

Comment on Antoon Vergote's "Phenomenology and Psychoanalysis: Reflections on  
Alphonse DeWaelhens' book *Schizophrenia* " ~~X~~

Thomas Ewens

What a pleasure, and privilege, to listen to Vergote's dialog-critique of Alphonse DeWaelhens' book La Psychose. Essai d'interprétation analytique et existentielle! Vergote's original text is from 1984 but it remains as fresh today as it was then: a splendid example of the passionate pursuit of the questions posed to philosophy by the advent of psychoanalysis, and of the philosophic exigencies of a discourse on or about psychoanalysis, by two grand masters of contemporary thought who were also grand friends.

In resuming with great finesse DeWaelhens' moves in developing his subject, and in clearly marking out the terrain of his own disagreements with the positions of DeWaelhens, Vergote in fact resumes a conversation that began twenty-five years earlier, and -- we here today are the living evidence -- continues until now. And if one recalls, as Vergote does with such perspicacity, that DeWaelhens himself -- in his last chapter (which, if memory serves, he originally intended as his first chapter) -- retraces in several magisterial pages the modern history of reason and its variously conceived other and, in so doing, sets forth his own conception of that "enlarged reason" Merleau-Ponty called for, that is, a conception of reason adequate to take account of the discoveries of Marx, Freud, DeSaussure, and phenomenology itself, if one recalls all of that, then one realizes that Vergote, in and across his discussion of DeWaelhens' book, has situated the topic of these annual conferences at the heart of philosophy's effort to define rationality, and thus itself, since the time of Kant and, in particular, since Hegel.

There is only one thing that is missing in this prodigious tour de force that Vergote has offered us: missing are the explosive laughter, the jokes, the witticisms, the exclamations, the "*Mais non !*", the *sourires*, the inimitable body language of DeWaelhens, in short the extraordinary communicability of these two friends, so infinitely respectful of one another, so infinitely loving also. They remain for many of us a supreme example of what Louvain is at its best, an unremittingly loyal pursuit of the truth in dialog with friends who could not be so critical of one another did they not love one another so much. Plato taught us early on the the passion for truth was not divorced from the erotic passion we have for one another; and, like Plato's Academy, the Institute of Philosophy at Louvain has always been a place where the philosophic dialogue among friends takes place and comes into its own. Of all of this, Vergote's paper is a deeply moving, exemplary witness, no less exemplary for being delivered with the simplicity, critical perspicacity, generosity and grace that has characterized Vergote's participation in the debates at Louvain for fifty years.

Faced with the task of commenting on such a rich paper, I think of the superb Shona sculpture I saw yesterday at the Zimbabwe Exposition at the African Museum in Tervuren. It was titled, simply: "Man With

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theory of mediation. Some think, as I do myself, that the theory of mediation provides the best contemporary example we have of a veritable human science -- a human science, not in the vague European sense of a general doctrine about the human, but in the sense of a discipline that would both take adequate account of the specificity of the human -- and thus be different from any natural science or behavioral science -- and at the same time be in some sense recognizably scientific -- and thus be different from any of the phenomenological, hermeneutical, linguistic, literary discourses of what are still called the humanities.<sup>1</sup>

This is not the place to describe the theory of mediation. But I do want to make clear that I take the theory of mediation (a theory Vergote knows well) as my critical vantage point in asking about the theoretical status of the theory that Vergote proposes. That said, let us ask again: What is the theoretic status of the theory that Vergote proposes? And how might that theory relate to a veritable scientific theory of the human such as the one Gagnepain proposes?

Permit me to briefly elaborate this question in reference to Vergote's paper.

In discussing DeWaelhens' effort to draw together a coherent account of the symptoms of psychosis, Vergote explains very clearly the theoretic issue that I want to focus upon. One might think, he says, that a synthetic account of the symptoms of psychosis is a simple matter of observation. Not at all. DeWaelhens' retracing of the modern history of psychiatry shows, as does the epistemology of the sciences and phenomenology itself, that "the operative concepts borrowed from psychology and philosophy" determine our description of the facts of psychosis. In other words, facts are only facts for a theory. Vergote is certainly right about this. What, we may ask, are his own operative concepts and what their theoretical status?

