

First Philosophy and Meditative Practice

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First, anyone who seriously intends to become a philosopher must "once in his life" withdraw into himself and attempt, within himself, to overthrow and build anew all the sciences that, up to then, he has been accepting. Philosophy – wisdom (sagesse) – is the philosophizer's quite personal affair (Husserl 2).

Whenever I read this challenge of Husserl's, I feel compelled to start afresh, to rediscover philosophy like some vagabond who sets out penniless on the road, hoping to find what he's always missed but never knew that he did. I travel a lot, and have always said that my nomadic wanderings are inseparable from my philosophic endeavors. In both, I chase the very horizon of existence, the edge of understanding, the point at which new sensations, emotions, thoughts and ideas begin to emerge. In doing so I "build anew" my very

existence, adding to it a whole host of new affects that I must then recompose into my world-view (Descartes 81).¹

However, every adventure is preceded by the choice of which road to travel upon, and throughout philosophic tradition there is no shortage of these roads – *methods* by which we seek and then claim wisdom. For instance, Husserl would have us begin, like Descartes before him, with a serious meditation on the foundations of our ideas, such that we would discover our own "First Philosophy", our own "certain and indubitable" truths about the universe.² Millennia of philosophic and meditative tradition would seem to be on their side, and so, being charitable to their arguments, I've given them the benefit of the doubt and have meditated numerous times hoping that these thinkers have found the most expedient and pragmatic way of becoming enlightened. In what follows, I will describe some of my own attempts at meditating in the hopes of finding first philosophy, and some of the problems this path is fraught with.

¹ For more on "philosophical self-responsibility" and the "radical" attempt to start philosophy at its "*beginning*", see Husserl (6, 7, 14).

² Descartes called this "First Philosophy", and he justified its practice reasoning that our senses deceive us from metaphysical truths. Accordingly he attempted to begin his method with a mind "freed from all cares" and "attachment to the senses", in "peaceful solitude", undisturbed by "no passions" (69, 75). From this position, he was led to the *cogito*, the supposed thought of thought itself, a perfectly ideal thought, or thought without necessary empirical content. Likewise, Husserl's attempt at first philosophy took up this position, and led him to what he called the "transcendental-phenomenological reduction", the realization that all worldly objects must be "judged" and "accepted" by "me" (i.e. one's "Ego") (Husserl 21). The "existential" becomes "secondary", for it "presupposes the realm of transcendental being", the Ego that subjectively transcends the world and all phenomena (21, 25).

The Language of the Soul

I began meditating when I was about fourteen, following a crisis in faith from which I never recovered. Concurrently I began to dabble in both Eastern and Western philosophy, more interested in finding 'god' than ontological principles. Nightly I would try to emulate the meditations of Descartes, the Buddha, Huxley, or Jesus, convinced that the right meditative effort would reveal the divine. Yet the more I meditated and studied, the more skeptical I became of my mystical experiences. In fact, I would attribute my early meditation and prayer sessions to my present atheism, for instead of finding 'god' at the depths of my reflections, I instead found only physical euphorias, silence of the mind, loss of a sense of self, and resignation to the mortality of everything – none of which I could, in good conscience, call 'divine' or even 'supernatural'.

I quickly became skeptical of anyone who claimed that they had 'felt the touch of god', or that they could derive god's existence from first principles. Instead, I redeployed my spiritual efforts towards the concrete, and began searching for the kind of clarity of mind and 'Enlightenment' promised by Ch'an/Zen scholars.³ The more I read about the ability of these monks to silence both the mind and the body, the stronger my conviction that Descartes, Husserl,

³ Ch'an being the older Chinese tradition from which Zen was founded in Japan.

and other practitioners of 'First Philosophy' had not gone far enough in their attempts to free the mind "from all cares" and all "attachment to the senses"(75, 69).

Philosophically speaking, First Philosophy and Zen are different in kind. Accordingly, Zen followers call their practice 'zazen', in order to distinguish it from meditative traditions. The difference between zazen and meditation is that in meditation, one meditates about *something*, whereas the goal of zazen is to clear the mind of all thoughts (Kapleau 3). Meditation is always focused on something formed, whether it be a mantra, a breathing ritual, or an idea (e.g. Descartes's concern with "things that can be doubted") (Descartes 75). Zazen, on the other hand, concerns itself with 'the unformed thing', the "shape without shape" (Chan 146, 435).⁴ This is not to say that practitioners of zazen try to think about 'nothing' (which would be both a logical and an existential contradiction), rather they do not think about anything formed. In zazen, the intellect shuts down, and the mind becomes free of objects, ideas, and every other significance.

