



The Shadow of Doubt

The affirmation of the ontological primacy of meaningful being for which, with some trepidation, I would revive the designation "personalism" calls for nothing less than an act of confidence in the ultimate reality of persons and the ultimate veridicality of individual consciousness. It is the affirmation that persons, as moral subjects, are real in the order of eternity, not merely actual in the order of time, and that they are the subjects of their lives, not the transient products of some allegedly more fundamental prehuman or transhuman force. It is no less the affirmation that human consciousness is fundamentally not illusory: though, admittedly, it is accidentally capable of error, it re-

mains essentially *capax veritatis*, capable of grasping truth. That audacious confidence is the gift of the radical brackets.

It is a fragile gift. To the Renaissance, that confidence may have appeared evidently justified—yet even the Renaissance conviction of the lucidity of consciousness and the rationality of the cosmos had its dark obverse of doubt. The “age of reason” was also an age in which witchcraft flourished no less than astrology. The age of science that succeeded it reaffirmed the personalist confidence on the far more problematic grounds of a faith in “progress.” It, too, had its obverse, the suspicion that the unfolding of history is not a purposive progression but an eruption of a blind and ultimately self-destructive force. Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were, after all, also a part of that century. Our own time has inverted the Renaissance perspective: though our acts remain predicated on the personalistic affirmation, the theory to which we increasingly look for guidance treats impersonal doubt as the evident datum. In the radical brackets of the forest clearing, the personalistic confidence stands out as the true sense of the cosmos and of our place therein. Beyond its confines, in the world in which, willy-nilly, we live, breathe, and have our being, doubt presses in and will not be ignored.

In one of its personae, that doubt is one which arises from within. The apostle Paul testifies to it in his anguished outcry, in Romans 7:19: “The good that I would I do not, the ill that I would not, that I do.” It is a universal experience. Paul articulated it in terms of the bondage of sin; a later age spoke of demonic possession and, later still, of “alienation” requiring the attentions of an “alienist.” In recent decades, depth psychology expressed that doubt forcefully with the conception of a dynamic unconscious. Though its theorists may differ, they share a common suspicion that our overt acts and thoughts are not the free acts of moral subjects but involuntary manifestations of a deeper, hidden reality beyond our ken. The criticism of their theories, no matter how telling, cannot dispel the doubt those theories articulate. The force of the cognitive claims of psychoanalysis is a moment of recognition. We experience our bondage long before anyone formulates a theory of determinism.

There is a second persona as well, the doubt that comes from without, acknowledged by Sophocles as fate. It, too, has received a powerful recent articulation, in this case in historicism, whether in the Hegelian conception of a purposive history or in the Marxian conception of a material historical determinism. Together with their many variations, both of those conceptions give expression to the deep suspicion that the logic of events is not that of individual moral acts but

of a transpersonal History and that persons, though actual, are not ultimately real but derivative from it. That suspicion, again, will not be laid to rest with counterarguments. It is as old as the ancient conception of fate and as deep as the experience of human longing brought to naught by the vicissitudes of events. Once again we experience our bondage long before historicism gives it an overt expression.

Any reaffirmation of the reality and the veridicality of moral subjects must come to terms not just with psychoanalysis and historicism, but with the experiences from which they arise. Radical brackets can suspend the ontological claims of psychoanalytic and historicist theory easily enough. What such theories present, after all, is not a faithful articulation of a clearly perceived experience, but rather highly speculative constructs which claim to interpret and explain that experience. What those brackets cannot suspend is the experience which lends credibility to the fanciful theoretical constructs of psychoanalysis and historicism—the suspicion that things are not what they seem, that the actual is not the real, that our consciousness is illusory and the lives we live and know themselves but an impoverished reflection of true reality. It is a fear far deeper than the fear that we may be mistaken in this or that belief. It is, rather, the fear that not just our beliefs but our reality itself, the world we know and our lives therein, are an inauthentic, deceptive distortion—and our true belief no more than true reflections of a false actuality.

In the history of Western thought, that suspicion has been articulated most clearly in a category which, in our passion for compartmentalization, we would be likely to label “theological” rather than philosophic, that of *the fall*.¹ That category acknowledges what may be an assumption or a recognition—or perhaps simply a vague sense—that the world of our experience, the world *pro statu isto*²—is fundamentally distorted and radically alienated from its true being. It is not primarily a historical category, referring to an alleged mythical event of long ago, even though in our historicist passion we tend so to read it. Rather, it is a systematic category, describing the actual as not fully real and perhaps as not even a reliable clue to true reality. It is an expression of the fear, the suspicion, or the conviction that this is indeed a “fallen” world whose present being is not a manifestation of its true being but only of the vast distance between what happens to be and what truly is.

