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# **Viet Cong Philosophy: Tran Duc Thao**

**by**

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In discussing ideologies, Gramsci pointed out that, “according to Marxism, ideologies are all but arbitrary; they are historical facts that must be fought and unveiled in their character of instruments of domination, not because of ethical reasons, etc., but precisely for reasons of political struggle: in order to render those who are dominated independent from those that dominate them, in order to destroy a type of hegemony and create another one, as a necessary moment in the overturning of praxis.”<sup>[1]</sup> News reports in the past five years have made it clear to everyone that for all practical purposes the United States has been militarily defeated in Vietnam. What has remained entirely unknown is that, while General Giap has been unleashing Tet offensives in the battle-fields, Viet Cong philosophers have also: been busy waging an ideological battle on the philosophical level. Modern imperialism finds its ideological justification in the now fashionable linguistic philosophy which either regards all meanings as wholly arbitrary (e.g., Quine, White, Goodman, etc.), or reduces them to the facticity of everyday discourse (e.g., Wittgenstein, Austin, etc.). In this fashion, all meanings are either equally unfounded, or they can be founded *only* in the domain of the given. In either case, imperialism is implicitly justified, for, in the first case it is regarded as at least as rational a system as any other, thus neutralizing any possible rational arguments for its debunking, or else, in the second case, since all meanings reduce to the given and the given is, in fact, imperialist, imperialism itself becomes the criterion of all meaningfulness.

This ridiculous apologetic state of affairs cannot be tolerated and it is not at all surprising to find Tran Duc Thao, probably the most brilliant of Vietnamese philosophers, hard at work developing a theory of consciousness and a theory of language based on labor and historical becoming meant to show how all meaning is necessarily teleological in character and historically rooted in the concrete operations of human subjects. If such is in fact the case, then the abstract categories of imperialism are neither exempt from the need of a foundation, nor will the fact that they are coextensive with ordinary discourse provide them with the needed foundation. The task of revolutionary philosophy is, therefore, to show how the imperialist ideology is both unfounded and unfoundable and, furthermore, how the historical dialectic at work leads to its eventual overthrow. This is precisely what Tran Duc Thao has done in a series of articles recently published in the French philosophy journal, *La Pensée*.

Who is Tran Duc Thao? Although his work is central in terms of the latest developments of Marxian thought, since he has resided in “North” Vietnam for over fifteen years, he is practically unknown in the English-speaking world. The available biographical information is very scarce. He studied in Paris in the 1930s at the *École Normale* where he met Merleau-Ponty and became interested in phenomenology. His major work, *Phénoménologie et Materialisme Dialectique*, appeared in 1951, and remains today one of the best critiques of Husserlian phenomenology. It also marks, by Tran Duc Thao’s own admission, his shift from a phenomenological to a Marxist perspective. Having returned to Vietnam immediately after the French defeat in the first Indo-Chinese war, he has not been heard from since, with the exception of his few articles in *La Pensée*.<sup>[2]</sup>

In many ways, Tran Duc Thao’s philosophical development is similar to Sartre’s and Merleau-Ponty’s. Their common interests center around the synthesis of phenomenology and Marxism -- a major theme of post-World War II French philosophy in general. The differences among the three, however, are more important than the similarities. Sartre and Merleau-Ponty never succeeded in transcending the phenomenological frame of reference, thus producing a forced synthesis between the two. In the case of Merleau-Ponty, Marxism was eventually discarded altogether after his writing of *Les Aventures de la Dialectique* in 1955. For Tran Duc Thao, however, the transition to Marxism turned out to be the only “conceivable solution to the

problems raised by phenomenology”, resulting in a radical change of viewpoint, *i.e.*, a total rejection of phenomenology.

As Tran Duc Thao himself indicates in the preface to his book,[3] what led to his rejection of phenomenology was the reading of Husserl’s later works (*Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften*, *Ideen II*, and “Ursprung der Geometrie”[4]) in 1939, when both Tran Duc Thao and Merleau-Ponty had access to the Husserlian archives in Louvain. According to Tran Duc Thao, the practical results of Husserl’s analyses are incompatible with the theoretical framework within which they were originally developed,[5] and the phenomenological *Weltkonstitution* negates itself during its realization since it is no longer an act of consciousness (*prise de conscience*), but *active, practical doing*.

