

UNDECIDABLE SENSE AND THE LOGICS OF INEFFECTIVITY

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In *Indexicalism* and now, again, in *Memory Assemblages*, Shajara Bensusan has insightfully perceived how a main occupation of the historical tradition of metaphysics, and a central project of global contemporary capitalism (perhaps culminating in the massive contemporary ideological project of “artificial intelligence”), can be seen as united in what is essentially a single program: that of the *extraction of intelligibility* in a unitary form from phenomena and events for the purpose of their comprehension, mastery and control.¹ This project of violent extraction may also be seen -- as Bensusan’s critique suggests, and as I shall argue further here -- as a project of the attempted extraction and stabilization of the *senses* of the beings and lives of the earth: that is, of the extrication and appropriation, in a unitary form, of the *possible* direction and directedness of their temporal becoming and possibilities of significant presentation, to or for one another. Seen in this way, what gives unitary direction to this project of the extraction of senses is the value, assumption or ideological form of an *effective* – that is, in principle effectively *decidable* -- predictability, comprehension and control by means of the exercise of a (presumptively human) capacity of rational intelligibility and intelligence.

In recent work and publications, I have tried to critically investigate and interrogate the underlying logic of this project of effectivity, which (I have argued) begins with Aristotle’s application of the idea and value of a general and unitary *rational capacity* of decision or judgment, thought to be possessed uniquely by human beings, and finds a characteristic contemporary form in the idea of the

¹ See *Indexicalism*, p. 11, for the extractive project and the connection to AI.
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human subject or agent as the possessor of language.² By reflecting on the logical-metaphysical form and foundations of the project of effectivity, I have argued, we also are in a formal position to begin to articulate what I have called, by contrast, several “logics of ineffectivity” that (I have argued) could both critically witness the limits of the coherence of these assumptions of effectivity and rational capacity and, thereby, point to alternative forms of life no longer as much marked by their characteristic violence.

The main aim of this paper is to further develop the underlying idea of a *logic of ineffectivity* by developing the formal connection between the formally demonstrable *undecidability of presentational sense* and the actual witnessing of this *ineffectivity* on the level of practice: that is, of the forms of a collective global and geopolitical life. In particular, I will consider how a formally grounded consideration of the question or problem of *sense and its direction*, developed in the neutral positional terms of the (essentially indexical) relationships of a(ny) *one* with (any or all possible) *others*, can orient both a critique of the logic and ideology of presumptive effectivity that underlies the contemporary techno-capitalist project of extraction, and (more positively) a series of critical logics of practice that witness the consequences of the *undecidability of sense* on the level of the global organization of collective life. I consider how critical reflection on the logical and formal-semantic determinants of the extractive project within (what Emmanuel Severino terms) the “nihilistic” project of Western cosmopolitics offers to evince the alternative development of logics of ineffectivity that thus provide a possible response on the practical level to this global nihilism, *without* relying on something like a metaphysical principle of full *presence* or a theological position of the *plenitude* of possible sense. In the last section of the paper, I raise a couple of interpretive and critical questions about Bensusan’s development of (what he terms) some of the possible “routes” to ineffectivity, in the specific context of the spectral realism and pan-mnemism he argues for in *Memory Assemblages*, and thereby to reassess, from a slightly shifted perspective, some of the positive claims of justice, historically oriented memory, and messianic anticipation that he offers on behalf of spectral realism there.

² See, e.g. “Thinking and Being are not the Same”; “What is Orientation in Thinking Today?”; “What is a Rational Capacity?”

SENSE AND PRESENTATION: INDEXICALISM OF THE ONES AND THE OTHERS

Familiarly, the concept or value of *sense* has, in many ways, dominated the theoretical and logical-semantic projects of twentieth century philosophy. Here, the project of “making sense of things” is typically conducted in the medium of, their assumed or presumed intelligibility.³ But simultaneously and conversely, the broader technological/metaphysical/geopolitical project of the extraction and control of intelligibility -- though not at all limited to philosophy -- itself visibly functions as a project of the extraction and appropriation of sense in ways and terms that can be illuminated by this twentieth-century philosophical reflection. For if, as Bensusan argues in *Indexicalism*, the procedure of the process of extraction is to capture the intelligence of whatever appears by exposing its underlying principles and possibilities of the functioning of objects and processes, this project is *also*, at the same time, a project of the extraction and appropriation in unitary form of the *senses* of beings and lives: that is, of the directions of the meaning and possibilities of what they are or can be or become. Its aim, in these terms, is “to surprise the other in order to seize its secrets”: in other words, to find, in the other(s) it encounters or the characteristic modes of the life and becoming of any (other) one in general, the extractable sense and meaning that can itself be appropriated and understood as the intelligible and usable truth of its becoming, for the purposes and project of global intelligibility and control.⁴ This means that however beings are – however it is with the interests, motivations, and manifestations of any other – the senses of these others are assumed or understood always already to be understandable, extractable, and usable from the general perspective of a unitary form of intelligibility and the position of *our* mastery of it. This is, at the same time, a project of extracting and capitalizing on the (privileged or selected) possibilities of how such an other or any other in general can present *itself*, to or for any other at all.

³ Compare A. W. Moore’s articulation, and historical examination, of the project of modern metaphysics as that of ‘the most general attempt to make sense of things’ in Moore (2011).

⁴ *Indexicalism*, p. 173.

In thinking critically in this way about the form of the extractive project, a relevant concept of *sense* may be understood as drawing equally on both the traditions of phenomenology and analytic philosophy. Phenomenologically speaking, sense is *presentation*: its structure is that which underlies what Brentano and Husserl understand as *intentionality* and which, indifferently to the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic (for example perceptual) modalities, structures – as if “always already” in advance -- the *phenomenality* (the showing or appearance) of whatever shows up. Presentation is, in this sense, always presentation *somewhere* or to *some one* or other, presentation to some point of view; there is (we shall take it here) no such thing as presentation *in general* or from a perspective of totality that is not itself situated. Phenomenological sense, as it is relevant to asking the critical question about the project of extraction, therefore is irreducibly indexical. But we will try here to read its indexical structure without prejudice to the idea or claim (actually secondary to this) that what shows up necessarily shows up *to* or *for* an entity of any particular kind, whether that kind is thought to be “defined” by ‘its’ “mindedness” or ‘mental powers’, by the assumed or imagined transparently adequate reflexivity of a self-consciousness, or even by its reflexive ontological self-possession as the bearer of an indexically located structure of ‘its’ possibilities-of-being, or of being-there.

At the same time, in continuity with the analytic tradition and as I shall argue more fully here, sense is made evident in the formally clarified structure of what is also sometimes called (linguistic) meaning, and, in particular, in the formal semantics that articulates its constitutive relation to *truth*. Here, the structure of specifically linguistic meaning is (as I shall argue) especially indicative, although not exclusive: though we should not assume or take it that all meaning is linguistic or that the lives of beings who ‘have’ language are more meaningful than those of lives that do not, critically reflecting on the formal semantics of linguistic truths helps to illuminate the ultimate *incapacity* of language or thinking to master the totality of modes and directions of becoming, or of the senses of lives. What is here most characteristic of the formal clarification of this semantics in its critical modality is its tendency to *witness* (in a sense I will try to explain) the formal *emptiness* of those preconceptions of both the metaphysical project and everyday belief that seek to orient us toward any unitary principle of truth: for instance toward something like a unitary meaning of being, or of history, or of the lives of

beings on earth.

To begin to develop the consequences of a concept of sense along these (twofold) lines, it will be helpful to have at hand a framework within which one can consider in detail, or “stage”, the generality of the relationships that are, or can be, articulated as those by which one presents itself to another (that is, in which *any* one presents itself to any other in general). It will also be helpful to be able to articulate these relationships in propositional claims: that is, to be able to consider in formal terms *how* the possible claims of any one, by or with or on any other, are themselves logically or formally articulated as claims (whether these be claims to being, to activity or agency, to affection or passivity, or indeed to cause or produce changes in another, or to cause or produce oneself or another to be at all).

Such an opportunity for formal reflection is afforded by considering the overall logical form of the tense andaporetic “dialectical exercise” of the second part of Plato’s *Parmenides*. Here, Parmenides proposes to the young Socrates the methodology of a dialectically exhaustive examination of the one(s) and its (plural) others, and of the implications of their possible becoming, each both for itself and for any and all others.

“Quite right,” said [Parmenides], “but if you wish to get better training, you must do something more...: you must consider not only what happens if a particular hypothesis is true, but also what happens if it is not true.”

“What do you mean?” [Socrates] said.

