

FLASHBACK

When I was a young man I used to work in the fields, vineyards, and meadows of my father's farm. This intense agricultural labor would consume practically all my energy, leaving little or no time for reflection. Indeed, my mind was so task-oriented that there was room for nothing else. Had I been able to "let go" I would have been naturally receptive to the concept of the infinity that surrounded me; my mind would have yielded to its natural propensity to wander and wonder, as it should do when one is so young and in the midst of this pure and transforming nature. But back then I had no notion of what infinity meant, virtually no knowledge of its existence at all.

Only today do I realize how alienated my mind had been; rather than surrendering to its natural disposition and absorbing itself in meditation on the infinite, it was stubbornly and exclusively preoccupied with what is contingent and finite.

As a schoolboy and, later, a college student, my mind would have been naturally receptive to conceive of infinity, but instead it was continuously limited by objectives of little scope, obliged to restrict itself to these narrowminded pursuits. I had to write essays and reviews, prepare this or that homework, and eventually, as an older student, submit my thesis. These scholastic efforts were presented for my headmaster's or professor's consideration, who in due time would then pronounce their final judgment. All this belonged to the contingent order of things. All that belongs to a human being that necessarily defines him or her as a philosopher was forgotten, brushed aside, or simply never stimulated or encouraged.

Human beings spend their lives accomplishing tasks, carrying out functions, performing roles that they have chosen or responsibilities that others have chosen for them. These tasks, functions, and roles might have been entirely different as a consequence of some other particular need, tradition, influence, or coincidence. How difficult it is to truly and deeply ascertain the universal human being beyond peoples' individual characteristics!

Having been spiritually educated in the Catholic faith, my teachers taught me that “God” had created the sky and the earth out of nothing; then he created light, the firmament, the planets, and the animated beings of the sea and air. I was told that he had created man in his own image; that a man called Adam had disobeyed him nevertheless; that Adam and his earliest of all sins had wrought evil, suffering, and death upon the world. But I was also told that, in his demise, man would take with him the promise of a savior who would return as Jesus Christ during the reign of Emperor Augustus.

From all this I could have concluded that God, World, and Man are all there is. Hence, I might have come up with the concept of the Whole: the Whole of reality, and therefore of the infinite, since there can be nothing else beyond the Whole of reality.

But that is not what I came up with.

God, World and Man tallied up without forming a whole; it did not cross my mind to consider them as going *together* at that time. Above all “God” meant a serious threat for “sinners” as well as a promise of eternal life in paradise for the “souls of the deceased,” at least for the “just and good” souls amongst us.

Throughout my childhood and part of my youth, I attended an annual seven o’clock morning Mass, which was offered to God in order for my mother’s soul to “rest in peace.” I cannot at all remember having felt something resembling a love for God. Actually, I often felt a superstitious fear of this Supreme Being known to many as the “Almighty.” Even back then, my mind never truly accepted what I had been told about Christ, the “God made man, second person of the Trinity, mediator, savior, dead and resurrected.”

The Foundation and Spontaneity of My Rejection of the Monotheist Creed

The Judeo-Christian myth did not prepare me to reflect upon the ideas of the Whole and Infinity. God was of course “infinitely perfect,” but this prerequisite did not really inspire one to think about the infinite. The Christian dogma never quite held a firm grip on my mind. So when I came to explicitly reject it, all I had done was to throw away a burden of imposed beliefs that did nothing but uselessly weigh me down. The so-called kindness of God did not appear to correlate with the utter magnitude of suffering here on Earth.

I had yet to develop the decisive argument needed to reject this religious dogma outright until the time I became aware of the sufferings of tortured children through reading Dostoyevsky and the “Diary of Mary Berg,” among other texts. I considered their abject woe as having de jure no justification whatsoever. However, it was not the suffering of children that motivated my rejection of the monotheist creed: I had already rejected it. Rather, this suffering “became” the foundation for my rejection, and it was all I required to justify an anti-theist position, which had become mine spontaneously. Indeed, it had already been mine for quite some time.

Bergson, whose thoughts shall be discussed in chapter IX, writes that by taking into account only arguments, analysis, and rational motives, “we risk failing to see what is fundamentally spontaneous in a philosophical position.”¹ My philosophical intuition freely induced me to reject the monotheist path. I had a premonition that my reason, my feeling of what is just, simple, and clear would be uselessly troubled by something that only made sense thanks to a dubious “Revelation.” To my mind, this was as a cumbersome, hazardous, and complex construction.

