PHILOSOPHY AND THE IDEA OF INFINITY

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(Alfonso Lingis, trans.)

1. Autonomy and Heteronomy

Every philosophy seeks truth. Sciences too can be defined by this search, for from the philosophic eros, alive or dormant in them, they derive their noble passion. If this definition seems too general and rather empty, it will, however, permit us to distinguish two directions the philosophical spirit takes, and this will clarify its physiognomy. These directions interact in the idea of truth.

1. Truth implies experience. In the truth a thinker maintains a relationship with a reality distinct from him, other than him—"absolutely other," according to the expression taken up again by Jankélévitch. For experience deserves its name only if it transports us beyond what constitutes our nature. Genuine experience must even lead us beyond the nature that surrounds us, which is not jealous for the marvelous secrets it harbors, and, in complicity with men, submits to their reasons and inventions; in it men also feel themselves to be at home. Truth would thus designate the outcome of a movement that leaves a world that is intimate and familiar, even if we have not yet explored it completely, and goes toward the stranger, toward a beyond, as Plato puts it. Truth would imply more than exteriority: transcendence. Philosophy would be concerned with the absolutely other; it would be heteronomy itself. Let us go yet further. Distance alone does not suffice to distinguish transcendence from exteriority. Truth, the daughter of experience, has very lofty pretensions; it opens upon the very dimension of the ideal. In this way philosophy means metaphysics, and metaphysics inquires about the divine.

2. But truth also means the free adherence to a proposition, the outcome of a free research. The freedom of the investigator, the thinker on whom no constraint weighs, is expressed in truth. What else is this freedom but the thinking being's refusal to be alienated in the adherence, the preserving of his nature, his identity, the feat of remaining the same despite the unknown lands into which thought seems to lead? Perceived in this way, philosophy would be engaged in reducing to the same all that is opposed to it as other. It would be moving toward auto-nomy, a stage in which nothing irreducible would limit thought any longer, in which, consequently, thought, unlimited, would be free. Philosophy would thus be tantamount to the conquest of being by man over the course of history.

Freedom, autonomy, the reduction of the other to the same, lead to this formula: the conquest of being by man over the course of history. This reduction does not represent some abstract schema; it is man's ego. The existence of an ego takes place as an identification of the diverse. So many events happen to it, so many years age it, and yet the ego remains the same! The ego, the oneself, the ipseity (as it is called in our time), does not remain invariable in the midst of change like a rock assailed by the waves (which is anything but invariable); the ego remains the same by making of disparate and diverse events a history—its history. And this is the original event of the identification of the same, prior to the identity of a rock, and a condition of that identity.
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Autonomy or heteronomy? The choice of Western philosophy has most often been on the side of freedom and the same. Was not philosophy born, on Greek soil, to dethrone opinion, in which all tyrannies lurk and threaten? With opinion the most subtle and treacherous poison seeps into the soul, altering it in its depths, making of it an other. The soul “eaten up by the others,” as M. Teste would say, does not feel its alteration, and is hence exposed to all violations. But this penetration and this prestige of opinion presuppose a mythical stage of being in which souls participate in one another, in the sense Levy-Brühl has given to the term. Against the turbid and disturbing participation opinion presupposes, philosophy willed souls that are separate and in a sense impenetrable. The idea of the same, the idea of freedom, seemed to offer the most firm guarantee of such a separation.

Thus Western thought very often seemed to exclude the transcendent, encompass every other in the same, and proclaim the philosophical birthright of autonomy.

2. Narcissism, or the Primacy of the Same

Autonomy, the philosophy which aims to ensure the freedom, or the identity, of beings, presupposes that freedom itself is sure of its right, is justified without recourse to anything further, is complace in itself, like Narcissus. When, in the philosophical life that realizes this freedom, there arises a term foreign to the philosophical life, other—the land that supports us and disappoints our efforts, the sky that elevates us and ignores us, the forces of nature that aid us and kill us, things that encumber us or serve us, men who love us and enslave us—it becomes an obstacle; it has to be surmounted and integrated into this life. But truth is just this victory and this integration. An evidence the violence of the encounter with the non-I is deadened. The commerce with exterior truth as enacted in true cognition is thus not opposed to freedom, but coincides with it. The search for truth becomes the very respiration of a free being, exposed to exterior realities that shelter, but also threaten, its freedom. Thanks to truth these realities, whose plaything I am in danger of becoming, are understood by me.