The type of zazen I practice is called "shikantaza", which literally means 'just sitting there':

[S]hikantaza is a practice in which the mind is intensely involved in just sitting. In this type of zazen it is all too easy for the mind, which is not supported by such aids as counting the breath or by a koan,⁵ to

⁴ Although this principle and this quote are drawn from Taoism tradition and scripture respectively, Chan reminds us that the Zen tradition is a direct offshoot of these.

⁵ Koans are logical puzzles that are meant to propel the mind towards its "Buddha-nature". For example, "The flag doesn't move, the wind doesn't move, only your mind moves". See: Kapleau

become distracted. The correct temper of mind therefore becomes doubly important ... [It] must be unhurried yet at the same time firmly planted ... a heightened state of concentrated awareness wherein one is neither tense nor hurried, and certainly never slack. It is the mind of somebody facing death (Kapleau 56-57).

In other words, a mind at the height of attention and sensation.

Now I must admit that I have struggled with shikantaza, and that I am not completely faithful to its tradition. For instance, I often meditate prior to zazen, and I never sit in the prescribed full or half-lotus positions (they both hurt my back and knees too much). Instead I sit cross-legged, with a pillow under my backside for support. My hands are in my lap, right over left, with my right thumb over my left thumb on top of them both; back and shoulders are straight, while my head is held high; eyes are closed, and the room is as dark and silent as I can make it; I breathe as slow as I can without getting dizzy, usually through my mouth (allergies keep my nose too plugged); and after relaxing with a bit of meditation using breath-counting, a koan, or a mantra, I quickly snap the mind into the thoughtless concentration of shikantaza. Dissolving all sense of ego, I become my dark and silent room.

Long before I could do this though, my attempts were continually thwarted by a variety of mental and physical obstacles. I'd often sit cross-legged and close my eyes only to find all sorts of hallucinations waiting for me: random words and

70-71, 190.

gibberish echoing in my head; abject visions and coloured fractals dancing before my closed eyes; the sound of blood rushing through my ears, that would gradually build to a screaming pitch; small itches that would burn with torturous pain; and emotional tides that would swell into tsunamis. In other words, my efforts at sensory deprivation proved instead to become the exact opposite, and the more deprived my sensitive faculties, the more intense each little sensation became. Nonetheless, by carefully adjusting my bodily positions and controlling my breathing – and with years of practice – I was able silence my verbal thoughts, and quiet my sensations and emotions to the point where they were in harmony with each other, which is to say, the point at which no one particular sensation stood out amongst the others. Yet, even in the deepest of these meditations I would still have trouble reaching "peaceful solitude", as I would occasionally succumb to strong "passions", whether these were emotional reactions or bodily demands (Descartes 75).

In fact, it seemed the less I exercised my cognitive faculties, the more my emotional and sensitive faculties compensated for the loss. For example, aside from the emotional tranquility or elation that I felt when meditating (which are themselves passions), I experienced a general sensation of warmth, in addition to thirst, itchiness, aches in my back and joints, and other irritations. Although I had removed intelligent and verbal representations from my mind, they were

quickly supplanted by emotional and sensitive ones, churning over and under each other in a chaotic brine.

Over months of meditating, these aches, pains, and hallucinations began to take on a life of their own. Patterns began to emerge between them, and I was quickly forced to conclude that despite my best attempts to rid myself of thought, and notwithstanding being able to rid my mind of verbal expressions, my body was clearly and consistently communicating throughout my meditations in a codified and significant language of affects. The irritants that kept popping up were my body's attempt to 'think', to represent its affects and sensations with emotions, pleasures, pains, and hallucinations.

I learned a valuable lesson here, namely that our thoughts and ideas can be conveyed and represented by more than just words and symbols. Inasmuch as a word can represent an emotion or sensation, then vice-versa – a sensation or emotion can signify a word. Ultimately, emotions and sensations can signify and represent each other to each other. Not only that, but these representations were of a consistency so great that they formed what I could only call a "language of the soul", which happened in parallel to and in conjunction with the other languages that I could already understand (e.g. English, French, mathematics, etc.).