“Impossible.” This is what intuition “whispers in the philosopher’s ear,” says Bergson. And he adds: “What a strange force this intuitive power of negation! How is it that historians of philosophy have not been more greatly struck by it? Is it not obvious that the first step the philosopher takes is to reject certain things definitively, when his thought is still faltering and there is nothing definitive in his doctrine? Later he will be able to make changes in what he affirms; he will vary only slightly what he denies.”²

As a matter of fact, I never once thought of turning back on my position on the monotheist creed. On the contrary, my negation became even more radical over time, up to the point of annihilating itself, having completely dissolved its object.

At first, the notion of God seemed to me most worthy of examination. At that time, part of my role as a university professor was to be able to explain the great theological philosophies of the world. Out of probity, I made an effort to align myself with the spirit that underlies and drives these theologies and to reconstruct their inner logic. However, this was quite an alienating experience as I had the patent feeling that doing so meant working against my true self.

Progressively, the meaning of the word *God* lost its meaning and eventually I tired of using it. In the monotheist system, notions of “God,” “World” and “Man” are correlated. Once the notion of “God” is rejected, the notion of “World” cannot remain the same; a “World” is a whole with a defined, unifying structure. Do all finite beings, including “Man,”

form a “World?” For this proposition to be true, you need to postulate the existence of “God” for structure and unity. All finite beings become then a “world,” a single one, unique and ordered, but also rational, reasonable, and harmonious. This is exactly how Plato, the Stoics, and Leibniz, among others, wanted the “World” to be, as will be shown in the coming chapters.

In contrast, once the notion of “God” is rejected, finite beings no longer need be thought of as forming a unique “World,” though this does not mean that the notion of “World” becomes useless. Firstly, it remains useful as a phenomenological concept expressing the experience we have of all that we can see around us. Secondly, if all the finite beings no longer need to be brought together in *one* unique World, then we can consider there are multiple *worlds*. We can do so because we accept pluralist cosmologies, as Anaximander first did in the sixth century BC, or because we consider each species or even each individual as inhabiting “its own world,” and finally, because we consider artists as “creating worlds.”

The notion of “Man” fares no better than the notion of “World” against the disappearance of the notion of “God.” Indeed, in the monotheist creed, the essence of man, the definition of what Man must be, and how he should live in order to qualify for salvation are all correlated to the notion of God. With God, eternal life, or immortality, is promised to Man; without God, his is a mortal destiny. In the monotheist creed, his “finitude” on earth means he must experience death, though that death would not be his life’s end. The Loving God’s promise gives sense to his life for, without God, his “finitude” becomes truly finite; his life ends with earthly death, as though he were an animal or a tree.

But what of his *being* then? “For why,” asks Montaigne, “do we claim title to existence, on account of that instant that is only a flash in the infinite course of an eternal night, and so brief an interruption of our perpetual and natural condition?”³ Montaigne speaks here as if he were an atheist. It is possible he was an atheist, albeit an intermittent one, as we will see in chapter VI.

Being and Appearances

To live during such a short period of time between the infinite past (when we were not yet) and the infinite future (when we will no longer be): can we really refer to that as “being”? Neither Plato nor Aristotle thought so, even though they needed the “forms” to be eternal so that they could be

said to “be,” as we will see in the next two chapters. Indeed, the lasting being is more real than the passing one. If Man only lasts one day, he is “the shadow of a shadow,” states Pindar, the Greek lyric poet who lived during the fifth century BC.

Of course, in my daily life if I observe a table in front of me I might be moved to say: “The table is,” or “This is.” That is because I only see things in their present and current form or shape, forgetting the two infinities—the past and the future. I do not perceive what surrounds me as integrated into the infinity of time. Hence, I accept it as a firm reality.

But, if I could see all things within the infinity of time, they would appear to me as fleeting, incapable of taking the forms of firm *beings*. They would resemble “shadows and phantoms,”⁴ states Philo, from the first century AD. He adds: “In a procession the first ranks get out of sight as they move further. In a torrent the waves stream faster than our capacity to perceive them. Similarly in life, things pass by, move away and although they seem firm, not one of them remains fixed for a single moment. All flee continuously.”