It would be a mistake to write off that perception as no more than a product of idle theological speculation. For one, it is grounded directly in lived experience, reflecting the aching recognition of the gap between the profound *goodness* of being and the painful imperfection

of what is. Being is so utterly good, it is so deeply good *to be*. Then why do we make such a sorry mess of it? Humans have such an immense capacity for good—and, really, such a vast store of good will. Then why, why do we visit so much destruction on our world and our lives in it? Or, less dramatically, there is such a gap between what an apple could be—healthy, ripe, moist with dew—and the sorry, crabby specimen from my old orchard. Quite apart from all theological injunctions, there is, in lived experience, much ground for experiencing this world as a fallen one.

Nor is that putatively theological recognition absent from pure philosophy. Parmenides describes this world as the realm of seeming, Plato as a cave of shadows, or, in the *Statesman*, as a topsy-turvy one, a “world running backwards.”³ In philosophy, however, we encounter discriminations, not simply the aching unease of lived experience. In them, three ways of conceptualizing the fall emerge as ideal possibilities. One of them, which might or might not have been dominant in Plato’s thought, treats the fall as radical and absolute. It reflects not only a doubt but a despair over this world, not simply as a distorted image of true being but as wholly, irretrievably alienated from it. The truth, then, not only is not *of* this world: it is not even *in* it. This world is but an illusion and a perversion—and the strategy of the enlightened, who have seen through the deception, can only be to reject it, to leave it behind, escaping to a better realm. That can be the driving impulse of piety or of activity, seeking to destroy this flawed world utterly and to create a whole new reality, as in the case of secular radicalism, or asking God to do so. Less dramatically, it is also the perception expressed by the conviction that the reality accessible to us is wholly phenomenal and not indicative of the nature of the noumenal reality in itself.⁴ In their various ways, all such views express the conviction that the fall is radical and total.

It is that suspicion that is the root of true *skepsis*. In the confident age just past, bouyed as it was by a faith in “progress,” the word “skepticism” acquired a much milder, methodological sense. Still in the early decades of our century, writers dealing with the methodology of the sciences recommended a “skeptical” attitude, meaning by it nothing more drastic than an ordinary caution in accepting belief, asking for reasons and suspending judgments until they are offered. Though priding themselves on their “skeptical” attitude, those investigators did not for a moment doubt the intrinsic ability of humans to know the truth. Masaryk wrote in good faith when he proposed a probability calculus as a response to Humean *skepsis*:⁵ to his age,

skepsis meant no more than a functional doubt with respect to the truth claim of individual assertions.

Were *skepsis* really no more than that, probability could be an answer. If, to Nietzsche’s heirs, that answer appeared trivial beyond notice, it was because *skepsis* runs far deeper. Its basic suspicion is not that any specific assertion does not correspond to reality, but that the reality which it describes is itself a false reality, a mask rather than a manifestation of the real. Or, reverting to the theological metaphor, *skepsis* is the expression of the suspicion that ours is a fallen world, an inauthentic one, so that even true statements about it cannot claim to be the truth.

The nineteenth century, for all its dark undertones, had little understanding for Nietzsche. Perhaps, in its closing decades, it was simply willfully naïve, insisting on preserving the illusion of a world of sweetness and light down to the shot at Sarajewo and the smoke over Auschwitz. Yet even Matthew Arnold, the author of that phrase,⁶ knew better. The nineteenth century did not simply willfully refuse to acknowledge the reality of evil. It assumed a different, no less time-honored conception of the fall as essentially contingent and episodic, no more than a collective name for a set of specific and specifically remediable lapses in a fundamentally sound creation. As the conception of the fall as radical can be associated with Plato, so the conception of the fall as superficial might be associated with Aristotle. It is such a conception which would justify us in regarding the mean as “golden” rather than simply mean. The assumption here is that, by and large, the actuality of humankind and their world runs true to its reality so that, again by and large, it presents us with its faithful image. There are, to be sure, deviations, but the point is that they are indeed deviations, individual departures from the norm, occasioned by ignorance, ill will, or accident, and as such can be dealt with case by case. If, however—or so the scenario runs—we are careful to isolate the deviations and take the “normal” as the norm, whether qualitatively as in Aristotle or statistically as in much of contemporary social science,⁷ we can depend on actuality to provide us with a reasonably reliable image of reality and an adequate standard for correcting its distortion.