“Take, for instance,” he replied, “that hypothesis of Zeno’s: if the many exist, you should inquire what will happen to the many themselves in relation to themselves and to the one, and to the one in relation to itself and to the many, and also what will happen to the one and the many in relation to themselves and to each other, if the many do not exist. And likewise if you suppose the existence or non-existence of likeness, what will happen to the things supposed and to the other things in relation to themselves and to each other under each of the two hypotheses. The same applies to unlikeness and to motion and rest, creation and destruction, and even to being and not-being. In brief, whatever the subject of your hypothesis, if you suppose that it is or is not, or that it experiences any other affection, you must consider what happens to it and to any other particular thing you may choose, and to a greater number and to all in the same way; and you must consider other things in relation to themselves and to anything else you may choose in any instance, whether you suppose that the subject of your hypothesis exists or does not exist, if you are to train yourself completely to see the truth perfectly. (135e-136c)

The repeatedly aporetic dialectical examination that follows of the consequences of the existence and nonexistence of the One repeatedly witnesses the multiply contradictory consequences of the assumption of each of these hypotheses, both for this (or any) one and for any and all others, traversing *en route* such topics as being a whole or a part; being limited or unlimited; being in oneself or in another; identity and difference (from oneself or from another); becoming older or younger; and temporal becoming and change. In each of these cases, as Parmenides' description of the method suggests, the examination considers the status and relationships of the one and the other according to both members of an opposed conceptual pair, and in each case finds the assumption of a unitary and non-contradictory *decision* as to this status and possible relation impossible, because contradictory. In considering the variety and totality of these relations, the dialectical examination amounts to something like a traversal of the entirety of (what we may anachronistically call) the *logical space* of the *possible* relationships of the One to the others, and we may also read the logical examination as an exposition of this space of possible relationships of *any* one – that is, any being or entity conceived or conceivable *as* (being) one at all – to any or all (of) the others, in this sense.⁵ But at the same time as it traverses this 'logical space,' the examination does not seek or assume a privileged *position* from which it would be possible to *overview* the space as a whole in a presumptively non-contradictory and complete fashion.

The examination and exercise that follows can be read as an essentially *indexicalist* examination of the possible *senses* of the (of any) one in relation to the others: the forms in which any one at all can present itself, or be perceived or understood or thought or presented as, what it can present itself as being to or for any or all of its others: that is, for whatever can be or appear to be an other to it.

If the dialectical exercise is read in this way, its form is – rather than that of a general thinking of “the” idea of unity or a regulated development of its own unitary presentation in the assumed medium of an effectively comprehensive thought of “it,” quite to the contrary a document of the multiplicity and complexity of these modes of presentation or presentational forms, of the plurality

⁵ And thus *not* (as I have argued elsewhere) exclusively or even primarily about the “form” or “idea” of Oneness or Unity in (what is supposed to be) a programmatically Platonist inquiry into its relationship to *its* others, whether these be (themselves) other forms or sensory particulars.

of ways of a one to be for or in the presence of another. It is, in other words, an exhaustive demonstration of the possible logical forms of the senses it can bear, for itself or for another: the possibilities of its presentation as a matter of its significance or effect as well as its being “in itself”. The exercise is, in this sense, formally general, but not abstractive or universal: there is here no position of the one, either assumed or inferred or imagined, that is not a situated one in relation to all that which is or may be other to it.

Viewing the dialectical exercise this way, what is the outcome of this formally positional examination of the relations of possible sense? The logical conclusion of the dialogue is stated, in summary form, at 166c:

Then let us say that, and we may add, as it appears, that whether the one is or is not, the one and the others in relation to themselves and to each other all in every way are and are not and appear [*phainetai*] and do not appear [*te kai ou phainetai*].

The conclusion, which summarizes the multiply contradictory or aporetic results of each of the individual investigations of conceptual pairs, thereby points to the logically demonstrated *impossibility* of deriving from them a unitary, noncontradictory, and overall *decidable* sense of the being, becoming, and appearance of the one. This points to the possibility of a reading of the *Parmenides*, and its location with respect to the project of “metaphysics” announced by Aristotle in the book that came later to bear that title, that is rather different than usual, or at any rate essentially contests, as if in advance, the very assumption of the noncontradictory unity of thinking and being that foundationally orients this project for him (as evidenced in his programmatic appeal to the principle of noncontradiction, both in “logical” and “metaphysical” versions, as the “most basic” and “firmest” principle for its project).

If the *Parmenides* dialectical exercise is read in this way, the fundamental contradictions it witnesses are no longer seen as leading us to imagine (in Neoplatonic fashion) a broader comprehensive and noncontradictory picture of the One’s hierarchical sovereignty over the world of becoming; and neither should we read the arguments as representing logical mistakes on Plato’s part which he is (it is supposed) on the way to overcoming by way of a further logical or categoric development of the structure of forms themselves. Similarly, we must learn to resist reading its arguments as *simply* contributions to a ‘fundamental’ ontology or to the ontological “study” of “the meaning” of being

in general or in itself. As is explicitly noted in the conclusion, the question of appearance (*phainetai*) is here just as essential as that of being, and bears witness to a properly *phenomenological* questioning with respect to the appearances or presentation of the one to the others and of the others to the one. Both questions, as they are posed here, bear witness to a logical formal-situation which is that of the question, or problem, of the givenness and direction of sense as the presentation of ones to their others, and thereby invokes the question not only of *its* overall form, but of the meanings that their senses offer to the positive and relational being of those who thus present, and pursue, its affordances and relationships as the occasions and circumstances of their lives.

FORMAL WITNESSING: THE SENSES OF THE ONES AND THE OTHERS

If the question of sense and its direction is to be brought to bear critically on the problem of the foundations of the value or presupposition of unitary presence – if, that is, it is to elicit critical terms for challenging the priority that metaphysics has accorded to the presence of the One, or to the (implicit or assumed) project of a unitary extraction of the sense of beings as a whole, from what is assumed to be its perspective – it will be helpful to develop this question of sense and direction within the context of a *logically structured* examination of its form. Such an investigation will also be one that offers to present illuminating terms for the elicitation of the overall logical dynamics of the relationship between *thinking* and *being* that this assumption or presupposition of unitary presence requires. This will be, especially, the case within a development of the logical form of sense that does not begin by understanding it as a separably thinkable accompaniment of linguistic use or intentional activity, or reify it as residing in a metaphysical “third realm,” (as in Frege or Husserl) but rather develops its logic, even up to aporia and contradiction, as just that of the *possible* relationship of any one with any other: of, that is, any object or entity in its possibilities of combination or relation suitable to the conditioning of a truth. In the internal development of the logic of this relationality, we witness the forms in which language gives itself to be understood as unitarily directed toward a possible global sense; but also, and by the same token, that which critically undermines this requirement or assumption of direction from within the logical problematic itself.

The suggestion of a requirement for the unitariness (that is, the “determinacy”) of sense enters the tersely announced dynamic of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* at an early stage, as providing indirect proof of the necessary existence of the simple objects (2.02ff) whose possibilities of combination comprise the totality of possibilities for states of affairs; or in other terms, those which “make up the substance of the world” [*bilden die Substanz der Welt.*]:

If the world had no substance, then whether a proposition had sense would depend on whether another proposition was true.

It would then be impossible to form a picture of the world (true or false).

The argument presents itself as a modus tollens, with the underlying premise that it *is* (indeed) possible to form a picture of the world. This picturing is, according to the logic of the argument, possible only insofar as and because it is possible for the picture thus formed to be either true or false; but this capability of a picture to be true or false at all depends further upon the substratum of support that is comprised by the existence of the simple objects whose composition determines the truth-value of statements about complexes, and into statements about which every complex statement can be resolved (2.0201). If it were the case that there were no simple objects, and hence no maximally simple and necessarily existing determinants of these possibilities of truth and falsity, then the determination of the truth-value of a complex proposition would wait endlessly on the decomposition of its referents, and determinate sense would be, in general, impossible. The premise of picturing (“We picture facts to ourselves” (2.1)) upon which the argument for simple objects (for substance) depends is thus itself premised on the *determinacy of sense*: that is, on the uniformity and decidability in principle of the sense of any possible picture, in accordance with its determinability as true or false of what it represents.⁶

The further semantic consequences of this determinacy unfold, in the course of the *Tractatus*, in close connection with the text’s decisively marked *extensionalism* (“A proposition is a truth-function of elementary propositions” (5)) and *realism* (“A proposition must restrict reality to two alternatives: yes or no. [*Die Wirklichkeit muss durch den Satz auf ja oder nein fixiert werden*]” (4.023)) At 4.022, Wittgenstein introduces “showing” as the relationship which a significant [*sinnvolle*] proposition

⁶ Cf. 3.23: “The requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate.”

bears to “its” sense, on the general condition that this sense be determinate at all: that is, that it restrict reality to the two alternatives of agreeing or disagreeing with it. The sense of a proposition is, in this connection, also that which is shown in the *application* of signs, and what is understood when we understand its meaning. The suggestion that an understanding of the propositional sign’s possibilities of coordination with reality, as either true or false, is at the same time an understanding of its sense, and so that the latter is evinced or sufficiently indicated by the *symbolic* dynamics of the use of signs in the course of picturing the world, in general, bears on the more general (and somewhat vexed) interpretive question of the meaning of “showing” in the *Tractatus* more broadly, and also on the question of the particular methods and demonstrative results of its overall critical project with respect to both the meaning of language in general, and metaphysical language in particular.