Sadly, I am now stuck trying to translate this emotional language into written English, which seems about as absurd as being asked to write an English

paper on 'what it's like to think in French'. Nonetheless we are all forced into this absurd predicament every time we try to express how we feel in words. And yet the language of the soul is precisely what moves the body and mind. It is both the crucible and catalyst in which all our other languages are forged, and by which all of them blossom. In essence, the language of soul is *art*, the union of body and mind in creative expressions that invite others to share in a community of sensations, emotions, affects, ideas, and concepts – all of which, in the language of the soul, manage to surpass the expressive media and languages throughout which they travel.

Sensory Deprivation

Now, regardless of my best efforts to pacify this 'language of the soul' in my meditations and zazen (for sometimes it seemed to be screaming!), to this day I am still at a loss to find the point at which Descartes would say, "I have freed my mind of all kinds of cares" and, "feel myself, fortunately, disturbed by no passions". Somehow "peaceful solitude" always eludes my meditations, regardless of how little I think or how bereft my senses become (75). Furthermore, given that Descartes carried out his meditation(s), "seated by the fire, wearing a 'winter' dressing gown", paper and quill in hand, under the light

and aroma of a beeswax candle (the drippings of which he rolled about in one hand), I still have my doubts that he was entirely free from cares or passions either (76). He certainly *cared* about about the words he was writing and the gravity of the thoughts he was pursuing! Nonetheless, being charitable we must interpret 'peaceful solitude' not as an absence of passion, but of a state where no particular passion 'disturbs' the ebb and flow of any other, and the intensity of our sensations and passions are more or less balanced.

In my own meditations and zazen I have certainly felt peaceful states like these, though there is little solitude in the experience. Despite the absence of words, ideas, or even a sense of 'ego', my mind still grapples with various amorphous objects, while even in the lowest depths of my meditations I nonetheless experience a variety of emotions and sensations. Thus, whenever I try to meditate ala Descartes, "freeing the mind from attachment to the senses and clearing it entirely of all sorts of prejudices"(69), I may succeed in the latter, but have difficulty in the former.

Anyone who has dabbled in sensory deprivation knows that our senses have ways of offsetting the loss, and that 'hallucinations' and other 'phantom' sensations quickly follow. As mentioned, when I first started meditating I was plagued with imaginary noises, hot and cold flashes, and rich visuals. Furthermore, the more I starved my senses, the more sensitive they became, so that a shuffle of feet on the floor above me sounded like deafening thunder; a hint

of potpourri in the corner of the room turned into a field of aromatic flowers; and the slight pain in my back felt more like a knife to the spine. When opened up to even the slightest sensation, every faculty was already at its most acute state, such that even the most minute stimulation went off like an explosion. In general I was able to conclude that the deprivation and minimization of our individual senses effectively maximizes them. If meditation is the act of reducing thought and sensation to minimal activity, then the meditative act always already fails; namely because subduing any particular faculty of thought or sense we actually intensify the activity of others, while at the same time making the subdued faculty extremely sensitive. The most I could hope for in my meditations was a balance of these faculties, or a commensurate field of sensations and/or thoughts. However, this state would be difficult to maintain, for were such an homogeneous state of mind and body possible, we would find ourselves acutely aware of even the slightest imbalance in this tranquil sea, to the point where any affect would emerge as a tremendous disruption to our senses.

Ironically, this means that First Philosophy is not actually a matter of reducing sense, but is instead its greatest intensification. Axiomatically, sensitive minima are effectively sensitive maxima, which means that one could just as easily meditate by being over-stimulated instead of under-stimulated, and that unbeknownst to Descartes his technique of First Philosophy could have just as

easily been carried out in the light of day, stumbling around in the hustle and bustle of the street.