It was not so much willful naïveté as this conception of the fall which underlay the attempts to counter *skepsis* with a probability calculus and to answer moral questions with empirical research. If the fall were indeed superficial and episodic, then it would not be unreasonable to expect some methodologically sophisticated version of, say, a Kinsey report to provide us not only with a description of American mores

in the Age of Eisenhower but with a norm of "normal" human sexuality. The age of "progress," now in its final phases, with its confidence that not only will technology grow more complex but that, in due and not too distant time, it will make a significant difference in all the woes that the world is heir to, provides another dramatic illustration of the conception of the fall as fortuitous and episodic. Less dramatically, so do the phenomenalist and naïve realist convictions that, this way or that, phenomena are in fact noumena, the thing in itself but an aggregate of its ways of appearing.

Much of the critique of traditional personalism has focused on what its critics perceive as a tendency to regard evil as contingent and episodic. The confidence in the merely episodic nature of evil may have been convincing when Victoria was on her throne, Karl Marx sitting harmlessly in the public reading room of the British Museum, and Thomas Alva Edison was busy at work in his laboratory. Yet even then the faith was suspect. Overtly, it was drastically shaken for England by the Boer War, for Germany by the war of 1914 and its aftermath, for all of Europe by the war of 1938 and the Soviet occupation, for America finally by Vietnam. Those, however, were less the causes of the shift in European consciousness than manifestations of forces which seem to defy comprehension in personalistic terms. The massive eruption of passion in the nightmare of National Socialism, the inexorable grinding of history which reduced half of Europe to a gulag, simply did not seem explicable in moral categories, as the product of the mistaken or ill-willed decisions of Adolf Hitler or Joseph Stalin and their heirs. They themselves appeared caught up in an irresistible tide of the subhuman and the transhuman, by the demons of passion and the necessity of History. Nor does our daily world seem morally comprehensible any longer. In the conceptual and technological restructuring of it, we have restructured the givens of our daily experience. The very "balance of nature" which, laudably if belatedly, we seek to respect by restricting certain technologies, has already been deeply disrupted. The social ills we try to remedy with specific, laudable measures reflect a disruption of our entire social existence. The fall in our experience is not just an isolated incident but a universal condition. It pervades all of our world and our being therein, veiling the thing in itself no less than our lives in themselves.

Even within the radical brackets of the forest clearing, it is no longer possible to recapture the innocent confidence of the personalists of a century ago that the fall is merely episodic, an unfortunate, unintended by-product of rational acts. The forces of passion and fate have proved too real. They can be ignored—as ignored they are in much of our

"empirical" research in the human sciences—only at the cost of ignoring or denying our moral humanity as well. A denial of the pre-human and the transhuman cannot produce an adequate strategy of being human in the cosmos.

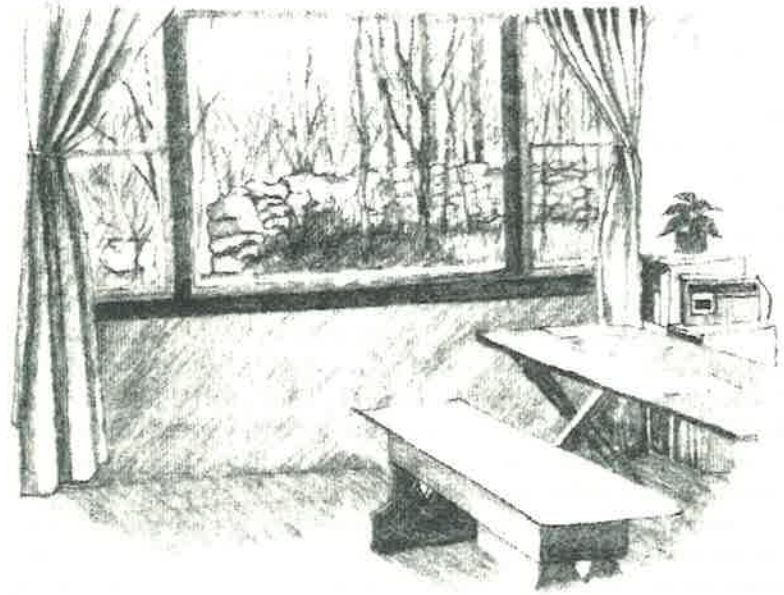
Neither, though, can a conception of the fall as radical and total. Were we to think of our moral humanity as illusory and of the world as offering no clue to the nature of reality, the sole strategies open to us would be those of individual escape to a heaven or a garden of Epicurus, or those of a revolutionary apocalypse which would wipe out the corruption by applying globally Mr. Kurtz's final recommendation in Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*.⁸

