenomenology and speculative realism, though obvious, must be suspended. No wonder that *Unity and Aspect*, with its suspension of the position of the human, reminds us of the problems posed by anti-correlationists, just as both of them are somehow interested in the questions of first philosophy and metaphysics.

In order to clarify the dual orientation of phenomenology's attempt to overcome its origin, one could compare this gesture with music, namely, with the activity that the American composer John Cage embodies while performing his well-known composition "4.33." On the one hand, this gesture is the final act of destruction for all musical traditions with their forms and rules and harmonies. From now on, the absence of sounds could also be considered music. This is the final act of the orgy of Modernity, now taking us to a new post-modern state of existence without music, without meaning, without sense—destruction in a negative sense. But it is also the first positive act—for Cage shows that absolute silence is never present. And if we forego our creative-subjectivity, our will-to-power, construction and interpretation, we will hear a huge variety of sounds which we did not pay attention to before. This is bound to bring us to a new kind of music, which is still composed and played and improvised today, and which is fascinating, and reminds of old forms of harmony, although it is far from them. Thus, if we were to compare *Unity and Aspect* to music, we might say that it belongs to a kind of minimalism, time and again repeating its passages in different arrangements in 37 series with a rich *Appendix*, composed of quotations from the history of philosophy and art, and meditating upon them.

CONCLUSION

And Haas is quite aware of his position in relation to the tendencies of contemporary thought, as well as of the necessity of avoiding the repetition of such a position, so as to leave it suspended in a new form of language:

Nevertheless, this probably does not simply mean that our work is post-metaphysical or pre, trans- or quasi-metaphysical, much less anti-metaphysical. And if all attempts to get out of metaphysics, beyond it, to transcend it, think its ground or horizon, or destroy it, if they all seem to lead back to metaphysics, it might be necessary perhaps to refuse to simply translate its results into the language of success or failure, inside or outside, certainty or uncertainty, true or false, potential or actual, empirical or transcendental, possible or necessary, revealed or concealed, determinate or indeterminate. And this could even mean that the history of metaphysics is implicated in our work, perhaps even implied by it, which would presumably have implications for both. (Haas, 2018, 21)

Here, we could not even be sure if we are entitled to speak of “necessity, or even possibility,” for it is still unknown if such a thing exists. So, on the one hand, for someone like Meillassoux, such a philosophy could be called speculative insofar as it tells us about the possibility of accessing reality; and it should be called metaphysics insofar as this access is based on the principle of sufficient reason *qua* principle of determination and necessity (Meillassoux, 2013, 80). If this is accurate, then Haas’ thought certainly could not be called metaphysics in any traditional sense because his language is of a problematic nature; which is why he turns to the ontological problem in order to leave it suspended. But on the other hand, one of the advantages of *Unity and Aspect* is that on some meta-level it suspends and problematizes possibility, any possibility of speaking definitely and making sense.

There still remains the question as to whether Haas’ attempt to overcome the trauma of metaphysics and its critique, as well as the deconstruction of such critique, by creating some new language for first philosophy, is ever “successful.” He creates a new way of speaking, as Heidegger or Derrida do—for as Tanzer notes: the project of *Unity and Aspect* is a direct continuation of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, “as unity and aspect are the most direct implications of being and time, respectively, which can be taken as implying that *Unity and Aspect* is the implication of *Being and Time* (Tanzer, 2018). Or, as I have argued in another context, while thinking of the specific traits of contemporary theory: even though theory and rational thinking previously directed and guided the development of humanity, revolutionized it and pushed it forward; nowadays, when the absurdity of contemporary theory exceeds its radical level, it seems to be “too late” with respect to the practice of life generated by this theory, which goes far beyond all its limits, simply because it transcends strict rational thinking. In fact, it must be admitted that all kinds of theorizing are “too late,” when compared to practice, even those, that are predicated by this very theory itself (Nikonova, 2012, 191).

Haas captures this practice by suspending language in *Unity and Aspect*. It is up to the reader to decide whether this attempt is “successful,” at least to the extent that

the reader would somehow be implicated by its philosophical setting, by its problematization—and improvise upon it. For my part, although I am not sure it “solves” any particular philosophical problems, I must say that the language of *Unity and Aspect* has a strong impact, and it cannot help but assert its influence—certainly not as a language of theory, but as a kind of speech practice, the practice of suspending any speech act and any definite sense which could entrap us into metaphysical thinking.

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