The “I think,” thought in the first person, the soul conversing with itself, or, qua reminiscence, rediscovering the teachings it receives, thus promotes freedom. Freedom will triumph when the soul’s monologues will have reached universality, will have encompassed the totality of being, encompassing even the animal individual which lodged this thought. Every experience of the world, of the elements and objects, lends itself to this dialectic of the soul conversing with itself, enters into it, belongs to it. The things will be ideas, and will be conquered, dominated, possessed in the course of an economic and political history in which this thought will be unfolded. It is doubtless for this reason that Descartes will say that the soul might be the origin of the ideas that relate to exterior things, and thus account for the real.

The essence of truth, therefore, would not be in the heteronomous relation with an unknown God, but in the already-known which has to be uncovered or freely invented in oneself, and in which everything unknown is comprised. It is fundamentally opposed to a God that reveals. Philosophy is atheism, or rather unreligion, negation of a God that reveals himself and puts truths into us. This is Socrates’ teaching, when he leaves to the master only the exercise of maieutics: every lesson introduced into the soul was already in it. The I’s identification, its marvelous autarchy, is the natural crucible of this transmutation of the other into the same. Every philosophy is—to use Husserl’s neologism—an egology. And when Descartes comes to discern an acquiescence of the will in even the most rational truth, he not only explains the possibility of error, but sets up reason as an ego and truth as dependent on a movement that is free, and thus sovereign and justified.

This identification requires mediation. Whence a second characteristic of the philosophy of the same: its recourse to neuters. To understand the non-I, access must be found through an entity, an abstract essence which is and is not. In it is dissolved the other’s alterity. The foreign being, instead of maintaining and an a priori ide of fronted, is very indivi, in grasping every in reality do diverse. T suspendeThey are courage, without re to be unjust. be, in add be, in add be, in add in add. modality; over the o these for to be in dis We sha seem to When Hei ular being the verb an capital “B” and rense puts over not destro The Da same. Ind homeland quently ce above the tion for m constitutio sibility (o ment of re
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eing, instead of maintaining itself in the inexpugnable fortress of its singularity, instead of facing, becomes a theme and an object. It fits under a concept already, or dissolves into relations. It falls into the network of a priori ideas, which I bring to bear, so as to capture it. To know is to surprise in the individual confronted, in this wounding stone, this upward plunging pine, this roaring lion, that by which it is not this very individual, this foreigner, that by which it is already betrayed and by which it gives the free will, vibrant in all certainty, hold over it, is grasped and conceived, enters into a concept. Cognition consists in grasping the individual, which alone exists, not in its singularity which does not count, but in its generality, of which alone there is science.

And here every power begins. The surrender of exterior things to human freedom through their generality does not only mean, in all innocence, their comprehension, but also their being taken in hand, their domestication, their possession. Only in possession does the I complete the identification of the diverse. To possess is, to be sure, to maintain the reality of this other one possessed, but to do so while suspending its independence. In a civilization which the philosophy of the same reflects, freedom is realized as a wealth. Reason, which reductions the other, is appropriation and power.

But if things do not resist the ruses of thought, and confirm the philosophy of the same, without ever putting into question the freedom of the I, is this also true of men? Are they given to me as the things are? Do they not put into question my freedom?