DeWaelhens, Vergote tells us, was convinced by his study of the history of psychiatry and by his own philosophic conceptions that there was "a reciprocal envelopment between the observation of facts and theoretic concepts". These theoretic concepts (borrowed from a variety of places) serve as an interpretive grid for DeWaelhens' (and Vergote's) reading of the phenomena. What are those interpretive grids?

For DeWaelhens, Vergote says, the interpretive grid is provided by "psychoanalytic concepts". But of course the status of these psychoanalytic concepts is itself in question: Whose concept of psychoanalytic concepts? Nuttin's? Lagache's? Brenner's? Lacan's? In fact, after DeWaelhens has described the five essential traits of schizophrenia in terms of psychoanalytic concepts, he interprets them all in function of a certain conception of language and of philosophy: "the negative of negativity", Vergote says, that is, the negative of the "structuring efficacy" attributable to "the operative negativity of

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<sup>1</sup> I have developed this point more fully in "Lonergan and Gagnepain: The Human Sciences in Question", Method, Volume 15, Number 1, Spring 1997.

Hegel”, to “the intentionality of Husserl”, to Heidegger’s notions of “existence and difference”. In other words, De Waelhens and Vergote invoke the basal philosophic concepts expressive of any human presence in the world.

These are not psychoanalytic concepts. Moreover, these concepts admit of quite different interpretations. Gagnepain, for instance, sees them as structural, that is, as marking the difference between man and nature, a difference which is given and not a matter of choice. DeWaelhens sees them as structural but also as offering a ‘developmental’ terrain of choice: confronted with an originary loss, a person may consent to and accept the loss -- and thus renounce the immediate, or may not consent to and not accept (that is, as Freud said, may disavow) the loss -- and thus not renounce the immediate.

Vergote makes clear that this thesis of DeWaelhens is not that of Freud, or of Lacan, or of Vergote himself. Vergote adds that DeWaelhens’ interpretation is based not just on psychoanalytic concepts and a conception of philosophy but also on a psychology of development. And one essential part of that psychology of development is the stage called mirror-stage and the paranoid model of the unconscious inherited from Lacan. There is also the notion of constitution, notably the constitution of “the constituting unconscious” or “unconscious constitution” or “theory of developmental constitution” mentioned above, theory which Vergote contests insofar as it would interpret paranoia as a fixation at a given stage (mirror-stage). In contesting DeWaelhens’ view of psychosis as a primary and definitive refusal to “consent to being”, i.e., refusal to accept an originary loss as precisely originary, Vergote contests what he calls “the principle itself of a sufficient comprehension according to the model of genetic constitution”. It is in fact just here that he appeals to a language of economic forces and a pulsional conflict of Eros and Thanatos. These conflicts, he thinks, mark the limits of both a phenomenological comprehension and an psychoanalytic explication. Vergote, like Schotte, denies that a psychotic is one from the beginning; or, rather, the psychotic both is, and is not, psychotic from the beginning. To some early calamity another, later one must be added, to bring about a psychosis in the present of the patient -- a coming into being that Vergote would explain by an interplay between an originary moment of potential psychosis (the infant is not schizophrenic) and a retroactive effect after the fact (*apres-coup*).

What interests me here is not these issues for their own sake but only the question of the theoretic grids or, more exactly, the succession of theoretic grids, that Vergote presents us in developing his critique of DeWaelhens.

One of DeWaelhens’ grids, of course, is phenomenology (his “conception of philosophy”, as Vergote calls it.) Vergote says, somewhat astonishingly, that if the inheritors of Freud had possessed the culture of Freud, we would not need philosophy. But we do not possess Freud’s culture, and phenomenology, Vergote feels, “seems to accord the best with psychoanalytic concepts”. Now here, notice, it is not, as before, the psychoanalytic concepts which provide the grid or guide but rather phenomenology which “opens” the psychoanalytic concepts and permits what Vergote calls “*une écoute decouvrant*” (a

disclosive, or freeing, listening) of the psychoanalytic concepts. It provides them, in other words, a kind of philosophic baptism and gives them a new life.