Crucially, this project goes by way of reflection on the form of a possible symbolic language – what Wittgenstein understands as a language adequate to the expression of the *totality* of possibilities of the world (or rather the totality of possibilities of the “logical space” in which the world is situated) in such a way that the structure of these possibilities is shown in the very logical/combinatorial possibilities of the signs themselves (3.3ff). Such a notation, Wittgenstein suggests, will substantially correct our tendency in natural language to use signs in indeterminate ways, and (more problematically) to mistake what are in fact only formal possibilities of sense for material structures of substantial reality, by ensuring that the combinatorial possibilities of sense are themselves clearly shown in the “logical syntax” or “grammar” of the rules for the possible combinations of the basic signs themselves. The development or adoption of the clarified logical syntax is also instrumental to the drawing of the clear line between sense and nonsense to which the *Tractatus*’ preface adverts: adopting the forms of the clarified language, we will come to see which seeming sentences and expressions of our ordinary language are thereby recognizable as bearing sense and which may be dismissed as bearing only the illusion thereof.⁷

⁷ 3.323. In everyday language it very frequently happens that the same word has different modes of signification – and so belongs to different symbols – or that two words that have different modes of signification [die auf verschiedene Art und Weise bezeichnen] are employed in propositions in what is superficially the same way...

In this way, we may say, the logical syntax, together with the usage⁸ articulating its possibilities of truth and falsity (its coordination to the world), *witnesses* the totality of the possibilities of sense: the totality of the possibilities, that is, for a significant sentence, that is a sentence *with* sense (or a thought) to express how things are, or are not, with the world: the totality of the logical space, that is, of the possibilities for thought to determine the being of whatever is, or is not, (the case). And such a witnessing will be adequate just in case the comprehension of the rules of the logical syntax is itself adequate to produce an adequate *insight* into the structure of the *totality* of this space: that is, the totality of the space of the relationship between significant thinking as such, and (what we might be tempted to call, in a metaphysical modality) the possibilities of being.

Let us examine this relationship of *witnessing* in a bit more detail. Of course, “witnessing” is not Wittgenstein’s terminology, but I believe we may take it as a generalization of the Tractarian terminology of “showing” that is suitable not only to capture the relationship of language (or, indeed, any form of picturing which admits of a dimension of determination of veridicality) to its sense, but also the way in which a logical/critical project of the general sort of which Wittgenstein’s in the *Tractatus* is a determinate specific instance can reasonably be thought to yield a clarification of a more general and global logical situation. To fix terms, let us say that a language, together with its usage which is the condition for its possibilities of sense, *witnesses* such a situation just in case its possibilities of signification evince the possibilities of beings and lives in their relationships, in general and as such.

How, then, do the results of such a critical analysis of possibilities of

3.324. In this way the most fundamental confusions are easily produced (the whole of philosophy is full of them).

3.325. In order to avoid such errors we must make use of a sign-language [Zeichensprache] that excludes them by not using the same sign for different symbols and by not using in a superficially similar way signs that have different modes of signification: that is to say, a sign-language that is governed by *logical* grammar – by logical syntax.

⁸ I do not assume here that this usage has to be captured or capturable by means of (stateable and univocal) rules. It is sufficient – in a sense that remains essential for the later Wittgenstein – to suppose that it has what may be characterized as a “grammar” (in the later sense of “logical grammar”). For related reasons, to recognizing the phenomenon of “witnessing” in the general sense I discuss it here is not to commit ourselves to the claim that there must be something like an “essence of language” or a “general form of the proposition” – both commitments of the earlier Wittgenstein that the later Wittgenstein would come to repudiate.

signification *witness* a broader structure of sense, which thus presents itself, in the showing, as the medium for all signification as such, in connection with the line between sense and nonsense that the *Tractatus* purports to draw or illuminate?

A language, in *witnessing* what I am here calling a logical situation of sense, does not point *beyond* the world. It does not, that is – and relevantly to current debates over the “resolute” and more traditional interpretations of the *Tractatus*’ critique of nonsense – point to some kind of mystical or transcendent ‘beyond’ to language and its possibilities, or indeed – at the same time and for the same kind of reasons – to a significant *corpus* of rules or substantive structure of metaphysical reality to which things and situations would be compelled to conform. Rather, the idea of witnessing – as such a development of Wittgensteinian “showing” -- is the idea of an *immanent* clarification of the possibilities of sense as they present themselves to us: paradigmatically in the language and the life that we, ourselves, already know and live.⁹ Here, there is no *new* information to be revealed, and there is no outside position from which to survey the possibilities of the totality that we are thereby clarifying to ourselves. Witnessing will then be, itself, essentially indexical: it is done from within the world, from within a situation and at a position, and will always be situated with respect to its surroundings and in relation to *its* others, what(who)ever they may be. It will be the appropriate operation, or practice, of a clarification of life that is (self-)aware of the relationships of sense that *it* bears or can bear to and from any or all others, or to or from the others in general, and as such.

In this sense, what is witnessed is not witnessed from beyond, but is rather what is lived from within: from within the space of immanence in which the ones and the others bear all of *their* possible relations, and within which the positions of the ones and others are always exchangeable with one another: the indexicality of both does not point to anything like a metaphysical absolute. The formality of the practice of witnessing evinces the generality of these relations, but if the thought of totality that is thereby involved may seem to witness simply an

⁹ I believe – although I will not argue for this here – that this thoroughgoing *immanence* is requisite for any formal witnessing of sense that does not tend to re-inscribe its basis in some form of plenitude or global presence or theological plenitude. For this reason, I generally reject the development of “exteriority” as transcendence in Levinas’s appeal to ethics as first philosophy, and the relationship it appears to require of infinite deference to the (in each case singular) Other. This is a difference between my project and Bensusan’s – for some further reflection, see my “Indexicalism and Paradox” (Livingston 2021) in this journal.

enclosure or delimitation, it is worth attending in more detail (against this) to some further, and demonstrative, consequences of this formal self-reflection.

TRUTH, PRESENTATION, AND UNDECIDABILITY

The reflection, within the formalism of a language, of the structural conditions of the relations of presentation it allows will bear implications for the study of the regularities of practice and use that it witnesses; but also, in so doing, for the broader formal situation of sense it inhabits: that is, for the forms of the presentation of one to (any) other, or any other to any one, in general and at all. It will, moreover, apparently be requisite to discerning these forms of presentation that they *not* be thought as presentations to or for a “subject” or conscious intentionality, or assume the power or self-presence of an agent or subject simply available to itself: rather, they witness the irreducible plurality of relations of any “self” to any other, and finally (as I will argue in this section) the underlying *undecidability* of these relations as a matter of the formally demonstrated undecidability of sense itself. This is not (as we shall see) because any logically rigorous account of sense whatsoever already implies or requires that sense be undecidable as such and in general – indeed, Wittgenstein’s own “official” account in the *Tractatus* does not, being committed explicitly to a formally decidable truth-functional (sentence) logic and (at least implicitly) to the global perspective (as it may be, that of the “sense of the world” or of the “world viewed as a limited whole”) from which such a uniform decision on sense and implication would (were there anything that could occupy it) be possible. However, at the same time (and as we shall see), raising the question of the positionality of such a perspective and the possibility of its own self-reflection within language is already sufficient to begin to witness the undecidability of sense, insofar as its structure and overall formal determination can appear to a reflective semantic awareness at all.