They can, to begin with, block it by opposing it with more than their force—their freedoms. They wage war. War is not a pure confrontation of forces; it can perhaps be defined as a relationship in which force does not alone enter into account, for the unforeseeable contingencies of freedom—skill, courage, and invention—count too. But in war the free will may fail without being put into question, without renouncing its rights and its revenge. Freedom is put into question by the other, and is revealed to be unjustified, only when it knows itself to be unjust. Its knowing itself to be unjust is not something added on to spontaneous and free consciousness, which would be present to itself and know itself to be, in addition, guilty. A new situation is created; consciousness's presence to itself acquires a different modality; its positions collapse. To put it just in formal terms, the same does not find again its priority over the other, it does not rest peacefully on itself, is no longer the principle. We shall endeavor to make these formulas more clear. And if the same does not peacefully rest on itself, philosophy does not seem to be indissolubly bound up with the adventure that includes every other in the same.

We shall return to this shortly; let us first observe that this supremacy of the same over the other seems to be integrally maintained in the philosophy of Heidegger, the most renowned of our time. When Heidegger traces the way of access to each real singularity through Being, which is not a particular being nor a genus in which all the particulars would enter, but is rather the very act of being which the verb to be, and not the substantive, expresses (and which, with M. De Waelhens, we write with a capital “B”), he leads us to the singularity across a neuter which illuminates and commands thought, and renders intelligible. When he sees man possessed by freedom rather than possessing freedom, he puts over man a neuter term which illuminates freedom without putting it in question. And thus he is not destroying, but summing up a whole current of Western philosophy.

The Dasein Heidegger puts in place of the soul, consciousness, or the ego, retains the structure of the same. Independence—autarchy—came to the Platonic soul (and to all its counterfeit versions) from its homeland, the world of Ideas; according to the Phaedo, the soul is related to that world, and consequently cannot encounter anything really foreign in it. Reason, the power to maintain oneself identical above the variations of becoming, formed the soul of this soul. Heidegger contests this dominant position for man, but leaves Dasein in the same, qua mortal. The possibility of being annihilated is in fact constitutive of Dasein, and thus maintains its ipseity. This nothingness is a death, is my death, my possibility (of impossibility), my power. No one can substitute himself for me to die. The supreme moment of resoluteness is solitary and personal.
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To be sure, for Heidegger man's freedom depends on the light of Being, and thus does not seem to be a principle. But that was also the case in classical idealism, where free will was considered the lowest form of freedom, and true freedom obeyed universal reason. The Heideggerian freedom is obedient, but obedience makes it arise and does not put it into question, does not reveal its injustice. Being, equivalent to the independence and extraneousness of realities, is equivalent to phosphorescence, light. It converts into intelligibility. The "mystery" essential to this "dark light" is a modality of this conversion. Independence ends in radiation. Being and Time, Heidegger's first and principal work, perhaps always maintained but one thesis: Being is inseparable from the comprehension of Being; Being already invokes subjectivity. But Being is not a being. It is a neuter which orders thought and beings, but which hardens the will instead of making it ashamed. The consciousness of his finitude does not come to man from the idea of infinity, that is, is not revealed as an imperfection, does not refer to the Good, does not know itself to be wicked. Heideggerian philosophy precisely marks the apogee of a thought in which the finite does not refer to the infinite (prolonging certain tendencies of Kantian philosophy: the separation between the understanding and reason, diverse themes of the transcendental dialectic), in which every deficiency is but weakness and every fault, committed against oneself—the outcome of a long tradition of pride, heroism, domination, and cruelty.

Heideggerian ontology subordinates the relation with the other to the relation with the neuter, Being, and it thus continues to exalt the will to power, whose legitimacy the other alone can unsettle, troubling good conscience. When Heidegger calls attention to the forgetting of Being, veiled by the diverse realities it illuminates, a forgetting for which the philosophy developed from Socrates on would be guilty, when he deplores the orientation of the intellect toward technology, he maintains a regime of power more inhuman than mechanism and which perhaps does not have the same source as it. (It is not sure that National Socialism arises from the mechanist reification of men, and that it does not rest on peasant enrootedness and a feudal adoration of subjugated men for the masters and lords who command them). This is an existence which takes itself to be natural, for whom its place in the sun, its ground, its site, orient all signification—a pagan existing. Being directs its building and cultivating, in the midst of a familiar landscape, on a maternal earth. Anonymous, neuter, it directs it, ethically indifferent, as a heroic freedom, foreign to all guilt with regard to the other.

