
Un-knowing and its Consequences

At the end of yesterday's lecture ('The idea of truth and contemporary logic' by A. J. Ayer), Jean Wahl spoke of the subtle relationships which might be proposed between what Hegel said and what I have to say to you today. I am not certain that those relationships are very solid. I do think, however, that Jean Wahl has pointed to something with a precision of meaning which does justify emphasis on my part. It so happened that I met A. J. Ayer last night, and our reciprocal interest kept us talking until about three in the morning. Merleau-Ponty and Ambrosino also took part, and at the end of the conversation, I think, a compromise was reached.

It happened, nevertheless, that the conversation took a turn such that, despite our very pleasant surroundings, I began to feel as though I were beginning my lecture. I apologize for this distinction made between bar and lecture hall, but the outset does involve a certain confusion.

We finally fell to discussing the following very strange question. Ayer had uttered the very simple proposition: there was a sun before men existed. And he saw no reason to doubt it. Merleau-Ponty, Ambrosino and I disagreed with this proposition, and Ambrosino said that the sun had certainly not existed before the world. I, for my part, do not see how one can say so. This proposition is such as to indicate the total meaninglessness that can be taken on by a rational statement. Common meaning should be totally meaningful in the sense in which any proposition one utters theoretically implies both subject and object. In the proposition, there was the sun and there are no men, we have a subject and no object.

I should say that yesterday's conversation¹ produced an effect of shock. There exists between French and English philosophers a sort of abyss which we do not find between French and German philosophers.

I am not sure that I have sufficiently clarified the humanly unacceptable character of that proposition according to which there existed something prior to man. I really believe that so long as we remain within the discursive, we can always declare that prior to man there could be no sun. And yet one can also feel troubled, for here is a proposition which is logically

The text appeared in English in *October*, 36 (1986), pp. 81–5. Dated 12 January 1951, it is among the papers published in *OC*, VIII, pp. 190–8.

unassailable, but mentally disturbing, unbalancing – an object independent of any subject.

After leaving Ayer, Merleau-Ponty and Ambrosino, I ended by feeling regret.

It is impossible to consider the sun's existence without men. When we state this we think we know, but we know nothing. This proposition was not exceptional in this respect. I can talk of any object, whereas I confront the subject, I am positioned facing the object, as if confronting a foreign body which represents, somehow, something scandalous for me, because objects are useful. A given object enters into me insofar as I become dependent on objects. One thing that I cannot doubt is that I know myself. Finally, I wondered why I blamed that phrase of Ayer's. There are all sorts of facts of existence which would not have seemed quite as debatable to me. Which means that this un-knowing, whose consequences I seek out by talking to you, is to be found everywhere.

Let me clarify what I mean by this un-knowing; the effect of any proposition the penetration of whose content we find disturbing.

I shall begin with an antithetical proposition, not from a review of knowledge which may appear systematic, but rather from the concern with the attainment of maximum knowledge. It is, indeed, quite evident that insofar as I have a satisfiable curiosity of an unknown realm reducible to a known one, I am unable to say what it is that Hegel called absolute knowledge. It is only if I knew all, that I might claim to know nothing, only possession of this discursive knowledge would give me an ineradicable claim to have attained un-knowing. As long as I misunderstand things, my claim to un-knowing is an empty one. Were I to know nothing, I should have nothing to say, and would therefore keep silent. The fact remains that while recognizing that I cannot attain absolute knowledge, I can imagine knowing everything, that is, I bracket my remaining curiosity. I may consider that continued investigation would not teach me much more. I might thereby expect a major personal change in knowledge, but it would stop there. Assuming better knowledge of everything than I now have, I should still not be free of that disturbance of which I speak. Whatever proposition I may utter, it will resemble the first one. I find myself confronting that question, that question raised, we may say, by Heidegger.

Speaking for myself, the question has long seemed to me unsatisfactory, and I have tried to frame another: why is there what I know? Ultimately, this can be perfectly expressed in a turn of phrase. It still seems to me that the fundamental question is posed only when no phrase is possible, when in silence we understand the world's absurdity.

I have tried my best to learn what can be known, and that which I have sought is inexpressibly deep within me. I am myself in a world which I recognize as deeply inaccessible to me, since in all the relations I have

sought to establish with it, there remains something I cannot conquer, so that I remain in a kind of despair. I have realized that this feeling is rather rare. I was quite surprised that someone like Sartre shared no such feeling at all. He has said approximately the following: if you know nothing, you've no need to repeat it.

This is the position of one ignorant of the contents of a locked trunk he is unable to open. At a moment like this, one uses a literary language which contains more than need strictly be said. Only silence can express what one has to say, in a language therefore of disquiet, and in a state of perfect despair which, in at least one sense, is not comparable to that of one in search of something he does not have. This is a much deeper despair, one which we have always known, for, essentially bent on objects, we have projects in mind which cannot be realized, and we are on the point of frustration. This despair is equivalent to that of death. As foreign to death as it is ignorant of the contents of this coffer of which I have just spoken.

We can imagine death. We can, at the same time, know that this conception is erroneous. Our proposition concerning death is always tainted with some error. Un-knowing in regard to death is like un-knowing in general. It would seem quite natural to me that, in all that I have just said, each of you has seen a wholly special position (involving an exceptional individual placed outside the norm). As a matter of fact, this judgement of me is entirely consistent with present-day man. I do think, nevertheless, that we may say that this was not ever so – a view which may appear to you somewhat lightly framed.

This is a rather debatable hypothesis, the position of people whose object is precisely that of knowledge. Knowing that you know nothing helps considerably; you have to persevere in thought so as to discover the world of those who know they know nothing. It is a very different world from that of people who possess confidence (children), from that of those who have extended intellectual knowledge. It is a profound difference. These residues may even involve un-knowing in sometimes disconcerting syntheses, since they are, it must be said, no more satisfactory than the first position.