In the *Tractatus*, at 5.54-5.5421, Wittgenstein develops an analysis of the “intentional” form of the apparent relation between a thinker or speaker and the “contents” of their belief, thought, or saying, as these appear in the logical form of sentences such as “A believes that *p*”, “A has the thought *p*”, or “A says *p*”. On Wittgenstein’s analysis, the true logical form of such a statement is not that of the

relationship of a “subject” to a “content” or indeed any sort of relational form actually involving a thinker or believer at all: rather, the unitary form of *all* of these expressions is that of the (disquotational) coordination of a sentence with a state of affairs: “p” says p. On this basis, Wittgenstein argues in 5.5421 that “...there is no such thing as the soul [*die Seele*] – the subject, etc. [*das Subjekt etc.*] – as it is conceived in the superficial psychology of the present day”. The analysis of that which is indifferently or generally held to be believed, maintained, judged or asserted by (what is supposed to be) a thinker or speaker “capable” of all of these “relations” thus dispels the idea of an agent, subject, or thinker who is or must be, in her ‘competent’ use of a language and relation to it, the *source*, agent, or master of the senses of this language in general. At the same time, the disquotational form that is thereby evidenced is a *general* possibility of all symbolic language as such, and bears implications for whatever we may reasonably understand as its sense: the aspect of sense it brings out is that in which it is formally connected to the formal structure of truth or (now again switching to the phenomenological register) that of presentation as such.¹⁰

Anachronistically, but at the same time revealingly, we can then bring out some further consequences of the disquotational analysis by replacing Wittgenstein’s disquotational formulation (i.e. “p” says p) with the one suggested several years later in the course of Tarski’s analysis of the concept of truth, and subsequently deployed by Davidson as the central formal device of the project of a formalization of a “theory of meaning” for a natural language. Let us suppose, in particular, that in place of Wittgenstein’s

“p” says p

we instead write and apply Tarski’s “convention T”:

“p” is true if and only if p

The schema, which for Tarski represents the form that must be taken by the deductive consequences of an correct and adequate systematic theory of the truth-predicate for a formal language, is rather employed by Davidson to yield, under conditions of radical interpretation, the essential structure of a formally illuminating meaning-theory for a natural language. Such an interpretation will be successful, for Davidson, if it succeeds in producing a true Tarskian T-sentence

¹⁰ Compare what Derrida says about quotation and iterability in “Signature, Event, Context” (Derrida 1982).

for each sentence of the language under interpretation. The pattern of interpretation that Davidson envisages as thus illuminating the formal structure of a particular natural language is also therefore illuminating with respect to what we may reasonably understand as the “truth-conditional” dimension of its sense: that is, the formal analysis illuminates that which we can understand as the totality of the situation by which the language under interpretation *can* present whatever it is that it *does* present. It is also relevant to the problematic of sense that sense is not *reified* here: the Davidsonian analysis of a language, operating – as it does – within the methodological constraints of the project of radical interpretation (that Davidson develops from Quine’s idea of radical translation) does not assume or imagine any ontology or being of sense, beyond that which is already present in, and recoverable by means of the observation of, the behavior and activities of a group of speakers. What, in these terms, the Davidsonian analysis evinces through a meaning-theory for that group is *how* the overall practices (verbal and non-verbal) of the group are related to what those who speak and practice in that way can (and do) take to have the value and reality of what shows up and appears in truth.

So it is relevant to this dimension that the structure of the Tarskian T-sentences, for any language that is sufficiently self-reflexive to describe and discuss the truth of its own sentences, will (as I argued in more detail in *The Logic of Being*) in this structure unavoidably witness a broader phenomenon of *undecidability* that is consequent on the very idea of its truth-conditional meaning – that is, on the very idea of sense as given by its truth-possibilities – itself.

At its core, this undecidability of truth-conditional sense is a consequence of the possible presence, in any such language, of “Liar” sentences that was already noted by Tarski in his original 1931 treatment of the concept of truth in formalized languages: that, in particular, by means of the arithmetization of syntax or of any suitable device of self-reference, it will generally be possible to produce in such a language a sentence, L, of the form “L is false”. Given this, the application of the Tarskian convention T will produce contradiction, and the potential for irreducible contradiction will propagate throughout the language, wherever sentences of it are available that discuss the phenomena of truth, sense, or

meaning at all.¹¹

Given the presence of liar-sentences, it follows, in particular, that there can be no (finitely specifiable) procedure for determining truth-conditional meaning univocally for all sentences of the language: it follows, in other words, that truth-conditional sense will be, inevitably and unavoidably, undecidable.¹²

As I argued in *The Logic of Being*, the undecidability of truth-conditional sense, thus defined, seems to have important consequences for our thinking about the overall shape and possibilities of a natural language, insofar as such a language is something that is created, maintained, and used, where and when it is at all, within the life and practice of its speakers. For example, the implications of the undecidability result, formally speaking, within the context of the consideration of axiomatic theories of truth appear to extend to showing that we cannot conceive of such a language, in noncontradictory fashion, as having been *constituted or instituted* by the founding act of some simple and univocal moment of original institution, convention, or designation (this might be called the undecidability of *instituting* sense).¹³ Similarly, the ongoing reality of undecidability in the everyday collective life of a language's speakers appears to imply that the use of any term, understood as a matter of the regular application of "its" meaning, is always open to possibilities for extension and use that will not be mastered by the provision or explication of *any* symbolically expressible rule (this might be called the undecidability of *ongoing* sense).¹⁴

¹¹ Notably, Tarski himself sought to resolve the problem, with respect to formal languages, by invoking the possibility of a formal hierarchy of truth-predicates, and associated distinct formal languages at each level, whereby each can talk about the structure of truth only for languages "below" it in the hierarchy. With respect to actual natural languages, however, the formal solution is implausible (English, or Portuguese, are obviously not an infinite *hierarchies* of distinct languages), and the very possibilities that these language exhibit for self-quotation in general and for discussing sense and meaning evidence that the structure of contradictions must be unavoidable.

¹² The argument for this is essentially the argument given by Priest in *In Contradiction* (p. 135) (cf. *The Logic of Being*, p. 90): if a truth-theory for a natural language is (even) recursively enumerable, it will fail to provide a criterion for determining univocally and consistently which sentences are (even) meaningful in the sense that the T-schema is applicable to them (and thus in the sense that they are truth-conditionally determinable as either true, false, or (even) indeterminately true or false, at all).

¹³ See *The Logic of Being*, p. 108.

¹⁴ This (latter) result obviously echoes a main strand of Wittgenstein's critical thinking about rules and meaning in the "rule-following considerations" of the *Philosophical Investigations* (about which I will comment further in the next section), but it is also to the point to notice here how an

At the same time, they also point (as I argued in more detail in *The Logic of Being*) to a broader kind of undecidability of sense, one which is not limited in its scope to specifically *linguistic* truth, presence, or presentation, but bears on the formal dynamics of the presentation of anything to anything, or from any position or point of view, at all. For example, as I argued there, that the sense of (truth-conditional) *language* cannot be univocally decided also implies that the senses of *beings* in their temporal becoming similarly cannot be decided: that is, that it is impossible to determine, of a being known or understood, *what* possibilities of being it will be able to present in any of the (open multiplicity of) contexts in which it *may* appear or present itself. It is relevant in this connection to note that something akin to the framework of T-sentences may be extended, beyond just the treatment of sentences, to a broadly Husserlian formal structure of presentational intentionality (thus including perception and non-“conceptual” modalities as well)¹⁵ – and hence to include those aspects or modalities of presentation which do *not* plausibly require what is supposed to be a specifically human capacity for reasoning or language. But the broader connection to what might be understood as a witnessing of the undecidability of *presence* comes into view if we consider these implications in terms of what they suggest for the very form of any such presentation of one to another. If sense, in other words, is not only the sense of language, but is the sense of presentation *of* one to another (that is, of *any* one to any other), then its formal undecidability means that the possibilities of this presentation cannot be mastered or comprehended from the position of *any* one – and hence, *a fortiori*, from the perspective of a “human” subject of thought, language, or intentionality – at all. In the (closely related) language of the possibilities of beings in their becoming, this means that these temporal possibilities are themselves undecidable, and that the (imagined) position from which it would be coherently possible to master them, as such and

appreciation of the ongoing undecidability of sense renders in principle inaccessible the conception of sense and its life that he inveighs against throughout the *Investigations*, particularly that according to which the sense of a word is something present to the “queer medium” of the mind, where it is understood as fully accessible and available simply to be deployed in speaking or use.

¹⁵ For one development of such a (broader) phenomenological application of the Tarskian structure, see Smith (2026).

in general – for example by means of technological predication, anticipation, production, and control – is exposed as illusory, and its project as one that cannot survive the critical reflection.