The analysis of meaning in the precategorical context within which meaning arises — the major theme of Husserl’s later works — clearly shows that the objects of description are no longer the contents of a transcendental consciousness, but natural and historical phenomena, and that the *Weltkonstitution* simply occludes the process of historical becoming. In other words, once translated into practical terms, the idealistic framework of the Husserlian method turns out to be a useless duplication of empiricism — or, what is worse, a new *type* of empiricism. According to Tran Duc Thao, examples of this can be found in manuscripts (later published as *Ideen II*) where Husserl deals with the constitution of “things”, which is used as the foundation of all intersubjective relations and, therefore, of all social and political values. “The *Weltkonstitution* here turns out to be entirely based on sense-data, bodily motions, and physical configurations as they are constituted on the actual animal level. The description of the primordial world confidently insists on these elementary bodily movements so that there are no doubts that the ‘transcendental’ subject dealt with by phenomenology must be unambiguously identified with man in flesh and blood, developing in the real world.”[6]

The same thing happens in the historical and intentional analyses of the *Krisis* and of “The Origins of Geometry”, where the attempt to constitute universal meaning and truth in the actual historical development leads to the discovery of the creativity of human activity in its actual environment. This leads to serious problems and eventually reveals the impossibility of the original project. Since, for Husserl, the transcendental Ego turns out to be the

actual consciousness of each man, the reality of human praxis is thereby reduced to the contents of individual experiences. At this point, Husserl falls into a total relativism which undermines the objectivity of the Welt/constitution: “the merchant at the market has his own market-truth”.[\[7\]](#)

Thus, Husserl closes the idealistic circle, which, starting out with the contemplation of eternal essences, winds up with the discovery of the futility of all values and the so-called crisis of Western man — the root of the existentialists’ claim that the only sense in life is the lack of any sense, *i.e.*, “life unto death”. Husserl, however, wants at all costs to avoid these existentialist consequences by stressing the rationality of the *Lebenswelt* and the need to “return to the things themselves”. According to Tran Duc Thao, the crisis can only be overcome by abandoning the idealistic scaffolding (transcendental Ego, the constitution, etc.) and by pointing out that man’s work is the only source of truth. Being a bourgeois philosopher, Husserl was unable to take these steps and recognize that material labor is the only “giver of sense” (*Sinngebung*) even if his last work — the bourgeois “swan song” — indicates the new direction.

As previously indicated, for Tran Duc Thao, the solution to these problems is to be sought only through dialectical materialism. He himself had been aware of these problems implicit in Husserlian phenomenology.[\[8\]](#) but failed to realize their full import until he read the unpublished manuscripts that were later published as *Die Krisis, Ideen II*, etc.[\[9\]](#) The first part of Tran Duc Thao’s book was, in fact, to have been the beginning section of a longer study of phenomenology. This however, he never completed. The second part of the book is devoted to “the dialectic of actual becoming” and reveals an altogether different viewpoint, even though the earlier phenomenological influences remain very strong. As he puts it, “the true contribution of phenomenology has rarely been understood”, the only aspects that have been stressed being its anti-naturalistic and intuitionistic approaches. [\[10\]](#) What needs investigation is Husserl’s stress on a rational and scientific analysis, *i.e.*, his rigorous critique of all mystifications by means of constant references to the “material contents of experience” which avoids formalism without at the same time falling into arbitrariness and irrationalism. The positive contribution of phenomenology for Tran Duc Thao consists in the effort to construct a new rationality, the stress on the concrete contents of experience (even if hidden under idealistic veils) and Husserl’s descriptive analyses which must not only be integrated by dialectical materialism, but also must inevitably lead to it. In this sense, the second part of *Phénoménologie et Materialisme Dialectique* can be seen as a continuation of Husserl’s project of