Indeed this earth-maternity determines the whole Western civilization of property, exploitation, political tyranny, and war. Heidegger does not discuss the pretechnological power of possession effected in the enrootedness of perception (which no one has described so brilliantly as he), in which the most abstract geometrical space is in the last analysis embedded, but which cannot find any place in the whole infinity of mathematical extension. The Heideggerian analyses of the world which in Being and Time were based on gear or fabricated things are in this philosophy borne by the vision of the lofty landscapes of nature, an impersonal fecundity, matrix of particular beings, inexhaustible matter of things.

Heidegger does not only sum up a whole evolution of Western philosophy. He exalts it by showing in the most pathetic way its antireligious essence become a religion in reverse. The lucid sobriety of those who call themselves friends of truth and enemies of opinion would then have a mysterious prolongation! In Heidegger atheism is a paganism, the pre-Socratic texts anti-Scriptures. Heidegger shows in what intoxication the lucid sobriety of philosophers is steeped. To conclude, the well-known theses of Heideggerian philosophy—the preeminence of Being over beings, of ontology over metaphysics—end up affirming a tradition in which the same dominates the other, in which freedom, even the freedom that is identical with reason, precedes justice. Does not justice consist in putting the obligation with regard to the other before obligations to oneself, in putting the other before the same?

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3. The Idea of Infinity

By reversing the terms we believe we are following a tradition at least as ancient, that which does not read right in might and does not reduce every other to the same. Against the Heideggerians and neo-Hegelians for whom philosophy begins with atheism, we have to say that the tradition of the other is not necessarily religious, that it is philosophical. Plato stands in this tradition when he situates the good above Being, and, in the Phaedrus, defines true discourse as a discourse with gods. But what we find most distinctive is the Cartesian analysis of the idea of infinity, although we shall retain only the formal design of the structure it outlines.

In Descartes the I that thinks maintains a relationship with the infinite. This relationship is not that which connects a container to a content, since the I cannot contain the infinite, nor that which binds a content to a container, since the I is separated from the infinite. The relationship which is thus described negatively is the idea of infinity in us.

We have of course also ideas of things; the idea of infinity is exceptional in that its ideatum surpasses its idea. In it the distance between idea and ideatum is not equivalent to the distance that separates a mental act from its object in other representations. The abyss that separates a mental act from its object is not deep enough for Descartes not to say that the soul can account for the ideas of finite things by itself. The intentionality that animates the idea of infinity is not comparable with any other; it aims at what it cannot embrace and is in this sense the infinite. To take the converse of the formulas we used above, we can say that the alterity of the infinite is not cancelled, is not extinguished in the thought that thinks it. In thinking infinity, the I from the first thinks more than it thinks. Infinity does not enter into the idea of infinity, is not grasped; this idea is not a concept. The infinite is the radically, absolutely other. The transcendence of infinity with respect to the ego that is separated from it and thinks it constitutes the first mark of its infinitude.

The idea of infinity is then not the only one that teaches what we are ignorant of. It has been put into us. It is not a reminiscence. It is experience in the sole radical sense of the term: a relationship with the exterior, with the other, without this exteriority being able to be integrated into the same. The thinker who has the idea of infinity is more than himself, and this inflating, this surplus, does not come from within, as in the celebrated project of modern philosophers, in which the subject surpasses himself by creating.

How can such a structure be still philosophical? What is the relationship which, while remaining one of the more in the less, is not transformed into the relationship in which, according to the mystics, the butterfly drawn by the fire is consumed in the fire? How can separate beings be maintained, and not sink into participation, against which the philosophy of the same will have the immortal merit to have protested?