In witnessing (in the sense of the last section) the formal undecidability of sense, the implications of the linguistic concept of truth, as shown in the formal implication of the Tarskian formalism, thus already point to what positively may be called *logics of ineffectivity*. Formally speaking, the idea of an *effective decision procedure* is the idea of a finitely specifiable and rigorous procedure that can be relied upon to decide, within finite time, any “yes” or “no” question of an appropriate form. By pointing to the undecidability of truth-conditional sense, the results we have developed here already witness the unavailability (whether by means of linguistic rules, conventions of language use, specifiable regularities of practice, or abstract canons of reason) of any such effective procedure for the effective determination of sense. At the same time, in connection with the broader problematic of (not necessarily linguistic) presence or presentation, they witness as well the undecidability of the senses of the temporal presentation and becoming of things, as such and in general, to or for themselves or for any other.

The idea of a distinctively human capacity -- whether understood as a capacity of reasoning, judgment, or of or for language or its mastery -- which enables its possessor to have access to the senses – that is, the possibilities – of beings as a whole and as a such plays a decisive role in the actual historical constitution and ongoing ideological justification of the interlinked epistemological, technological, and extractive project of Western metaphysics. Its structure is visible, in particular, in Aristotle’s appeal (in book Θ) to the constitutive structure of what he terms a *dunamis meta logou*: a capacity, that is, that goes by way or by means of the structure of a *logos* or (indeed) by the structure of reason itself. As bearing such a general capacity, Aristotle argues, the human intellect is capable of decision, in general and with respect to any subject matter about which it can know, on the (positive) truth or (negative) falsehood of any claim for which there is sufficient positive or negative evidence. This idea of the *dunamis meta logou*, as an idea of a human mastery over negation, is itself a determinate and by no means avoidable plank in Aristotle’s case for the uniform and unequivocal application to the whole of being of the principle of non-contradiction, which he terms earlier in the *Metaphysics* the “first” and “firmest”

principle of reasoning about beings as such and as a whole.¹⁶

In these terms and in critical connection with this idea of a human *dunamis meta logou*, the twentieth-century and contemporary results that bear witness to the undecidability of sense have the significance of witnessing the incoherence of this idea of the power of human thought to extract, comprehend and control the senses of beings in a unitary way. In thus witnessing the consequences of semantic undecidability, they join other formal and metaformal results in the near vicinity with a similar critical bearing on the classical idea of rationality that is at the same time an idea of the effective determination of beings by thought.

In 1936, in a kind of extension of Godel's incompleteness results, Church and Turing near-simultaneously proved results which imply the undecidability of deductive validity in first-order logic: that is, that prove that there can be no effective procedure for determining whether or not a given formula follows deductively from another one in first-order quantificational logic.¹⁷ This result is not the *same* as the undecidability result, drawing on the structure of a truth-predicate, that I have discussed above, but it is closely related and relies essentially upon the same formal-positional situation, whereby the procedural logic of a rational or regular method for the determination of sense or consequence within a language can be reflected back into that language itself as soon as it is, and just because it is, indeed determinable as a procedure in a rigorous and clearly specified way. Moreover, in both cases, the formal or metalogical demonstration of undecidability witnesses a broader situation, and thereby points to a distinctive set of consequences on the level of the practice of language and collective life. To fix terms, if we may call Aristotle's organizing logic of the *dunamis meta logou*, along with *any* logic committed to the univocal and noncontradictory determinability of the senses of beings, a "logic of effectivity", we may call group the forms of life and logic indicated and witnessed in these undecidability results, by contrast, a

¹⁶ Through its understanding and application of this principle (among others, of which it is nevertheless the first and foremost), human understanding is, in the context of Aristotle's project, seen as capable in itself of determining in a univocal and noncontradictory way the totality of the possibilities of which beings are as such capable within the range of their identities and the courses of their becoming.

¹⁷ Deductive validity in this sense is "semi-decidable" – that is, there is an effective procedure for detecting the validity of a formula if it is valid, but no procedure for determining the invalidity of a formula if it is invalid.

series of “logics of ineffectivity”. In broad terms, whereas the logics of effectivity propound and presuppose the availability of being as such and as a whole to the mastery of effective thinking, the logics of ineffectivity witness the illusoriness of this presupposition by witnessing an essential and unavoidable *dissymmetry* or non-identity between thinking and being: in these terms, for these logics as developments of the logic of sense, and *contra* (the historical) Parmenides, thinking and being are not the same, and there is thus no way to guarantee or produce the conditions for this general mastery by any other than purely ideological means and effects.

LOGICS OF INEFFECTIVITY AS LOGICS OF SENSE: EXTENSIONALISM, NIHILISM AND LIFE

What, then, are the *consequences* of the positive development of a logic of ineffectivity, in this sense, for the meanings and senses of our individual and collective forms of life? In this and other related ways, we may come to see the formally demonstrable undecidability of sense as witnessing (again, in the sense of the last section) the emptiness of the project of Western metaphysics, insofar as this project has involved or demanded that of the mastery of beings in their becoming by means of an understanding of (what it sees as) their constitutive possibilities, as such and as a whole. This witnessing, in these terms, amounts to a logical witnessing of the emptiness of the idea of rationally intelligible possibility itself, insofar as (and in the way that) that idea itself proposes or requires an idea of its own mastery through the capacities of (presumptively human) thought. At the same time, it points to the availability of a phenomenon (or phenomena) of sense that are not limited to, or determined by, this project of the human mastery of possibilities.

Witnessing the emptiness of sense in this way, we are not appealing to it as some kind of ontologically positive being or stratum underlying (what could only then again be) the totality of “its” (that is, sense’s) possibilities. We can explore these consequences in a theoretical context that is not committed to or in any sense a contribution to the project of an “ontology” of sense, and thus does not (any longer) tend to reify sense as defined by the capacity of a mind or a thinker. In this connection, it is relevant to note that the specific results we have discussed

here, including those about intentionality in the *Tractatus* as well as the broader consequences of the Tarskian truth-structure, are all available in the context of logical settings that are extensionalist in general and even (as in Quine) eliminativist about ‘senses’ as ontological realities: indeed, as Quine himself attests in *Word and Object*, there is a fairly direct route from the Church-Turing theorem about the undecidability of first-order logic to some main lines of the indeterminacy of translation results, which he wields unremittingly against any assumption of or belief in intentional meaning as a genuine constituent of reality in its ultimate sense.¹⁸

The world of Quine’s eliminativist arguments against intentional attitudes or irreducible mentality may seem to be one artificially evacuated of sense, for the presumptive and prejudicial ends of a presupposed scientism or behaviorism: formally and critically speaking, however, it is also the requisite setting of a formal consideration of sense that does not reify its structure or refer it to the (assumedly privileged) perspective of *one* kind of being (viz., the kind that “is” intelligent or minded or linguistic, or marked by the privilege of the “possession” of a *dunamis meta logou* in general). And it is then significant that in a world without intentional attitudes or propositional meanings, where we know only the truth-functional relations between sentences and where the truth-predicate is (as above) simply disquotational or translational, we already have the formal conditions for a reasonable derivation of the undecidability of sense, and hence of the possible logics of ineffectivity themselves.¹⁹ That is, even in the world that is thus

¹⁸ Specifically, as Quine argues in arguing against taking “propositions” to be substantial meaning-bearing entities, in the context of radical translation we might understand sentence synonymy as a matter of the logical possibility of transforming a sentence *as expressed in quantificational logic* into another logically equivalent one (i.e. we could understand a sentence A as equivalent to a sentence B if we can derive A from B or B from A); but it is a consequence of Church’s theorem that “The transformability of one sentence into another by the logic of quantification and truth functions can elude even the specialist in logic for indefinite periods; there is no general limit to the length of inquiry that may be required [footnote: this is a way of stating an important discovery of Church]. Evidently then to identify propositions on this basis would disqualify them as objects of belief?” (p. 204) According to Quine, this is to be expected, since *even paraphrase into a canonical logical notation is relative to our purposes in paraphrasing*. (and similarly for the project of identifying a “primitive” set of general terms, etc.) In general, “...conversions to canonical notation are in general no more mechanical than foreign translation.” (p. 205)

¹⁹ Compare, again, Quine in the “Flight from Intension” chapter of *Word and Object*: “If we are limning the true and ultimate structure of reality, the canonical scheme for us is the austere scheme that knows no

“evacuated” of any substantial principle or organizing assurance of determinable meaning, the undecidability results are available, and even point the way to a plurality of lives and meanings whose recognition may be the very form of the pacification of the originary violence of the metaphysical project itself.