*Ideen II*, now inverted, or, to use an old metaphor, turned right side up. The relationship between consciousness and the intentional object is not explained by Tran Duc Thao from the viewpoint of the transcendental Ego, but rather in terms of the subject-object, man-nature dialectic mediated throughout by human labor. “The notion of production” writes Tran Duc Thao, “fully accounts for the enigma of consciousness since the object produced attains a meaning for man as a human product. The understanding of its sense is precisely the symbolic transposition of productive material operations within a system of intentional operations where the subject ideally appropriates the object by reproducing it in consciousness.”[11] The bourgeois philosopher, to the extent that he does not *produce*, cannot understand this process since he belongs to a leisure class. Thus he has no way to move from the sensible to the intelligible and vice-versa. Because of this, he cannot see how intentional meanings can be imposed upon the world. As such, the bourgeois philosopher is always an idealist even when he presents himself as a materialist (e.g., the abstract materialism of the 18th century philosophers). The bourgeois knows labor only as the category “exchange-value”, and consequently, can conceive of matter only in an unreal and mechanistic aspect, i.e., only as an object of consciousness (Husserl’s “materiality” or *Dinglichkeit*). As such it has as its necessary counterpart the purely internal spirit.’[12] The unity of man and nature either appears as a mystery or is altogether denied (as in modern science, the objectivity of which is based on the systematic elimination of every subjective element from nature). Here Tran Duc Thao reiterates Husserl’s critique of positivism but differs from it in that the dialectic between subject and object does not obtain solely as an activity of consciousness, but rather as a concrete material activity that actualizes meaning. This subjectification of the object, i.e., the process of the humanization of nature through labor, is the theme of the second part of *Phénoménologie et Materialisme Dialectique*, and it seeks to show how matter becomes life and, subsequently, human value. In this part, Tran Duc Thao anticipates all of the major themes later developed in the series of articles published in *La Pensée*, elaborating the development of consciousness from the very beginning to the origin of language.

The whole approach to the problem is historical and dialectical materialistic: consciousness is not seen as the product of any “transcendental constitution”, but is rather explained through a concrete anthropological study from the first manifestation of human life in the process of man’s adaptation to his social and natural environment. Tran Duc Thao’s analyses can be divided into three parts which correspond roughly to the division of the articles themselves: (1) the origin of consciousness from the sensual-psychical level to the animal level;[13] (2) its development through the

process of collective labor and the making of tools;[14] and (3) the origins of language.[15]

The aim of Tran Duc Thao's analysis of the genesis of consciousness is to show that consciousness originates organically as language, generated in turn from the development of material conditions constituted in human activity. Unlike the formalistic or idealistic approaches, Tran Duc Thao does not see consciousness as explainable in terms of its own structure. This enables him to demonstrate consciousness as being directly related to the world of objective, material reality, and further, as being dependent upon that world. Only with such a grounding as this can we obtain a criterion of objectivity and truth. From a dialectical and materialist viewpoint, the first problem that now arises is to account for the transition from a mere animal psychism to the conscious psychism of human life, constituting the first manifestations of man's activity.[16]

For Tran Duc Thao, the transition occurs at an intermediary stage, defined as that of the *prehominid*. Here man's activity still operates on an unconscious level but implicitly contains the potential for developing consciousness. What distinguishes the prehominid from the animal is that the former uses material signs: the *indicative* gesture.[17] This is the "original form of consciousness". Tran Duc Thao argues against formalistic trends, which maintain that the meaning (*signification*) of every sign can be accounted for only by another sign. The fallacy of this approach, of course, is that it denies the possibility of any direct contact with things and, consequently, the reality of the external world is deprived of any meaning whatsoever.[18] The *indicative* sign is fundamental. Its meaning consists precisely in the positing of a direct relationship between the subject and the object as external and independent.[19] "The gesture of indicating represents the most elementary relation of consciousness with its object as external . . . the meaning of the indicative gesture expresses precisely this relation of objective externality which constitutes the fundamental intentionality of consciousness (as consciousness of the object) in contrast with the simply kinesthetic psychism of the animal."[20] In fact, the animal does not perceive objects as external perceptions independent of its bodily movements. It is thus incapable of indicating them. In the animal we find signals, but signals that lack the *meaning* which is given only by the intentional relationship with the object. At the prehominid stage, the indicative gesture is necessary for the coordination of group movements, and hence, for the establishment of regular work-patterns. Yet it still occurs at an unconscious level as immediate, material behavior. During the hunt (the prevalent form of group activity at this

time)[21] the indicative gesture becomes the *act of guidance* as the hunters pointed to the animal to be chased. At this stage, the indicative sign is still in a simple form, as a linear movement, operative only in the immediate environment of each hunter.