The fact of the matter is that there are an equal number of practitioners in the meditative tradition that have prescribed this kind of sensory 'over-stimulation' as a means to enlightenment as there are those that have begged for its proscription. Consider the sweat lodges and sun rituals of our First Nations, the flagellation of a Catholic monk, Leary's acid trips, or the torturous routines of a Hindu ascetic.⁶ The concept behind all these methods is to instantly snap the mind into a focused state of enlightenment via an overload of sensation. Whether it be through an excess of pleasure or pain, the idea is that that sensory over-stimulation effectively saturates both the mind and the language of the soul with a static state wherein it is impossible for intellect to operate. As all other sensations are overshadowed by the extreme pleasure or pain, no one sensation or thought is able to represent it. Mind and body are silenced, the excessive sensation renders the body numb, and the mind is in default. Sensory excitation would therefore seem to lead us to the same end that sensory deprivation does, namely the point at which both mind and body cannot form ideas, and sensations cannot be signified.

⁶ And I could go on: Buddhist chanting; out of body experiences brought on by DMT or GHB; staring at the sun; Tantric sex; etc.

In light of this tendency, we would define meditation generally as 'the state of letting things appear', wherein one does not need ascetic poses, a dark and empty room, or even a sensory deprivation tank. One can meditate at anytime, anywhere. In fact, we are always meditating to some degree insofar as we notice things constantly appearing before us. Nonetheless, traditional meditative forms help to heighten this awareness and increase its degree. With enough practice, one can even reach a point of absolutely pure sensation, where being in the world is not mediated by any representation, but experienced in raw wonder.

Unconsciousness

Now despite the fact that sensory deprivation leads us to the absence of ideas and sense (i.e. meaning), it definitely does not lead us to the absence of sensation. Instead, sensory deprivation/excitation experiments prove generally to lead to very intense sensations, meaning the phrase 'sensory deprivation' is actually an oxymoron. So long as we are conscious, we necessarily feel, thus so long as 'sensory deprivation' or true 'First Philosophy' aims toward silencing sensation, its logical end is a loss of consciousness, akin to dreamless sleep or even death.

When sensation is reduced to a singularity, this singular phenomenon forms the whole of the phenomenological field, effectively silencing the dynamism of consciousness. Put in another way, one loses consciousness precisely when sense has been reduced to a singularity. For example, the blow that knocks you out is a sensation with an intensity so great that it obliterates all others. Or consider how just before fainting or falling asleep we feel a 'hum', a certain reverberation throughout the body and mind that renders all of sense a melodious pulse – till the final beat that exhausts it.

In any case, when all flows of sensation are tranquil, consciousness cannot be. We get near to this state in meditation, as we try to minimize sensual intensity and eliminate significant thought. If we are successful, and if we achieve a state of sensory and noetic deprivation, we pass out, as anyone who has practiced meditation will certainly admit to doing from time to time.⁷

In extreme cases, where consciousness is *permanently* reduced to an absolute singularity, and sense resolved in a complete totality, the person is *dead*. This helps explain why, existentially, people fear the dark or dread sleep, because in order to slumber one must pass through the singularity of sensation, and therefore get close to death. From this perspective, insomnia is a kind of 'stress in the face of being so close to death', the fear that our relaxed state could

⁷ I've always enjoyed reading accounts of the lengths to which Zen Buddhist monks will go to prevent this from happening, whether it be by strange bodily prostrations, flogging, bell ringing, exposure to the elements, etc. See Kapleau's *Three Pillars* for a variety of detailed personal accounts.

slip into a complete and permanent relaxation of all faculties. Likewise, some will find that meditation will actually end up making them feel more anxious than relaxed, for as they approach the acute relaxation and minimization of sensory activity, they fear that it may be irreversible (i.e. that it might lead to their death). Luckily, our bodies and minds have an incredible way of preserving the flow of intensities that keep them alive. When we sleep, are knocked out, or fall into a coma, the mind avoids silence by dreaming, while the body avoids eternal rest through its series of biorhythms.

Thus, as true First Philosophy and sensory deprivation necessarily fails to bring any sort of 'higher consciousness' (or consciousness at all for that matter), we propose that in order to reach the threshold of perception we proceed in the opposite direction, focusing instead on the the 'emergence' of sense, or the sudden intensification of some sensitive flow against others.⁸ In this spirit, we would now like to trace another mediation, a meditation on what we will call "Secondary Philosophy", the aim of which is to chase the emergence of sensation and sense, not their absence.⁹

⁸ As we can never 'know' either death or sensory deprivation (as they are both outside our empirical grasp), we can only hypothesize their metaphysic. First Philosophy is therefore an exercise in metaphysics, and consequently imaginative in abstract, impossible in the concrete.