Another consequence of the truth-functional setting of the argument for the undecidability of sense which I have explored here is it exposes the deep historical form and consequences of the project, endemic to Western metaphysics since (the historical) Parmenides, which links the idea of decidability to the avoidance of contradiction and thus to the mastery of negation. Since Parmenides, philosophy has – in this sense – pursued the avoidance of contradiction, in accordance with (what it supposes to be) its universal application of the law of noncontradiction, and the assumed or required success of the project has underscored the sameness of thinking and being that Parmenides announces and that licenses, in a general metalogical or metaformal shape, the assumption and practice of the *intelligibility* of beings as such and as a whole. Understood as a matter of meaning, the project is that of extracting the *senses* of lives and beings in the modality of an assumed or demand *unidirectionality* of non-contradictory sense, over against the paradoxicality of their (potentially contradictory) becoming.²⁰

The historical project of the intelligibility of beings that defines Western metaphysics can thus be understood, in large part, as the historical project of (what is assumed to be) an effective determination of unidirectional sense; and once we understand the ideological form of this project in logical-formal terms, we can also begin to see the alternative which is thereby witnessed as, by contrast, a logic of ineffectivity that witnesses the lived consequences of undecidable sense. An appreciation of this fact can be relevant to the development of the positive consequences of these logics in a way that differentiates them from any principle

quotation but direct quotation and no propositional attitudes but only the physical constitution and behavior of organisms.” (p. 221); “Taking the canonical notation thus austerely, and holding also to the formal economies of chapter V, we have just these basic constructions: predication, universal quantification (cf. §34), and the truth functions (reducible to one). The ultimate components are the variables and general terms; and these combine in predication to form the atomic open sentences.” (p. 228)

The second quotation evidently echoes the extensionalist structure of the *Tractatus*, including (almost explicitly) its argument from the extensionalist claim that sentences can appear within other sentences *only* truth-functionally to the renunciation of a substantive basis of intentionality.

²⁰ I have explored the temporal consequences of this paradoxicality as a matter of the becoming of beings in more detail in *The Logic of Being*; see especially chapter 6.

of a renewed meaning or plenitude of meaning as orienting human existence. Thus, for example in the characteristic logic of existentialism, whereas the felt absence from the world of a traditionally theological or axiological source of unitary meaning may seem to demand a response in the form of a renewed source of the plenitude of meaning not dependent on such a theological beyond – whether that of human (artistic) creativity, freedom, or an appeal to the excessiveness of the paradoxical, here it becomes evident that no such appeal is needed, and no such appeal would even be to the point. For in all of these cases – even up to the logic of Deleuze’s “univocity of being” -- the appeal to such a plenitude of meaning is at the same time a renewed attempt to appeal to a source of *decidable* meaning within the ambit and project of a metaphysical or ontological project which remains that of the assumed or presumed univocity of available meaning as such or in general. In Heidegger’s project, for example, this appeal to ultimate decidability takes the form of the general appeal to a source or meaning of Being itself, as distinct from and yet projective toward, the beings and possibilities of entities, or to its privileged *presence* in the reflexive form of a being marked by the “onto-ontological” priority of its (indexical) being-there; or later, to *Ereignis* as the source or possibility of a granting of this sense and, accordingly, an organization of the history of being as a whole, in light of the great and terrible being-historical dynamics of its recurrent epochal unveiling and self-concealment.

By contrast with this and with the whole logical form of the attempt it represents, the witnessing of undecidability that we have explored here, as witnessing the undecidable becoming of beings and lives, at the same time evinces the phenomenon of sense (or of presentation) as itself structurally undecidable and thus incapable of being mastered or determined by means of the control of negation and the decidability of the contradictory and negative. This means going back to reconsider a project that is as old as Parmenides’ declaration of the sameness of being and thinking and his consequent attempt to assure the power of rational decision or ‘critical judgment’ with respect to the possibilities (or rather impossibilities) of the distinction of being and non-being in thought that, for him, evince this sameness.

In *The Essence of Nihilism*, arguing to conclusions quite at variance with the by-now standard (Nietzschean) conceptions of the sources and logical form of

nihilism as a world-historical consequence of the evacuation of meaning following the death of God, Severino argues that nihilism is rather inscribed in the very metaphysical project of the West from almost its first moment: the moment, in other words, when it becomes, in refusing Parmenides' general conclusion *that non-being is not*, the project of the mastery and control of beings in what are supposed to be their possibilities of becoming and non-being itself. We can certainly, and certainly should, dispute the positive Parmenidean metaphysics which Severino opposes to this, according to which everything exists eternally. But nevertheless, from the perspective of the logics of ineffectivity, we can recognize that what he sees as the essence of nihilism – the project of the control of beings and the mastery over negation that it involves – is indeed constitutively linked, on a logically basic level, to the project of the decidability of sense and the metaphysics of the *dunamis meta logou* which organizes the extractive project of Western metaphysics as a whole.²¹ What Severino brings out in this context is that the assumed or presumed decidability of negation means also the decidability of presence, so that we can think about the history of the project of decidability in terms of the history of the project of the intelligibility of being and non-being themselves.²² In these terms and relative to this setting, then, the ideas

²¹ The logical connection to the issue of contradiction is evident in a different but related way, which I do not have the space to go into in detail here, in two recent analytic-philosophical texts that themselves may be taken to indicate a kind of foundational and problematic return to Parmenides in recent “metaphysical” discussion: Kimhi's *Thinking and Being* and Della Rocca's *The Parmenidean Ascent*. It is also useful to compare the thesis of Alain Badiou in his 1985 seminar on Parmenides, according to which according to which Parmenides achieves the novel discursive configuration of a new ‘knotting’ of being, non-being, and thinking, which is, by breaking with mythology or narrative, actually fundamental for philosophy as such, exactly by developing (for the first time in relation to these concepts) the structure of a *reductio ad absurdum* argument (and hence of the consequences of a contradiction) with respect to the conjoint thinking of being and non-being (see Badiou 2025, pp. 151-53).

²² Compare Severino in “The Structure of Western History:” “For European civilization things are nothing: the meaning of the thing, which guides Western history, is the nothingness of things. *Nihilism* is the essence of European civilization, since the fundamental meaning of nihilism is the nihilation of things, i.e., the belief that being is a Nothing: nihilism is the action guided and shaped by this conviction ... The history of the West is a history of nihilism in an abysmally different sense from that denounced by Nietzsche and Heidegger. The genuine meaning of European nihilism, in which even the masses, public opinion, and the most ordinary people are now living, is something essentially different from, and infinitely more radical than, the human situation as depicted by existentialism. For existentialism, human life issues from and returns to nothingness and is not guaranteed by a transcendent God. But existentialism does not claim that when man lives, his life is nothing ... *Nihilism*, by contrast, as the authentic and deeply hidden essence of European

of the logics of ineffectivity are those that, witnessing the consequences of the undecidability of the becoming and presencing of entities and lives, by contrast allow to these entities the justice of their mutual becoming.²³

SENSE, MEMORY, AND JUSTICE

In *Memory Assemblages*, Bensusan has helpfully and clearly presented and advocated for the idea of the (plural) logics of ineffectivity, as part of the articulation and defense of a general *panmnemism* which is also, and crucially, a critical intervention with respect to the history of (the) metaphysics (of presence) and its project of the extraction of meaning or content.²⁴ The idea of memory assemblages, as Bensusan develops it here, challenges this project because it challenges the idea or assumption of memory as transparently accessing a kind of landscape of full or archaic presences which are simply stored and ready for retrieval. In contrast to this, the spectral realism that Bensusan develops involves acknowledging that that which has been partially or obscurely presented, as well as that which has been forgotten or dismissed, can always come back, and drawing the conclusion that retention and retrieval are themselves radically undecidable, and hence not able to be mastered by some kind of unequivocal access or assured possibility of restoration. The logics of ineffectivity enter the argument here, as part of what Bensusan calls an “ultrametaphysics” of addition committed to the claim that addends (in Bensusan’s sense) can always transform what is remembered.²⁵ This means that there can be no effective and guaranteed

civilization ... is something essentially more radical than existentialism, or than the world as it appears in the consciousness of an existentialist philosopher.” (Severino 2017, pp. 16-17)

²³ Bensusan discusses Severino’s project, in the (somewhat different) terms of memory and retrieval but with overall similar conclusions about the entanglement of thinking and being, on pp. 89-90 of *Memory Assemblages*.

²⁴ See, e.g., pp. 199-200.