The transition from the *objective* to the *subjective* form of the indicative sign (as a conscious relation of the subject towards the object) comes about only after the indicative sign is established as a regular pattern of behavior and the prehominid starts indicating the object to himself. Tran Duc Thao explains this transition on the basis of the reciprocal and symmetrical nature of the relations of collective work.[22] In the process of hunting, the members of the group indicate the object to each other, meaning that each is simultaneously the *giver* and the *receiver* of the indication: both the one who guides and the one who is guided. This double function where each worker sees himself in the other and through the other enables him to synthesize the two linear movements of the indication (the one of the giver and the one of the receiver) in a *circular arc*, allowing him to objectify himself to himself, i.e., to achieve consciousness of himself as related to the environment and, therefore, distinct from it.

Thus, the intersubjective relations developed in collective work are an essential condition for the formation of consciousness (which is always self-consciousness), and hence, for the constitution of all social values. In fact, the subject becomes conscious when, through the mediation of the other, he returns to himself and establishes a lived relationship to himself. The *image of the group* becomes a permanent component of his psychical system by constituting a sort of internalized society whereby he is always conscious of himself in relation to (opposition to, contradiction with, modification of) the other.[23] The continuous presence of the other in the process of attaining self-consciousness is exemplified by the phenomena of dreams, alienation and hallucination. In these phenomena, the distance and distinction between *self* and *other* seem to disappear. Here it might be pointed out that the phenomenon of hallucination represents a common and normal experience in primitive societies where the boundaries between the individual and the group are still fluid.

In its *material* form, the indicative sign communicates an *ideal* movement which directs the others' attention to the object. The development of the indicative sign from the line to the circle (indicating both the object and

the subject in their reciprocal relation) starts as a material act (the concrete act of guidance) but ends up in an ideal image, *i.e.*, the intentional image of the object as mediated through the image of the group. As Tran Duc Thao points out, it is because of this that idealism, by confusing form with substance, reduces all consciousness to immateriality,[24] thus occluding the material component always present in consciousness. Every act of consciousness is based on a set of psycho-physical movements — which, though not external, are no less real and concrete — and expresses man's anticipated actions towards objective reality as a field of practical possibilities. The idealistic confusion comes about because civilized man seems to lose the material component of the indication (the pointing of the finger) in its ideal counterpart. Yet, the material movement remains, e.g., the function of *looking* as an *internal* reaction which implicitly contains the movements to be performed in the *external* behavior. This is particularly crucial, since it shows the relation between consciousness, language (both in its verbal and non-verbal manifestations) and objective reality. Tran Duc Thao points out that language is not an expression of consciousness or thought. It is consciousness itself in its immediate reality as the unity of the signifying act and its meaning. Consciousness is what relates the subject to himself and the world through internal kinesthetic movements.[25] Man's objective material relationship with the environment entails a meaning immediately lived (*vécu*) before emerging at the level of consciousness. In other words, consciousness is not a reservoir of meanings which are subsequently poured on external conditions, but immediate meaning and teleology present in human activity. Hence, “we must admit the existence of a language which belongs to reality (*le langage de la vie réelle*)”[26] which is prior to consciousness and originates objectively in the development of the material relations of social life. Language is not arbitrary. It is a constitutive moment of consciousness[27] with its own pre-conscious meaning. If it were a simple expression of consciousness all creation of meaning (the *Sinngebung*) would be a function of consciousness itself: it would be defined by *itself* as pure lived internality, rendering unexplainable its relation to matter. Only when the meaning becomes conscious can it be tied with *verbal signs* (and therefore regarded as arbitrary). The verbal sign does not exhaust the material reality of the signifying act, which is also manifested through gestures.[28] They acquire an increasingly representative character till they become operative schemes.

From this perspective, it is possible to show the fallacy of every dualistic conception of reality based on a mechanic interaction of consciousness and matter, and on a static monism which reduces everything to one principle, thus allowing only for quantitative changes. Through the dynamics of the indicative sign it appears, in fact, that consciousness (subject) and matter (object) are immediately related in a dialectical nexus where both

terms are reciprocally constituted through their relations as distinct but organic moments of the same process. Thus, consciousness is the *form* of matter (*substance*), where consciousness is to matter as the *figure* to its *background*, distinct but not separate from it, since only the background allows it to be distinguishable.[\[29\]](#) Matter, on the other hand, can only be defined as “what is independent of consciousness” (*independent* and not merely “external”), where independence is nothing but a quality of things in the conscious relation between subject and object. For Tran Duc Thao sense indicates objects as objective reality, independent of the subject, and this independent reality is already implied in the sense itself. The independence of matter obtains only through the activity of consciousness (indicative sign or sense perception) which is always immersed in, and practically oriented towards, the surrounding world.