4. The Idea of Infinity and the Face of the Other

Experience, the idea of infinity, occurs in the relationship with the other. The idea of infinity is the social relationship.

This relationship consists in approaching an absolutely exterior being. The infinity of this being, which one can therefore not contain, guarantees and constitutes this exteriority. It is not equivalent to the distance between a subject and an object. An object, we know, is integrated into the identity of the same; the I makes of it its theme, and then its property, its booty, its prey or its victim. The exteriority of the infinite being is manifested in the absolute resistance which by its apparition, its epiphany, it opposes to all my powers. Its epiphany is not simply the apparition of a form in the light, sensible or intelligible, but already this no cast to powers; its logos is: "You shall not kill."
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To be sure, the other is exposed to all my powers, succumbs to all my ruses, all my crimes. Or he resists me with all his force and all the unpredictable resources of his own freedom. I measure myself against him. But he can also—and here is where he presents me his face—oppose himself to me beyond all measure, with the total unoveredness and nakedness of his defenseless eyes, the straightforwardness, the absolute frankness of his gaze. The solipsist disquietude of consciousness, seeing itself, in all its adventures, a captive of itself, comes to an end here: true exteriority is in this gaze which forbids me my conquest. Not that conquest is beyond my too weak powers, but I am no longer able to have power: the structure of my freedom is, we shall see further, completely reversed. Here is established a relationship not with a very great resistance, but with the absolutely other, with the resistance of what has no resistance, with ethical resistance. It opens the very dimension of infinity, of what puts a stop to the irresistible imperialism of the same and the I. We call a face the epiphany of what can thus present itself directly, and therefore also exteriorly, to an I.

A face is not like a plastic form, which is always already deserted, betrayed, by the being it reveals, such as marble from which the gods it manifests already absent themselves. It differs from an animal’s head in which a being, in its brutish dumbness, is not yet in touch with itself. In a face the expressed attends its expression, expresses its very expression, always remains master of the meaning it delivers. A “pure act” in its own way, it resists identification, does not enter into the already known, brings aid to itself, as Plato puts it, speaks. The epiphany of a face is wholly language.

Ethical resistance is the presence of infinity. If the resistance to murder, inscribed on a face, were not ethical, but real, we would have access to a reality that is very weak or very strong. It perhaps would block our will. The will would be judged unreasonable and arbitrary. But we would not have access to an exterior being, to what one absolutely can neither take in nor possess, where our freedom renounces its imperialism proper to the ego, where it is found to be not only arbitrary, but unjust. But then the other is not simply another freedom; to give me knowledge of injustice, his gaze must come to me from a dimension of the ideal. The other must be closer to God than I. This is certainly not a philosopher’s invention, but the first given of conscience (la conscience morale), which could be defined as the consciousness (conscience) of the privilege the other has relative to me. Justice well ordered begins with the other.

5. The Idea of Infinity as Desire

The ethical relationship is not grafted on to an antecedent relationship of cognition; it is a foundation and not a superstructure. To distinguish it from cognition is not to reduce it to a subjective sentiment. The idea of infinity, in which being overflows the idea, in which the other overflows the same, breaks with the inward play of the soul and alone deserves the same experience, a relationship with the exterior. It is then more cognitive than cognition itself, and all objectivity must participate in it.

Malebranche’s vision in God (cf. the Second Metaphysical Discourse) expresses both this reference of all cognition to the idea of infinity and the fact that the idea of infinity is not like the cognition that refers to it. For one cannot maintain that this idea itself is a phenomenalization or an objectification without reducing it to the presence of the other in the same, a presence with which it in fact contrasts. In Descartes, a certain ambiguity concerning this point remains, since the cogito which rests on God elsewhere founds the existence of God: the priority of the infinite is subordinated to the free adhesion of the will, which initially is master of itself.

We separate ourselves from the letter of Cartesianism in affirming that the movement of the soul that is more cognitive than cognition could have a structure different from contemplation. Infinity is not the object of a contemplation, that is, it is not proportionate to the thought that thinks it. The idea of infinity is a thought which at e other is Desire, Desire “met

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is a thought which at every moment thinks more than it thinks. A thought that thinks more than it thinks is Desire. Desire "measures" the infinity of the infinite.