As we limit time to a present flanked by a short-term past and future, we are thus able to say: “This is,” “I *am*,” etc. This occurs because we only succeed in living and acting in a “narrow” notion of time; the timeframe of the short lives and of the world we inhabit. However, let us now try to exempt ourselves from the need to act and consider our lives as brief moments in an infinite time. The time frame of the Whole of reality—Nature, as I call it—can be thought to be infinite in both space and time. Are we then still able to define ourselves with the words we use in the atomic time of our daily life? What are we then? Neither beings, nor nothingness: just appearances which do not refer to a being and which simply glide and flee, destined for oblivion.

Neither appearance-*of* (a being), nor appearance-*for* (for a being—a subject): such is the Pyrrhonian notion of Appearance. This concept is named after Pyrrho, the ironic philosopher considered by some as one of the fathers of Skepticism. In the monotheist creed, Man is the only being not destined to die. However, if Man has no destiny, then he merely appears for an instant until death extends its inevitable reach over all living things. All finite beings are then subsumed into the notion of Appearance. This whole of finite beings, the Whole of reality, is infinite since there is nothing else but this infinity, multiple and without unity. As will be shown in chapter V, this can hark back to the boundless universe of the Epicureans except that, in Nature, as I see it, there would be no substantial entities such as

atoms, the infinite void, and gods. As long as our thinking limits itself to what appears to or before our eyes, we consider such entities as fictions.

Duties toward Shadows

But if human beings are only shadows, and if independently of what they do they quickly vanish, what becomes of our duties? Do we have duties toward shadows? There was a time when I thought that the reality of a being was implied by the unconditional character of the moral imperative that could be applied to that being. By “real,” we can understand as we have just seen, either “that has the semi-reality of shadows” or “that has the full reality of what will surely last.”

Since we do have unconditional duties toward particular beings, at least in particular situations, I concluded that these beings were fully real. I now understand they might have only a semi-reality. But that does not change our duties toward them in any way. We can therefore claim to have duties toward “shadows.” Indeed, ontology should not interfere with morality; they play a different game. Ontological nihilism such as the Pyrrhonian philosophy only leads to a depreciation of beings, not of the duties we have toward them, or of the values we hold.

Where Pyrrho, Heraclitus, and Parmenides Meet

Was it possible for me to stick to the Pyrrhonian philosophy of Appearance, to such ontological nihilism? In order to answer this question, I should first state that my method is neither reflexive (examining myself), nor deductive (concluding from ideas to things), nor dialectic (limiting itself to the ideas game), nor eclectic (supposing a minimal agreement between different philosophies), nor intuitive (leading to the heart of things). My method is experimental, or rather “experiential.” So I continuously confront *all there is, the Whole of reality with all that is offered to my experience*. Here we should distinguish between two forms of experience: on one hand, the narrow forms of experience such as those of the worker, the artist, or the scientist, and on the other hand, the global philosophical experience. The latter does not omit anything but rather takes all the aspects presented to us into account.

This leaves us with the following question: Can the notion “the Whole of reality” facilitate the experience one has of that reality or are there pockets of resistance? I think that it can, and that there is not one single pocket of resistance.

It is not by chance that I have tried to pull Pyrrhonism toward Heraclitus’s philosophy and thereby bring together Heraclitus and Parmenides. Indeed, to defend as I do with Pyrrho the argument that there is nothing more than vanishing appearances is equal to defending the eternity of this statement. What there is now is not what there was yesterday, but whatever there is, to claim that “*there is*” remains always true. “*There is*” is the way I translate the “*esti*” of Parmenides, the Ante-Socratic philosopher who holds that the reality of the world as “One Being,” an unchanging, un-generated, indestructible whole.

Parmenides’s slightly younger contemporary, Heraclitus, claims what could be seen as just the opposite. For Heraclitus, everything is “in flux,” as exemplified in his famous aphorism “*panta rhei*” which means “everything flows, nothing stands still.”

With “*there is*,” Parmenides and Heraclitus join forces to give eternity its rights. Indeed, when I say “*there is*,” no notion of time is involved: “*there is*” demands no specification.