This is also a result of the analysis of all the other qualities of matter. For example, the qualities that we see both in nature and in man-made objects are not properties of matter as such, but they are objectifications of the movements necessary to create the very object itself. While on the one hand we know matter only in motion — and therefore in certain configurations which are nothing more than movement in a state of rest — it is also true that we cannot reduce matter to motion since in order to have motion we must have something moving. Needless to say, this something in motion is matter, whose only quality is its independence of consciousness.[\[30\]](#)

From this viewpoint, the possibility of knowledge and the criterion for its validity cease to be problematic. In fact, we have now a mediating structure, whose first manifestation is the indicative sign, where man and external reality meet. In its development, knowledge (consciousness) is rooted in the conditions and eventually the contradictions of the material relations. From this follows movement of consciousness itself as part of the overall movement of things. This, in turn, originates according to man’s practical and teleological intentions. Consciousness, as well as its correlative image of nature, is itself social production.

Practical and social activity are synthesized in the indicative sign and indicate simultaneously both the external object and the external subject. It is this that gives rise to consciousness, which subsequently further develops new levels of social activity. “It is probable that the exercise of labor at the stage of the prehomominid has generated . . . the *prise de conscience* of this first linguistic

sign (the indicative sign) which constitutes the original form of consciousness as sense certainty. The acquisition of sense certainty, in turn, gives a new impulse to the work of adaptation, whose development generates the first progresses of language and consciousness. In a movement of reciprocal action the work of adaptation reaches increasingly complex structures, resulting with the appearance of *Homo Habilis* in the first form of productive labor.”<sup>[31]</sup>

For Tran Duc Thao, the dawn of consciousness coincides with the development of man’s practical activity, i.e., with the making of *tools*. In fact, we can speak of *human* activity, i.e., of *productive* activity, only with the creation of the first tools. It is only through tools mediating between man and the object of labor, that man can change external reality and transform his relationship with the environment. Here Tran Duc Thao points out that, according to Marx, productive activity — as distinguished from activity in general which is also present at an animal level — implies three moments: (1) the object of work; (2) man’s activity, and (3) the means of production.<sup>[32]</sup> Thus, man escapes the *repetitive* activity of the animal which works only to reproduce itself.

As Tran Duc Thao points out, man is the only animal who is able to use tools in the labor process. Even the most highly developed apes can use only their hands and, when they employ objects, they do not see them as tools, but as mere prolongations of their hands. The animal works only under the compulsion of biological need. Therefore, it is unable to abstract the moment of labor from the satisfaction of the need to introduce a mediating element between itself and the object of its desire. The object of biological need always occupies a central position in the animal’s perceptual field. Hence it cannot go beyond the stage of immediate and direct *manipulation*, since the total dynamic field does not allow for the introduction of a second object.<sup>[33]</sup> For the introduction of the third element in the perceptual field is possible only when the immediate satisfaction of the biological need is temporarily postponed and the preparation of the tool is *not* subordinated to it — and therefore exhausted with it. in other words, only when the preparation of the tool does not occur in the presence of the object of need — which is still present on the ideal level — can it become an end in itself. The biological need is substituted by the need to transform the material of labor, and therefore to create a tool. Only now the object of biological need is transformed through the mediation of the tool into an *object of labor*.<sup>[34]</sup> Thus, *productive* labor, which marks the beginning of human activity and the transition from *nature* to *culture*, is possible only when the prehomominid has overcome the stage of simple pointing. At this stage he is already capable of

idealizing. He can not only *represent* the absent object of biological need, but he can also create the ideal and *typical* form to be actualized in the tool.[\[35\]](#) In other words, he can idealize the tool before he makes it.