The term we have chosen to mark the propulsion, the inflation, of this going beyond is opposed to the affectivity of love and the indigence of need. Outside of the hunger one satisfies, the thirst one quenches, and the senses one allays, exists the other, absolutely other, desired beyond these satisfactions, when the body knows no gesture to slake the desire, where it is not possible to invent any new caress. This desire is unquenchable, not because it answers to an infinite hunger, but because it does not call for food. This desire without satisfaction hence takes cognizance of the alterity of the other. It situates it in the dimension of height and of the ideal, which it opens up in being.

The desires one can satisfy resemble this Desire only intermittently, in the deceptions of satisfaction or in the increases of emptiness which mark their voluptuousness. They wrongly pass for the essence of desire. The true Desire is that which the Desired does not satisfy, but hollows out. It is goodness. It does not refer to a lost fatherland or plenitude; it is not homesickness, is not nostalgia. It is the lack in a being which is completely, and lacks nothing. Can the Platonic myth of love, son of abundance and of poverty, be interpreted as bearing witness to the indigence of a wealth in Desire, the insufficiency of what is self-sufficient? Has not Plato, in the Symposium, with the myth of an androgynous being, affirmed the nonnostalgic nature of Desire, the plenitude and joy of the being who experiences it?

6. The Idea of Infinity and Conscience

How does a face escape the discretionary power of the will which deals with evidence? Is not knowing a face acquiring a consciousness of it, and is not to acquire consciousness to adhere freely? Does not the idea of infinity, qua idea, inevitably refer back to the schema of the same encompassing the other?—Unless the idea of infinity means the collapse of the good conscience of the same. For everything comes to pass as though the presence of a face, the idea of infinity in the I, were the putting of my freedom into question.

That the free will is arbitrary, and that one must leave this elementary stage, is an old certainty of philosophers. But for all of them the arbitrariness refers to a rational foundation, a justification of freedom by itself. The rational foundation of freedom is still preeminence of the same.

Moreover, the necessity of justifying the arbitrary is due only to the failure suffered by an arbitrary power. The very spontaneity of freedom is not put into question—such seems to be the dominant tradition of Western philosophy. Only the limitation of freedom would be tragic or scandalous. Freedom poses a problem only because it has not chosen itself. The failure of my spontaneity is said to awaken reason and theory; a pain is said to be the mother of wisdom. Failure would lead me to put brakes on my violence and introduce order into human relations, for everything is permitted but the impossible. In particular, modern political theories since Hobbes deduce the social order from the legitimacy, the incontestable right, of freedom.

The other's face is the revelation not of the arbitrariness of the will, but its injustice. Consciousness of my injustice is produced when I incline myself not before facts, but before the other. In his face the other appears to me not as an obstacle, nor as a menace I evaluate, but as what measures me. For me to feel myself to be unjust I must measure myself against infinity. One must have the idea of infinity, which, as Descartes knows, is also the idea of the perfect, to know my own imperfection. The infinite does not stop me like a force blocking my force; it puts into question the naïve right of my powers, my glorious spontaneity as a living being, a "force on the move."

This way of measuring oneself against the perfection of the infinite is not a theoretical consideration in its turn, in which freedom would spontaneously take up its rights again. It is a shame freedom has of
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itself, discovering itself to be murderous and usurpatory in its very exercise. A second-century exegete, more concerned with what he had to do than with what he had to hope for, did not understand why the Bible begins with the account of creation instead of putting us from the first before the first commandments of Exodus. Only with great difficulty did he come to concede that the account of creation was all the same necessary for the life of the just man; for if the earth had not been given to man but simply taken by him, he would have possessed it only as an outlaw. Spontaneous and naïve possession cannot be justified by virtue of its own spontaneity.