At most, we can only hope for a secondary philosophy, a philosophy of prejudice, memory, and engagement. A philosophy that can never speak of individual percepts, as these would be already too abstract, glossing over the 'dynamic' nature of perception. Neither can we speak of minds and bodies, ones and others, this-es or thats, as they are already too abstract, too large for what we propose.

⁹ It begins by recognizing that there are at least two senses to the expression 'sensory deprivation' (one quantitative, the other qualitative), which often get confused. Quantitatively, one cannot consciously reduce sensation to a singularity or an absence. Insofar as consciousness

Secondary Philosophy: The Intuitive

Retreating to a dark and silent room, I close eyes and prostrate myself comfortably. Breathing shallow breaths at a slow rhythm, my body relaxes while my mind stops racing. With years of practice behind me, I am able to quickly bring myself to the point at which my senses are barely disturbed, my emotions remain constant, and my thoughts no longer pass. My concepts of time, space, ego, and other abstract ideas whither away into steady rhythms that are both emotional and sensitive. I enter into a state of being in which I forgo linguistic ideas and understandings for a relation of all sensations and emotions to each other according to their various intensities.

This intuitive state is extremely delicate. At any moment abstract thoughts and ideas can surface again or even be summoned, as if their faculties, although silent, nonetheless remain 'aware' and poised toward their own ends. Even the slightest emotions can summon greater ones, while the lightest sensation can spring to life a cascade of others that are quickly followed by definite ideas. In

must necessarily be conscious of something, it senses *that* thing at least. Though in order to sense that thing, it must stand out from some other sensed thing, thus consciousness is at its minimum dual. Though in sensing one thing from another, there is also a certain gestalt, a relation of the one to the other such that the two are in a dynamic relation, a play, not of 'figure' and 'ground', but of sensation to sensation. In the depths of my quietest meditations, or on the verge of slumber, I feel only this play, which although multifarious is nonetheless a dynamic monism of equal sensations in necessary relation.

this way, the intuitive is like an armistice in the middle of a very long war. Antagonistic faculties of sensation, emotion, imagination, reflection, etc. lay down their arms and rest a while, for the second one becomes agitated the others will quickly be forced to follow suit.

The intuitive is therefore a kind of harmony between faculties. Either all of them move together in unison, or one subjects another and tries to 'represent' it. Prior to this representation though, all sensations are equal, such that there is no centre in this state of tranquility, or rather "the centre will not hold"(Yeats), for whatever feelings of wellbeing I experience seem to circulate about and pulsate in their intensity, said pulsations being the only way I am even aware of them. It is as if these feelings radiate out from some abject periphery only to come back again in their full intensity, like being blindfolded and alone in a swimming pool, not quite sure where the waves are coming from, but knowing your movements are somehow intensifying them.

Devoid of abstract or symbolic representation, a further consequence of the intuitive is that all our sensitive faculties begin to blend into one another. The intuitive is synesthetic insofar as all our senses dissolve into the same tranquil sea. Phenomenologically speaking, the "raw material of our sensations" are as mixed as the waters of an ocean, with waves of impressions crashing over and

under each other, the more intense subsuming the lesser (Kant 1).¹⁰ There may be different sensations here, but my mind is not in a position to differentiate them significantly. Rather, the different sensations that swirl about in this state are only differentiated *after* my mediation, as I reflect back on it and start to divide up my previous inner harmony into distinct objects of thought, sense, and memory.

The Parentheses of Phenomena

How is it then that we pass from the monistic brine of amorphous sensations and thoughts to these significant ideas? In meditation, where all sensations are balanced and minimized and everything is meaningless, I am in a privileged position to watch meaning unfold. Insofar as reflection must be about something, it necessitates both that thing *and* that which it is distinguished from. This leads me to suspect that quantitatively there must be at least two qualitatively different sensations in my mind at any given time for it to remain conscious. The problem is that although I feel I am able to reach a point where

¹⁰ Kant calls the 'raw material of our sensations' "experience", to which we would add that in experience the intensity of these raw materials depends on our engagement with them. We reflect upon that which we find existentially 'gripping', our attention waning as soon as it stops delivering feelings, sensations, and ideas of a greater intensity than others. 'Distraction' is therefore the ebb and flow of more powerful phenomenal flows subduing less intense ones, while 'attention' would be the tendency for a sensation (or group of sensations) to maintain their intensity so as to be sustained in our reflections.

my mind seems completely blank, a place where there is only blackness and a feeling of peace, paradoxically I cannot verify that I have actually arrived at this point, for in order to numerically signify these two basic sensation, I would have to call many more into play.