There are other grids that Vergote invokes. In contesting DeWaelhens' account of psychosis as a disavowal of ordinary loss, Vergote not only undermines "the model of genetic constitution" but also insists upon the importance of another theoretic model, equally essential to psychoanalysis, the economic model of "the language of forces in conflict".

Permit me to recall here, with respect to the economic model and, in particular, with respect to the concept of the pulsion -- frontier notion, as Vergote says, between the biological and the psychic -- that Vergote has maintained for years the importance of a double reading of the pulsional reality proper to psychoanalysis, one a lecture of meaning, the other a lecture of economic forces. Ricoeur, in his book on Freud, systematically developed this point -- and expressly recognized his debt to Vergote in doing so. DeWaelhens, if memory serves, criticized Ricoeur's maintenance of this distinction at the expense of a more seamless philosophic reading of the significations embedded in the pulsions. For his part, Vergote has always maintained the theoretical and clinical importance of the economic register, and the bastard nature of the concepts necessary to think it.

I have never quite known what to think about this issue but I have never been convinced by Vergote's insistence on the economic as an explanatory factor. This issue, in any case, opens upon the very important developments in the understanding of the pulsional dimension of human existence that we owe to the work of Schotte, Melon, Kinable, Lekeuche and others (including, of course, DeWaelhens and Vergote) whose work has been inspired by Szondi. Rudolph Bernet also discussed this issue in his paper this morning. Many of the people just mentioned are in the audience and I hope they may return to this issue in the question period but I will not further discuss it here.

There is still another grid that Vergote invokes to explain the clinical phenomena of psychoanalysis: "a literary work, a drama of Sophocles, furnishes an essential grid for the deciphering of the unconscious". And here he places back to back -- not perhaps without a bit of *malice jouissante*, Jung's doubtful theory of archetypes and Lacan's theory of the symbolic order. This leads Vergote to bring into play still another set of grids: the ancient myths and the existential dimensions that they bring with them. The latter, he tells us, open upon a dynamic theory of memory in which an immemorial archeological past and its directions of sense are always at work and capable of being reactivated after the fact -- a kind of double constitution in fact which, according to Vergote, an enlarged philosophic anthropology must also integrate.

It is impossible not to admire the richness, the scope, and the sinuosity of Vergote's thought. But what is one to make of all these grids and guides and variously disclosive readings? What is one to make of this hybrid discourse that expertly juggles psychoanalytic concepts, Hegelian, phenomenological, and

Heideggerian philosophic conceptions, neuro-physiological notions, literary figurations and mythical references? What, if anything, might limit and control this somewhat eclectic and heterogeneous assemblage of theories and models, this proliferation of guides and grids?

There is, of course, more than one way to answer such questions. If I might, however, I would like to ask Vergote how he might answer these critical questions in terms of a scientific verification of the sort proposed by the theory of mediation. The theory of mediation, for example, insists upon the fact that the clinic is the place where theories of this sort can be verified, or not. This clinical verification of theoretic concepts the theory of mediation considers basic to the development of any veritable human science. Such a human science must be a *clinical* anthropology. Does the clinic play this kind of role with respect to Vergote's many-headed grid? If not, what role does it play? And if, perchance, the clinic cannot provide a terrain of critical verification for these philosophical-psychoanalytic theoretic elaborations, by what criteria may we recognize their validity? What relation, finally, is there between the different theoretic grids Vergote invokes and the constitution of a veritable science of the human?

Or, if I may put these questions somewhat more playfully: what, if anything, has changed in Vergote's thought "*apres le coup mediationiste*", that is, in the "*apres-coup*" of the theory of mediation? Does Vergote agree that, in order to think adequately about these matters, we may need to appeal to a veritable science of the human distinct from psychoanalysis and distinct, too, from philosophy?

Thank you.