Existence is not condemned to freedom, but judged and invested as a freedom. Freedom could not present itself completely naked. This investiture of freedom constitutes moral life itself, which is through and through a heteronomy.

The will that in the meeting with the other is judged does not assume the judgment it welcomes. That would still be a return of the same deciding for the other in the final analysis, heteronomy absorbed in autonomy. The structure of the free will becoming goodness is not like the glorious and self-sufficient spontaneity of the I and of happiness, which would be the ultimate movement of being; it is, as it were, its converse. The life of freedom discovered itself to be unjust, the life of freedom in heteronomy, consists in an infinite movement of freedom putting itself ever more into question. This is how the very depth of inwardness is hollowed out. The augmentation of exigency I have in regard to myself aggravates the judgment that is borne on me, that is, my responsibility. And the aggravation of my responsibility increases these exigencies. In this movement my freedom does not have the last word; I never find my solitude again—or, one might say, moral consciousness is essentially unsatisfied, or again, is always Desire.

The unsatisfiedness of science is not simply a suffering of delicate and scrupulous souls, but is the very contraction, the hollow, the withdrawal into itself, and the systole of consciousness as such. Ethical consciousness itself is not invoked in this exposition as a "particularly recommendable" variety of consciousness, but as the concrete form of a movement more fundamental than freedom, the idea of infinity. It is the concrete form of what precedes freedom, but does not lead us back to violence, the confusion of what is separated, necessity, or fatality.

Here above all is the situation in which one is not alone. But if this situation does not yield proof of the existence of the other, this is because proof already presupposes the movement and adherence of a free will, a certainty. Thus the situation in which the free will is invested precedes proof. For every certainty is the work of a solitary freedom. As a welcome of the real into my a priori ideas, an adhesion of my free will, the last gesture of cognition is freedom. The face-to-face situation in which this freedom is put into question as unjust, in which it finds it has a master and a judge, is realized prior to certainty, but also prior to uncertainty.

This situation is an experience in the strongest sense of the term: a contact with a reality that does not fit into any a priori idea, which overflows all of them—and it is just for this reason that we have been able to speak of infinity. No movement of freedom could appropriate a face to itself or seem to "constitute" it. The face has already been there when it was anticipated or constituted; it collaborated in that work, it spoke. A face is pure experience, conceptless experience. The conception according to which the data of our senses are put together in the ego ends—before the other—with the de-ception by the dispossession which characterizes all our attempts to encompass this real. But the purely negative incomprehension of the other, which depends on our bad will, must be distinguished from the essential incomprehension of the infinite, which has a positive side, is conscience and Desire.

The unsatisfiedness of conscience, the de-ception before the other, coincides with Desire—this is one of the essential points of this exposition. The Desire for infinity does not have the sentimental complacency of love, but the rigor of moral exigency. And the rigor of moral exigency is not bluntly imposed, but is a De-goodness is exercise.

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imposed, but is a Desire, due to the attraction and infinite height of being itself, for the benefit of which goodness is exercised. God commands only through the men for whom one must act.

Consciousness, the presence of self to self, passes for the ultimate theme of reflection. Conscience, a variation on this theme, a species of consciousness, is taken to add to it the concern for values and norms. We have raised several questions concerning this: Can the self present itself to itself with so much natural complacency? Can it appear, shamelessly, in its own eyes? Is narcissism possible? Is not conscience the critique of and the principle of the presence of self to self? Then if the essence of philosophy consists in going back from all certainties toward a principle, if it lives from critique, the face of the other would be the starting point of philosophy. This is a thesis of heteronomy which breaks with a very venerable tradition. But, on the other hand, the situation in which one is not alone is not reducible to the fortunate meeting of fraternal souls that greet one another and converse. This situation is the moral conscience, the exposedness of my freedom to the judgment of the other. It is a disalignment which has authorized us to catch sight of the dimension of height and the ideal in the gaze of him to whom justice is due.

Notes


From The Continental Ethics Reader, Calarco & Atterton, Routledge 2003

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