To test it, let us introduce the notion of time. Let us ask ourselves if, one day, one may have said or may say in the future: “*There is nothing*.” This would be contradictory. “‘*There is nothing*’ cannot be said or thought”⁵ says Parmenides. “*There is*,” on the other hand, can be equated to “neither there was, nor will there be, *because* it is now”⁶: the idea of “now” or “*nun*,”⁷ used here, excludes the succession of moments in time and refers to an “eternal present”: a present in no way bordered by a past and a future.

We can therefore say that everything happens in the world within an eternal present. Heraclitus’s *panta rhei*, “Everything flows,” implies an eternal present, just as Parmenides’s *nun*.

Getting to See the “Real Force”

What diversity there is within this infinite constant! What diversity in this “*There is!*” We have only to open our eyes: a multiplicity of beings and appearances reveals itself to us. We will call them “beings” if we look at them in narrow time and “appearances” if we choose to do so in infinite time as seen above. However, this diversity, this multiplicity cannot be

called disparate. What we see is an arrangement, a “world” (*cosmos*) in the phenomenological sense.

It would of course be pointless to ask why “*There is*” rather than “*There is not*”: it has always been and always will be so. A more natural and rational question is to ask “Why is it ‘so’ rather than differently?” Aristotle observes: “For all men begin, as we said, by wondering that things are as they are.”⁸

When we do wonder about it, we quickly note that no finite being can exist without an external source. Rain presupposes the cloud. The day presupposes the sun. The plant presupposes the seed. The animal has parents. All these beings cannot bring themselves alone into existence, or organize themselves in a world (a structured unity). Not even this world can justify itself. Should we then say this world conforms to an eternal model? We would thereby only shift the problem to another level.

So which creative force engendered this world? Observation and analyses of this world can give us a clue—on the condition that we are not blinded by some obsessive myth. The monotheist faith can prevent us from seeing what we have before our very eyes. We are told an Almighty being has created the world from nothing, and we must believe it, as absurd as it may seem. We are so blinded by this myth that we still would not understand it, even if we were to have real evidence reproducing all aspects of the world right before our own eyes. In order to truly see the real force, we first need to reject as imaginary the unsatisfactory “explanation”: the absurd myth of “creation out of nothing.”

When we finally succeed in rejecting this myth, then the real force naturally reveals itself to us. To sing the real force, to sing the renewal of nature in spring, the poet Lucretius uses the words *power*, *force*,⁹ or even *love* (*Venus*). The Ante-Socratics called this real force “*Phusis*,” which translates to Nature, always denoted with a capital N.

As the “real force,” Nature can be said to animate the world. But it does this discreetly “in the background,” as it were. Heraclitus says “Nature (*Phusis*) is wont to hide itself.”¹⁰ Heraclitus uses the word *phileo*,¹¹ meaning “to love,” but also “to be in the habit of, to be wont to.”¹² We can observe this over time as Nature shows or hides itself according to the seasons: it is a habit, the altering of the seasons being undefined. This power of life, Nature, hides itself and becomes invisible during the “dead” season. But after death, life; after life, death and so on. Each of these two opposites is needed. Nature keeps them together as they take turns to appear. A law of harmony governs the course of things but, as Heraclitus notes, “the hidden harmony wins over the visible harmony”¹³: the invisible governs the visible and holds its key.

Nature as Phusis, Nature as the
Whole of Reality

The myth claims “God created the world,” thereby implicitly acknowledging that the world is not everything. What is there beyond the world then? If we consider “God” as a cultural notion incompatible with our ingenuous experience of reality, could we then consider Nature as all that is “beyond” the world, as what encompasses the world we know and the multiplicity of other worlds and universes? If we do so, could we extend “*Phusis*,” the “real force,” “*Nature as what underlies the world*” to an all-encompassing Nature? Could Nature then be considered to be “*the Whole of reality*,” “the only being that truly is” which does not flow away while all finite beings are no more than its fleeting manifestations?

We can only answer this question by plowing through with an ingenuous experience of reality and by contemplating it with renewed attention. This is precisely the purpose of this book. In the following chapters, I will attempt to define my philosophical position by differentiating it from those of the philosophers who are dearest to me. Hopefully, a certain idea of Nature will emerge from these chapters: Nature as infinite in time and space, as infinitely creative and in which Man, if he does not get bogged down with rigid concepts or blinded by contrived and deceptive myths and creeds can also be creative.