²⁵ I will not comment here on Bensusan’s use of Malabou’s term or project of “ultrametaphysics”, except to say that, as a “permanent deconstruction” motivated by a (Levinasian?) “desire for the other untainted by ontology,” (p. 203) its idea appears to me to be in danger of resuscitating some of (what are for me) the problematic implications of Levinas’s continued endorsement of a (admittedly non-“ontological”) project of transcendent metaphysics, including its commitments to exteriority, transcendence, and the absolute; for me, by contrast, the undecidability results and the logics of ineffectivity themselves are wholly *logical*, and owe nothing to these commitments. (For more on my divergence from these Levinasian commitments, both in themselves and as they play out in *Indexicalism*, see my “Indexicalism and paradox” (Livingston 2021).

procedure of retrieval, and hence no possibility of guaranteeing for what is put into retention a rational immunity to its being revised by what shows up later, and – as such – articulates in terms of ineffectivity one of the central commitments of the spectral realism of addition that Bensusan develops in the book.

In the “Paths to Ineffectivity” section of chapter 4 of *Memory Assemblages*, Bensusan insightfully develops four different arguments, or (as he calls them) “complementing paths” toward ineffectivity, each of which helpfully illuminates the general idea of a logic of ineffectivity and provides important suggestions as to some of its particular critical consequences with respect to traditional and pervasive ideas of knowledge, understanding, meaning and presence.

In relation to the development of the “paths” and the broader role that the idea of logics of ineffectivity plays in the book, I would (first and foremost) very much like to thank Shajara for giving such a clear and lucid further development to the idea of ineffectivity (which I have developed for the most part only in so-far unpublished work)²⁶ and also for these helpful suggestions about its structure and some of its consequences. The development that Bensusan gives to the first of the suggested routes, that from undecidability, is in particular a very clear presentation of the argument from the undecidability of the thought-being relation, as witnessed in Church and Turing’s results, to the unavailability of any general capacity of rational thinking capable of rendering the world intelligible as a whole. As Bensusan writes here, the argument in this case has the conclusion that “the crucial presupposition” (of the metaphysical project as well as common everyday belief) “that the world can be at least to a great extent made transparent is itself unsound.”²⁷ With this conclusion, which parallels the present argument about the consequences of the undecidability of sense, I agree wholeheartedly.

In the second section – “ineffectivity through divergence” – the main kind of example that witnesses a version of the conclusion of a general ineffectivity is that developed by Wittgenstein in the (so-called) “rule-following considerations” of the *Philosophical Investigations*, and especially in the “recalcitrant” pupil of §185, who attempts to continue a series of numbers, beyond a certain point, in a way that strikes the teacher (that will strike us) as incorrect and (even hopelessly) confused,

²⁶ But see “Thinking and Being are not the Same” (Livingston 2024) for some suggestions in critical dialogue with McDowell, Kimhi, and Rödl.

²⁷ *Memory Assemblages*, p. 217.

and who resists initial attempts at ‘correction’ by reference to the “way” the series rule is ‘supposed’ to be followed. Here, on Bensusan’s reading, the apparent possibility of divergence evident in the pupil’s behavior may be seen as demonstrating that there is no assurance or guarantee, inherent to the capacities of reason (or, indeed, to the “meaning” of words or symbols as such) to prevent such divergent behavior, or to provide ultimate or ultimately decisive terms for criticizing and correcting it if it occurs. In the third section, “Ineffectivity through indexicality,” Bensusan points out, again insightfully and again, I think, correctly, that a logic of effectivity (in the sense of the logic of general *dunamis meta logou*) would necessarily be a logic that operates at a level of universal and inherently non-situated *generality*: logically speaking, the level at which something like Evans’ “generality constraint” can be assured to bind predicates in general to the (presumably decidable) generality of their possible predicates and objects in general to their (presumably decidable) properties. The form of this non-situated generality is already challenged by an indexicalist logic or metaphysics which emphasizes (as in Bensusan’s *Indexicalism*) the tie of each possible action or thought to a situation in which it takes place, and thereby challenges the idea of generality as generality-of-accessible-contents or -determinations that is characteristic of (traditional, substantive) metaphysics. Finally, in the last of the four sections, “Ineffectivity through spectrality,” Bensusan again challenges the logics of effectivity on the basis of a broader consideration of the dynamics of memory: where these logics assume a general kind of capacity of retention that is indifferent to retrieval, the contrasting logics of ineffectivity appropriate to the dynamics (or “ultrametaphysics”) of spectral memory follow “from the insufficiency of anything placed in retention to act or be accessed without the concurrence of addends” and thereby again witness the absence of any possible “effective procedure that can deal with what is genuinely external.”²⁸

Again, I have no real criticism of any of these four “routes” to ineffectivity, and I do not wish to contest the claim that, in any of these cases, the antecedent critical commitments appealed to (for example to undecidability in general, or to the possibility of the recalcitrant pupil’s behavior, or to indexicalism, or spectrality) do indeed help to clarify and motivate the forms and implications that

²⁸ *Memory Assemblages*, p. 222.

we may, on their basis, understand the logics of ineffectivity to take and to have. What I would like to do here, though, is just to pose a few general questions about the *relationship* of these routes to the *positive* (albeit negatively specified) idea or phenomenon of *a general undecidability of sense*, such as I have argued for it in the above sections of this paper.

In each of the cases and examples that Bensusan develops, the consequences or contours of the adoption of the envisaged routes to ineffectivity take shape, noticeably, by critical consequence to what are (quite rightly, I think) presented as assumptions or preconceptions of a standing metaphysical project which is committed to full and completely intelligible presence, or (more or less equivalently) to the effectiveness of a retention that is indifferent to a (completely transparent) retrieval. This project is indeed, as we have seen, centrally connected to such a picture, and a large part of the critical force of (what I have conceived as) logics of ineffectivity comes in their potential to expose the ideological foundations of this project and to show how its organizing assumptions about intelligence and intelligibility must indeed be empty. But beyond or before these critical consequences, it is striking that if we can conceive of the metaphysical project as (in terms of critique that Bensusan and I share) a project of the extraction of unidirectional sense from the plurality of beings and lives, we can also conceive one kind of critical upshot of the development of the logics of ineffectivity as a project of the liberation of these beings and lives from the force of this extractive project, in general; and hence of thinking toward a *possible* global life that is not (or no longer) determined by it. And so my main question is just: how do the “routes to ineffectivity”, and (more importantly) their lived consequences on the level of the actual (“cosmopolitical”) level of the organization of life, look different or yield different kinds of consequences, if seen in light of the question or problematic of the undecidability of *sense* that I have tried to develop here?

With respect to some of the particular “routes,” one consequence of posing and pursuing this question of sense might be a clearer differentiation of them or their consequences from (what might otherwise appear) as a merely or predominantly *skeptical* – or perhaps primarily or predominantly deconstructive - - understanding of their bearing and implications. For example, with respect to Wittgenstein’s rule-following considerations and the “recalcitrant pupil”, of course

the most predominant and discussed interpretation in the twentieth-century of the implications of the argument thereby presented against the effectiveness of a rule in univocally determining use is Kripke's development in *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, which presents the upshot of Wittgenstein's argument as the defense of a "radical form" of skepticism about meaning, according to which, as every interpretation stands in need of another interpretation, there is no determinate "fact of the matter" about meaning anything at all. But as many commentators (on both Wittgenstein and Kripke) have pointed out, it is clear that the real and most marked conclusion of Wittgenstein's argument is not this skeptical one but rather what he says positively at §201, in indicating or alluding to the positive value of a "practice" or (what we may also indicate in a Wittgensteinian vein) as the *place* of a rule (alternatively, the sense or meaning of a word) within a "form of life":

...For what we thereby show [*Dadurch zeigen wir*] is that there is a way of grasping a rule which is *not* an interpretation, but which, from case to case of application, is exhibited [*in dem äußert*] in what we call "following the rule" and "going against it".

"Showing" and "exhibiting" here are continuous with (or indeed essentially the same as) "witnessing" in the sense I have developed it above from Wittgenstein's own earlier usage (of "showing") in the *Tractatus*: what it means, in this sense, to say that our practice witnesses what it is called "following a rule" is that *what a rule is* (and hence what a 'meaning' is, or what a 'sense' is), is itself witnessed in this practice or in this form of life. This points to a positive understanding of *how* a form or practice of a life, in its presence or presentation *to* others in general, manifests (in the sense I have developed above) its possible or actual meaning(s), and not *only* (as the skeptical reading would have) to the impossibility of mastering or grasping this presence or presentation by means of rules that are held to be universal and capacities that are assured or assumed to be held by a thinking or speaking 'subject' in general. As such, it points, beyond these primarily skeptical or deconstructive consequences, to the practice of an (individual and collective) life that is aware of the phenomenon of undecidability in general on the level of its own practices of the manifestation, demonstration, or signification of memory or of sense.