The development of the tool passes through three stages: (1) *direct manipulation*, where we cannot speak of tools yet, but only of objects immediately used to satisfy biological needs and prepared in the presence of the object of need (e.g., the stone or the stick used for hunting); (2) *elaboration*, when it is possible to represent the object of need and thus prepare the tool in its absence; and (3) *production*, when the tool has both a function and a form, *i.e.*, it corresponds to a *typical* image. We can distinguish elaboration from production because at the former stage the tool has a solely functional character: it is a syncretic combination of the role of the tool and the contingent nature of the available material.

As we have already seen, the transition from indication to idealization and from manipulation to production is a result of collective labor. What is important here is an aspect of social life at the stage of the prehominid which not only permits the development of idealizations, but also reinforces these idealizations through rehearsals of the activities where eventually these idealizations find their practical application. According to Tran Duc Thao, one of the major incentives for the production of the tool is the concrete *representation* of the laboring activity. Thus, during rest periods, the *group* reenacts both as play and preparation the various operations of the hunt. Through these representations which imitate the laboring process the whole group achieves a “collective *prise de conscience*” through which it is possible to recollect the object of need at an *ideal* level (since the need is already satisfied). This further motivates the elaboration of the tool. The *play* situation has to be emphasized, because in play the group has more freedom of movement, and, consequently, the possibility to imagine various new combinations is increased. In the situation of biological need, its immediate pressures restrict the group to already available schemes. Tran Duc Thao does not develop this point, but the implications are clear. In fact, we can conclude that labor can create and transform only when performed independently of restrictive schemes, and, further, when it is not an imposed burden separate from the rest of social life. In other words, labor is really productive and creative only when (1) it is not completely subordinated to other objectives and (2) when it is not separated from social life, *i.e.*, when there is no dichotomy between *working* time and *leisure* time, the second being not an elaboration of the first, but an escape from it.[\[36\]](#)

In the process of collective labor the indicative sign functions as an appeal among the workers meant to coordinate their movements. From the very beginning this appeal is reinforced by a vocal sound, which becomes connected to the image projected by the indicative sign. Thus, the work acquires an objective (linguistic) meaning through its connection with the indication. This connection marks the difference between man and the animal whose emotional sounds are nothing more than *pure* signals.<sup>[37]</sup> According to Tran Duc Thao, at this stage we have only *syncretic* words, since meaning is still dependent on its connection with the gesture and does not possess a *distinctive* form. This explains why the syncretic word has a polivalent character, *i.e.*, it changes depending on the gesture that accompanies it and can indicate either the object or its movement, or both. This phenomenon obtains also on the ontogenetic level, where the first manifestations of language in the child are characterized precisely by their polivalent value.

The linguistic sign develops simultaneously with social relations in collective labor and can be understood only in connection with the development of the indicative sign, from the presentative to the representative level. According to Tran Duc Thao, this transition has to be studied on the phylogenetic level since in the child it comes about through inherited structures which already contain future developments. The transition occurs in two stages: (1) The indicative sign is still based on the *after-image* of the object. For instance, if during the hunt the animal escapes behind a rock, the indicative sign can no longer point directly at the object, which is still present in the perceptual field as an after-image with the rock functioning as a reference point. This does not create a new structure, but only develops the old one. (2) After hunting has developed to the point that different groups participate in it with some groups encountering the prey before others, the indication of the vanguard to the rearguard in the case of an animal escaping behind the rock takes on a new qualitative meaning. In fact, for the rearguard, the rock is not a reference-point connected with the after-image of the animal. Hence, the communicated indication refers to something which is absent from the perceptual field. This is the origin of the representative indication which brings back into the perceptual field the absent object. Tran Duc Thao again stresses that the new linguistic structures originate from the material relation of labor and that the new meaning must be *subjectively* recreated. In fact, when the hunters in the rearguard repeat the sign of the vanguard, the sign that they direct to the vanguard is actually directed to themselves since it is no longer an appeal but simply a recognition of the relayed message. “Therefore, it is to themselves that the hunters in the rearguard address this indicative sign, *i.e.*, they turn to each other and to themselves by identifying themselves with

the call coming from the vanguard and in which they recognize themselves. It follows that the new sign immediately contains its own image so that the hunters of the rearguard recognize themselves in the call from the vanguard . . . Now, the very movement of recognition constitutes in the material signifying act the form of its *lived experience* (*vécu*) as *consciousness*.”<sup>[38]</sup>