I cannot accept either strategy, that of despair or that of rage, not because I am unaware of the reality of evil but because, in the brackets of the forest clearing, I have also seen the profound goodness of being, simply as being. It is not that, lulled by the peace of the forest, I could revert to the confidence of the old personalists that the flaw is accidental and remediable. The ominous forces of passion and history are too real, not merely the creatures of theory, and cannot be bracketed away. Nor can I recapture the Renaissance confidence that human persistence can break the veil of deception and distortion. I know, as Heidegger also discovered, that it cannot.⁹ It is, rather, that my evenings have given me a confidence in the ability of reality, of the thing in itself, to present itself in spite of the veil—and of the possibility of the human, purged by solitude and pain of his arrogance, to receive its presence. It is a grand and startling gift, not an achievement. Humans can only receive it, not earn or deserve it. When, though, they are ready to receive it, setting aside their pride, the gift is given, the veil is drawn back. It is then that Emanuel Rádl's recognition applies—that the truth of being human is to redeem and reclaim, not to destroy.¹⁰

Perhaps, continuing the religious metaphor, we could say that though there is the fall, there is also epiphany. Though evil is powerful, grace is more powerful still. In our time, though, that is not a particularly transparent metaphor. Alternately, we might borrow Husserl's metaphor and say that the phenomenon is the noumenon as present, the noumenon appearing in and through—not "as"—the phenomenon. The divine *eros*, say, is distorted in the love of two human beings caught up in the care of their days, and yet it is there, not episodically, fully instantiated in some "perfect marriage," nor empirically, as the mean of all human marriages, but essentially, as the *eidos*, the sense of marriage present in and through the utter imperfection of all lives shared. It is a betrayal of our humanity to settle for an undemanding cohabitation as the best we can expect. It is folly to wait for a perfect

marriage. The great gift and the glory of being human is the possibility of recognizing reality as embodied in the actual, as the sense of the actual. Amid the flawed world of time there is yet the ideal, present as its sense. The porcupine is no more exempt from the fall than I am, yet the truth and goodness of being shine through the imperfection of his embodiment.

The forest clearing, the world revealed in radical brackets, does not constitute an antelapsarian enclave, somehow preserved from the fall. In this respect, Robert Frost's bittersweet vision of the world "north of Boston" is far more honest than Thoreau's exaltation of his Walden. Nor is the world beyond the confines of the forest ever wholly stripped of the truth of being. Truth is present in the fallen world, and can shine through it. Confidence in the face of skepsis cannot be based on the denial of the fall, but it can be based on the confidence in the ability of being to shine through. So, too, the personalistic affirmation of the reality and truth of the moral subject in a meaningful cosmos cannot be based on ignoring the bondage of passion and the momentum of history. It can, though, be based on the recognition that the truth of being human shines through both the prehuman and the transhuman dimensions of our being. The strategy of personalism in the face of the ideologies of the impersonal, psychoanalysis and historicism, cannot be one of seeking to deny the reality of fate and passion, but one of recovering their Person-al dimension.



The Spell of the Demon

It is easy enough to sustain the trusting confidence of personal vision on a calm starlit night or of a humming summer afternoon, while the blade of my axe swings rhythmically against the shining white of rock maple, its rhythm at peace with that of the forest. At such times the agonized bondage of passion and the involuted constructs of psychoanalysis seem far away, no more than a cunningly devised fable of idle men. It is tempting to dismiss them as self-indulgence and to think of the tangible goodness of physical labor as an adequate cure.

There are, though, the other times, when the forest grows dark as heavy clouds close up over the clearing and the sky splits with an ominous blue light. The rain comes suddenly, sheets of water beating