I think it well to refer to an experience as widespread as sacrifice (and in a context different from that offered in my other lectures): the difference and similarities between un-knowing and sacrifice. In sacrifice, one destroys an object, but not completely. A residue remains, and from the scientific point of view, on the whole, nothing of any account has taken place. And yet, if we consider symbolic values, we can conceive this destruction as altering the notion with which we started. The immediate satisfaction provided by a slaughtered cow may be either that of the peasant, or that of the biologist, but it is not what is expressed in sacrifice. The slaughtered cow has nothing to do with these practical notions. In all this, there was a limited, but solid knowledge. By engaging in the ritual

destruction of the cow, one destroyed all the notions to which mere life had accustomed us.

Man has need of inventing a prospect of un-knowing in the form of death. These are not regular intellectual operations. There is always some cheating. We all have the feeling of death, and we can assume that this feeling played a strong part in sacrifice. There is a profound difference between Catholics and Protestants; Catholics still experience sacrifice, reduced to a symbolic thinness. Nevertheless, the difference should not be exaggerated: traditional sacrifice and Catholic sacrifice are sacrifice of the soma and of the mass. The act of saying certain words over a bit of bread is quite as satisfying to the spirit as the slaughter of a cow. There is, ultimately, in sacrifice a rather frequent desire for horror. It seems to me that in this respect the spirit will assume as much horror as it can stand. An atmosphere of death, knowing's disappearance, the birth of that world we call sacred. We can say of the sacred that it is sacred, but at that moment language must at least submit to a pause. It is in fact the leitmotiv of this exposition that such operations are ill-conducted, debatable. It is all beside the point. And for a very simple reason: the only way of expressing myself would be for me to be silent; thence the flaw of which I have spoken. It is diametrically opposed to that which troubles us in the first proposition, in the phrase which set off the discussion with Ayer. A trouble felt, as well, in those who seek knowledge. That which I feel in confronting un-knowing comes from the feeling of playing a comedy, and in a position of weakness. I stand before you, challenging, while at the same time offering all the reasons for silence; I may consider, too, that perhaps I have no right to keep silent – a still more difficult position to maintain.

There remains simply the following: un-knowing does not eliminate sympathy, which can be reconciled with psychological knowledge.

When one knows that the hope of salvation must really disappear, the situation of someone wholly rejected (the difference between a lecturer and a servant dismissed in humiliation) – it is a painful situation because there is no project one can form which is not tainted by a kind of death. When one reaches this sort of despair but continues to exist in the world with the same hopes and the same instincts (human and bestial aspects), one realizes suddenly that one's possession of the world has greater depth than that of others. These possibilities are, in effect, more open to him who has relinquished knowledge (the walk through fields with a botanical textbook). Each time we relinquish the will to knowledge, we have the possibility of a far more intense contact with the world.

With a woman, insofar as one knows her, one knows her badly, that is, one's knowing is a kind of knowledge. Insofar as one tries to know a woman psychologically, untransported by passion, one distances oneself from her. It is only when we try to know her in relation to death that we draw near.

By a series of contradictions, it is when someone fails that we draw close, but we are asked to deny this feeling of the 'perishable'. In love, the will to project the loved one within the imperishable is a wish that goes contrary to this. It is insofar as an individual is not a thing that he can be loved. It is insofar as he bears some resemblance to the sacred. Just as the loved one cannot be perceived unless projected into death, thereby resulting in the imagination of death.

Still, we can, of course, through a conception of aspects of ordinary life, which provides a basis of un-knowing, endow them with extreme splendour. We have put a great distance between ourselves and un-knowing. Love cannot be successful. That attempt at magnification of the human being reduces such magnification to this world of practical knowledge.

Now that I have set forth the first consequence of un-knowing, I have again lost the right to speak of it. I have, in assuming the posture of un-knowing, returned to the categories of knowledge.

One can move indefinitely between both positions; neither one has greater validity than the other. I should be saved only by attaining the impossible.

There is, however, a perspective within which we can discern a true triumph for un-knowing – that of the end of history. Hegel's position in this respect is strongly subject to criticism. History must come to an end before it can be discussed; Hegel was mistaken in announcing the end of history; from 1830 on it accelerated. We can, however, without assuming responsibility, speak of the end of history. The position I have set forth would tend toward closure. The last man would find himself in a situation that would be wholly meaningless. If we consider our death as that of the last man, we can say that history has come full circle. He who would be last would have to continue the enterprise. Surely within him night would fall, overwhelming, burying him. This, one might almost say, would be his last spasm.

I think that I have also given the impression of having, in all these matters, a bias toward destruction. The world situation does not, in my view, imply that one is bound to the impossible. The relinquishing of investigation in that direction is true freedom.

There is no reason to adapt narrowly moral views but rather those which are moral in their intensity.

This situation does contain a sort of resolution. In relinquishing all, we can be rich. We are, as it happens, in the situation of the gospels, in that state of grace whose criterion is intensity.

The elements of cheating become a matter of indifference. There is no meaning in death, no project-related meaning. In this negation of means, in which salvation lies beyond everything, all is opened up within the limits of the instant, were I the last of men, and dying.

If I succeed in living within the instant, I break free of all difficulty, but I am no longer a man (to be a man means living in view of the future); and there is no recourse to animality in this situation, which requires a considerable energy available to few.

I pass no value judgement. I cannot manage the slightest condemnation of those who know, who live in the world in which I myself live, in which I can no longer live.

Note

- 1 [*D'hier, d'Ayer*: Bataille is punning on the resemblance between the word 'yesterday' and the name of the philosopher. TR.]