For example, sometimes when I meditate, I will use the word "one" as a mantra. After some time, the sound of the word echoes in my head with only darkness along side it. There is only one and its absence, both sensed to and in each other so that we cannot even differentiate which is more intense than the other. Now in this state, "one" certainly doesn't have a numerical sense. In fact, it does not signify at all. For it to have meaning, I need to bring another quality to bear, so that between one and the blackness there is something else to to which the sound of 'one' can correspond, and by which its intensity can be distinguished from the blackness.

Suppose I imagine a figure '1' at the same time as I'm thinking the word 'one' in my meditation, and concentrate on them both. The sound and the figure correspond against the blackness, which now serves as their background. Does the one signify the other? So long as I continue to make them correspond, they both seem to signify the non-blackness of my mediative state, but nothing more. They do this in alteration, as I consider the sound 'one' more intensely than the figure '1', and vice -versa.

Although the meaning of this meditation is simple, it nonetheless gives us a profound look at how the mind formulates meaning, and how meaning and its signification are forged out of a play of corresponding sensations that vary in intensity from others. Sense is like a 'parentheses' of phenomena wherein two sensations bond to each other in reciprocal expression. These basic pairs slowly begin to correspond to each other too, until all our sensations are eventually linked together in endless chains of understanding and significance (Husserl 20-21).¹¹ Thus, the correspondence of simple, redundant codes represent each other in turn,¹² gradually building long signifying chains, to the very limits of abstraction.¹³

Consequently, if we consider the intuitive state phenomenologically, every impression expresses every other reciprocally, making the intuitive utterly dynamic and un-codified. At this level, there is no such thing as a 'phenomenon' or 'percept', for intensities are always already multifarious, universally signifying all others without being bound to each other in any particular significance. Notions of time and space wither away into unreflective time, an insignificant time

¹¹ For Husserl, the "parenthesizing" of the phenomenological field allows us to "gain possession" of the "Objective world", such that the "one who is meditating" can acquire "pure living", and discover the meaning of the world on their own.

¹² Every codified sensation represent its paired sensation in such a way that the one expresses the other just as much as the other expresses it. (Deleuze & Guattari 44)

¹³ Throughout habitual use, these signifying chains eventually become languages, the practical and social value of which lead us to rely on them almost exclusively, ignoring the inner language of the soul as it struggles to express the the infinite depth of our phenomena in their own terms

of pure simultaneities, a time in which all that appears is perpetually caught in the state of appearing.

As ontologically prior to sense, meaning, and significance, we propose that the fields of both semiotics or linguistics are in dire need of a phenomenological account of how we pass from this intuitive state towards common languages and symbols. This investigation would begin with some of the principles and axioms we've outlined in this paper.

First, that all social languages must reconcile themselves with a personal 'language of the soul' that is chaotic, multifarious, artistic, and novel. Albeit the case that most of us routinely ignore this language, relying instead on the languages we have learned from others (for reasons of both habit and social pragmatics), we need to trace the mechanisms through which the language of the soul is made to conform to social codes and languages, and the rites of passage that inscribe common significations, symbols, and icons.

Second, using all the languages at our disposal, we need to model the language of the soul in greater detail. Beyond analytic accounts, we demand a philosophy that is as much poetic as it is precise, as metaphoric as it is categorical. A philosophy of the soul needs to achieve both the height of abstraction and the heights of artistic expression, so that it can not only define and categorize the limits of our understanding, but can illuminate the ways in

which our intuitions can surpass them, and the treasures that await those who are willing to plunge the depths of existence.

Finally, secondary philosophy calls for philosophers that are willing to push the very limits of their own bodies and minds in the hopes of finding new thoughts and sensations. Chasing the emergence of sense means actively seeking out that which is novel or uncanny by whatever means necessary. 'Live dangerously', as Nietzsche would say, for the pursuit of wisdom is the perpetual upheaval of sense, the usurpation of what we think we know, the embrace of the strange (Nietzsche 228).

About the Author

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