Something similar might be said, as I suggested above, about how we might today read the consequences of Quine's arguments for the indeterminacy of

translation, and how we might develop further some consequences of the Davidsonian project of a formal semantics that arises naturally from it. On such a reading, the (even radically) deconstructive or eliminative bearing of these projects against “senses” as reified contents, propositional meanings, or mental/intentional presences should not by any means be gainsaid: these eliminative arguments provide, already by themselves, an important and even primary gesture in the logical/critical project of the interrogation of the logics of effectivity in general and hence of the metaphysical project of the extraction of intelligibility. But the results, and the broader analytic projects that they support, also take on a different and more positive kind of bearing when they are read (as we have read some of the implications of Davidson’s development of Tarski’s analysis of the disquotational truth-predicate) as witnessing the dynamics of the presentation of ones to others, as such and in general, without prejudice to the status of any *particular* kind of one – for instance, any being supposedly possessed of exceptional powers of reasoning, thinking, or language itself – and with respect to any or all others in general or at all. As such a witnessing of the dynamics of possible presentation (up to and including the aporetic forms of its occasional pretensions to totality), the formal witnessing here also then serves the purpose of indicating, at least in preliminary forms, alternative forms for the organization and pursuit of a collective global life of each one of these ones, in relation to each and any of the others.

These questions about the positive implications of undecidability and their role in a clarified life also may suggest further questions about the situation and limits of Bensusan’s project of “spectral realism” as a generalized pan-mnemism itself. One may ask, for example, from the perspective of an appreciation of the multiplicity and more general undecidability of relations of presentation and “possible” temporal becoming that here emerges, what establishes or licenses the kind of privilege that *memory* itself, and in particular a directedness toward the *past*, seem to have in this project, or what establishes that the pan-mnemism here alleged is not really just a kind of “regional” determination of a broader logic of (ineffective and) undecidable sense itself. As we have seen, a logic of ineffectivity can be seen as the broader and more appropriate setting of a spectral theory of memory, insofar as it establishes the impossibility of guaranteeing the adequacy of the retention of “the past” against what may present itself as coming or coming

“back:” but why couldn’t what appears or shows up in this sense do so *from* a future (whether actual or possible or even impossible) or *another* present or just from somewhere(when) else, rather than from “the past” (or rather what is constituted as being past) at all? From this perspective, although no metaphysics of presence, indeed, can banish all ghosts, nevertheless what shows up or comes back or returns does not *have* to be a revenant, nor does its coming have to mean that something has been forgotten or is now being recalled again. To contemplate the generality of presencing in this way may be to contemplate a logic of sense that is not *especially* tied to memory or its dynamics, or is at any rate not tied to memory *as* a privileged modality or directionality for presentation or the manifestation of becoming. It would, rather, be a way of thinking the undecidability of (the sense of) temporal becoming itself, even with respect to the projects or prospects of a temporal (or cosmo-)politics concerned with contemplating the forms of possible global life today.²⁹

Conversely and complementarily, if we can ask about the situation of a spectral realism of memory within a broader or more general *logic* of undecidable sense, we can also ask from this perspective whether the privilege of memory in Bensusan’s project, in its thinking *of* memory as a kind of operation or process (albeit one that is open to and always contested by the undecidability of addends) does not risk re-inscribing (especially as an “ultrametaphysics”) the very *metaphysics* of sense which (as I have argued here) is probably sufficiently dispelled by the extensionalist arguments we have considered above. Following the sections in which he develops the routes to ineffectivity as parts of their logic, Bensusan proposes a (strongly) non-monotonic formalism for the supplementary logic of addition (in his sense): this logic includes an inference relation that (in strongly non-classical form) involves the anti-monotonic destruction of every consequence, once drawn. Here, the antimontonicity itself, as Bensusan notes, suffices to provide an alternative to the thought that negation and negative differentiation alone can make a difference to the truth of how things are shaped

²⁹ Relatedly – though I do not have the space to develop this consequence here – I believe that such a more generalized understanding, or clarification, of the dynamics of the possibilities of presentation could also have the effect of limiting or modifying the privilege of directionality toward the “new” and “futural” that is marked in much of the rhetoric of contemporary continental philosophy, and in particular in appeals to the “messianic” in the sense originating from Benjamin and developed within contemporary outgrowths of political theology, up to Žižek and Agamben.

or become: if addition as an antimonotonic force can add to the determination of things, then their determination is not, as a whole, the project of mastery over negation or its “determinate” possibilities.³⁰

However, as Bensusan notes, such a (completely) antimonotonic inference relation alone will not adequately by itself characterize a logic of addition whereby an addition *may* – or may not – “make” a difference, so for a fuller or more adequate logic of the actual functioning of (specific) memory assemblages would have to include grounds for a determination the potentiality of an addition to destroy specific conclusions of prior inferences, and hence of *relevance* in each case.³¹ A full or complete logic of memory assemblages would then necessarily be, according to this argument, a “relevance logic”: such logics are, familiarly, highly *intensional* and in this respect contrast markedly with the logics that can be developed in fully extensionalist settings (such as the early-Wittgensteinian or Quinean/Davidsonian ones I have considered above).³² So it can be asked whether, here, the priority that the idea of a logic specifically *of* memory or their assemblages does not imply or require, at the level of possible presentation, a logic of relevance or intensional meaning which does indeed (after all, and despite everything that is involved in Bensusan’s rigorous and sustained challenging of the various forms of the metaphysics of presence) require or imply something like the presence of *one who decides*, even at the level of the basic structure of its logic of memory itself.

I ask these questions, again, not primarily to challenge the coherence of Bensusan’s framework or the overall goals of his project, but simply to try to situate it somewhat with respect to the (perhaps alternative) questions of the logic or phenomenon of sense as these naturally find expression in questions about the forms and organizing practices of contemporary global life. Without developing the implications any more here, I will just note in closing that one marked dimension in which this might matter is the “cosmopolitical” one in which Bensusan develops some of the consequences of his spectral realism for questions

³⁰ *Memory Assemblages*, p. 238.

³¹ *Memory Assemblages*, pp. 238-39.

³² On pp. 61-62 of *Memory Assemblages*, Bensusan considers Davidson’s project of radical interpretation, appearing to conclude that it requires or invokes a kind of full-fledged and present content; but this appears mistaken to me, especially given the conceptual setting of the interpretation scenario downstream from Quine and his own arguments for indeterminacy.

of truth, justice, historical memory and political organization, up to an including the “post-nihilistic Marxism” with which he winds up in the concluding “Coda” on post-nihilist Marxism. As we have seen in the above, one of the implications of what I have called a formal witnessing of the logical situation and historical provenance of the extractive project of metaphysics may be to find terms in which to see this project (with Severino) as essentially a nihilistic one, and at the same time to provide for an alternative witnessing which is no longer, as a positive witnessing of undecidability, committed to its terms, ambitions, or goals.

It is then relevant that such a positive witnessing of undecidability, though it may come out best in contrast and juxtaposition to the historical project of the mastery of intelligibility, need not (in itself or in its own logic) be thought only or simply in relation to that project, or indeed with respect to that or any determined history at all. With respect to the historical project of metaphysics, which has been the project of a globally promulgated violence neutralized or concealed behind the idea of the effective power of thought, formal witnessing here can amount to a witnessing the formal determinants and structure of that violence and its effective power. Here, witnessing is, by contrast with this position of power, that which can be done by those with *no* power; that is, a thinking that is no longer a thinking guaranteed, or that guarantees itself, to have or project effective power in the world.

This thinking can, indeed, take the form of memory; and then the witnessing of the historical violence is, as such, and already, a memorializing which looks toward the claims of justice and, thereby toward the rendering of a decisive justice in an unspecified future: it is, as memory and in its modality, already a *doing* justice, that is, to those, or to the memory of those who have been harmed or annihilated, or to the victims of this violence as such and in general. But witnessing a formal situation, no matter how ideological and violent, is not (in the sense in which I have developed it here) necessarily witnessing the coherence of the possible *recovery* or *restoration* of a principle or source of meaning, even of what is most excessively or exigently “to come;” and I have accordingly suggested that the temporal referent of memory may not be as important, *even* in relation to these historical claims or the demand of justice itself, as maintaining the question, problem, or value of the undecidable, or of learning from it the ways and relations of a collective life that no longer pursues itself only by means of the characteristic

operations of this violence, or the modalities of power that it propounds.

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