The transition from the *presentative* indication of the *this here* to the *representative* of the *this absent* is the first form of reflection and the manifestation of that “liberation of the brain” whereby man can transcend the limitations of the present situation which always imprisons the animal. This “liberation” allows man to attain a more complex image of the world. After a certain development, however, it also permits him to escape reality and to confine himself in symbolic constructions by denying the reality of human life.<sup>[39]</sup> Idealism transforms these symbolic constructions into principles and interprets the overcoming of what is immediately given as a negation of objective reality. For Tran Duc Thao, on the contrary, the only meaning of this overcoming is social, since it is already objectively given in social labor when the group develops the division of labor. What is important is the development of the “collective worker” who is ideally present everywhere in the process while in fact he only deals with a part.

The syncretic word has only the *function* of a sentence but not its *form*. Philogenetically, the functional sentence develops in the transition from the presentative to the representative indication, *i.e.*, with the constitution of groups and the division of labor. The syncretic word applies only to an immediate situation. It makes communication possible only between subjects in the same spatial location. But the situation changes with the division of the group into a vanguard and a rearguard when communication becomes more complex. In this later case, the syncretic word alone becomes ambiguous<sup>[40]</sup> because not all of the group faces the same immediate situation. The different situations between the vanguard and the rearguard cause an ambiguity in communication. It is a matter of a contradiction between what is communicated and what is understood which results in the creation of new verbal synthesis. The real objective source of the contradiction is the new mode of production. The functional sentence is not developed by the vanguard for whom the immediate situation is always present, but by the rearguard, who is not immediately present in the field of action. Consequently it has to reformulate the message. Thus, the functional sentence “allows the group removed from the actual field of action to represent the objective relationship which is not present in their field of sense-perception.”<sup>[41]</sup> The functional sentence is developed along with tools. In both cases we have already the

beginning of a representative process which, however, is still undefined and subject to the contingency of the situation, e.g., the material available. But at this level, the word cannot do without the gesture. Only when the sign functions as totally independent can we speak of a *formal* and not merely *functional* sentence. Only with the creation of the *typical name* which indicates the object in its typical, distinct form, is it possible to abstract from the contingencies of the work process and render the whole process self-coherent.

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[1] Antonio Gramsci, *Il Materialismo Storico e la Filosofia di Benedetto Croce* (Turin, 1948), p. 236. For a very similar position, see Tran Duc Thao, “Marxisme et Phénoménologie”, in *La Revue Internationale*, Janvier-Février 1946.

[2] Another article, not mentioned in this note, deals with Hegel and appears for the first time in English translation in this issue of *Telos*.

[3] Tran Duc Thao, “Preface” to *Phénoménologie et Materialisme Dialectique* (Paris, 1951), p.5.

[4] Originally this work was published by Eugen Fink in *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, vol. 1, no. 2 (1939), under the title “Der Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem”. It has also appeared as “Beilage III” to Husserl’s *Krisis* (Den Haag, 1954), and it has remained as such in the Italian translation. In French, however, it was published separately with a long introduction by Jacques Denda: this accounts for Tran Duc Thao’s referring to this work separately. An English translation is now available: cf. Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. by D. Carr (Evanston, III., 1970). “The Origins of Geometry” appears as Appendix VI, pp. 353-378.

[5] Tran Duc Thao, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp 7-8

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 221-223.

[8] It is to be pointed out that Marvin Farber, in his *The Foundations of Phenomenology*, written in the late 1930s, already indicated some of these problems.

[9] That Tran Duc Thao attributes his “conversion” to Marxism to his reading of these works of Husserl is a rather unconvincing explanation. The problems that Tran Duc Thao recognizes in phenomenology were even more evident in Husserl’s early works. An even stronger and more plausible reason for his giving up phenomenology when he did might stem from his joining the French Communist Party in the 1940s and therewith tactfully being told to dispense with such idealistic pseudo-problems and to concentrate on more concrete ones.

[10] Tran Duc Thao, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 12.

[12] *Ibid*, p. 233.

[13] Tran Duc Thao, “Le Mouvement de l’Indication comme Forme Originale de la Conscience”, in *La Pensée*, no. 128, Aout 1966.

[14] Tran Duc Thao, “Du Geste de l’Index a l’Image Typique (I)”, in *La Pensée*, no. 147, Octobre 1969.

[15] Tran Duc Thao, “Du Geste de l’Index a l’Image Typique (II)”, in *La Pensée*, no. 148, Decembre 1969.

[16] “Le Mouvement . . .”, *op. cit.*, pp. 4-5.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[18] The apologetic bourgeois character of this ideological claim is immediately obvious: if we cannot grasp reality as such, every system (political, epistemological, and otherwise) is as arbitrary as the next — thus capitalism is at least as good as communism, and, to the extent that it is the *existing* one, it could never be replaced on rational ground.

[19] Tran Duc Thao, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.*,p.7.

[22] *Ibid.*, pp.8-9.

[23] *Ibid.*, pp 11-12.

[24] *Ibid.*,p. 13.

[25] Wittgenstein and his followers also identify language and consciousness. They go too far, however, when they identify consciousness with reality or, in the late Wittgenstein of the *Investigations*, with common usages, thereby erasing the materialistic distinction between the subject and the object and falling into idealism. Moreover, since everyday discourse is the discourse of the given (*i.e.*, imperialism), all possibilities are reduced to the facticity of the given. The same can be said of the structuralists' account of the same phenomena since they also identify language and consciousness. In the process of doing so, however, they make *both* language and consciousness external intra-structural realtions among *pre-given structures*. No meaning, therefore, is a subjective construct; all meanings become part of the object. Given this occlusion of the subject, it is not surprising that all *qualitative* changes become impossible and revolution is redefined in terms of such mechanistic distortions as *overdeterminations*.

On the other hand, Tran Duc Thao's account of language, consciousness, and objective reality aims precisely at showing the *materialistic* character of subjective constitution. To do this, he employs an argument very similar to that used by Husserl, in his fifth "Cartesian Meditation". (Here, Husserl shows how the problem of "other minds", or, in Sartrean terms, that of the sado-masochistic relationship, is solved in the subject relating to himself in exactly the same way that he relates to others. By this account, true intersubjectivity is thus rendered possible.)

[26] "Le Mouvement . . .", *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[29] *Ibid.*, p. 23.

[30] Tran Duc Thao, "L'Alvéole de la Dialectique de la Connaissance", in *La Pensée*, no. 149, Février 1970, pp. 100-101. According to Tran Duc Thao, Hegel's error consisted in reducing all matter to simple motion and, therefore, to the abstraction "motion". Consequently, all motion becomes subject which, as absolute motion, ends up in absolute rest. This is why the Hegelian dialectic which exalts movement, does this solely on the ideal level while leaving the real level untouched. Because of this, Hegel's philosophy ends up in political conservatism.

[31] Tran Duc Thao, "Du Geste de l'Index l'Image Typique" (I), *op. cit.*, p.6.

[32] *Ibid.*, p. 9.

[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp. 10-15.

[35] This is Tran Duc Thao's terminology which is obviously borrowed from Husserl, along with a great deal of his conceptual framework.

[36] It is interesting to compare Tran Duc Thao's position with Marcuse's. The latter holds that "no matter how justly and rationally the material production may be organized, it can never be a realm of freedom and gratification; but it can release time and energy for the free play of human faculties *outside* the realm of alienated labor." Cf. *Eros and Civilization* (New York, 1962), p. 142. Tran Duc Thao, on the other hand, holds that labor, undifferentiated from social activity, is creative human activity *par excellence*. Evidence for this can be found in the fact that in prehominid societies where the division of labor and alienation are not yet introduced, labor is the coordinator of *all* social activities. Thus, during *play*, the group reenacts the laboring process. Play is *free* labor. Cf. also Lukács' criticism of Schiller's notion of "play" where play leaves reality precisely as it found it while genuine play should creatively alter reality. This is why Marcuse constantly praises Schiller as a "revolutionary", while in Lukács' eyes, he turns out to be a conservative through and through. Cf. Georg Lukács, *Contributi alla Storia dell'Estetica* (Milan, 1957), translated by E. Picco, pp. 19-111.

[37] Tran Duc Thao, "Du Geste de l'Index a l'Image Typique (I)", *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 34.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[40] Tran Duc Thao, "Du Geste de l'Index a l'Image Typique (II)", *op. cit.*, p. 82.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 36.