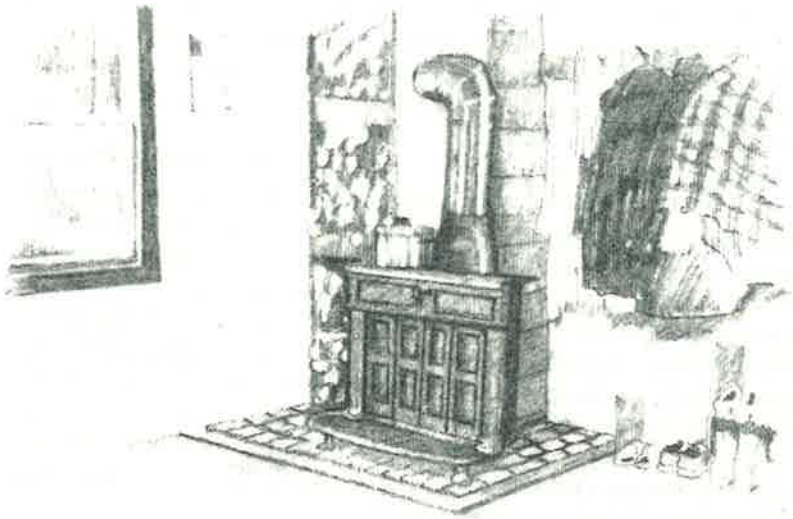
dissolves the monad of our conventions, pain borne and shared dissolves the monad of our pride and self-righteousness. Happiness, to be sure, can also be generous, but as it opens to the other, the opening tends to be unidirectional. In its generosity, happiness can also be insensitive and self-righteous. Pain borne and shared, not imposed on the other but freely accepted by him, teaches the human his own insufficiency, his own need and, with it, gentleness. It opens him to receive, in empathy, the gift of the other, not in censure but in gratitude and love. The blindness of time, judging in terms of what happens to aid or to hinder, must yield to the wisdom of eternity, which sees, behind time's pleasures and annoyances, the eternal value of every fragment of what is good, true, beautiful. It is when solitude dissolves the collective monad and pain borne and shared teaches the human to accept gratefully a gift freely offered that philosophy can begin to see the moral sense of the creation, of nature, the human's place therein, and of the God of it all. It is not simply in wonder but in love that philosophy begins. The paradoxic gifts of darkness, solitude, and pain are the radical brackets, the brackets of practical reason, which enable philosophy not only to speculate but to see.

Philosophy, as the ancients knew, begins with wonder. That wonder, though, is not puzzlement. It is, far more, the openness of one who no longer clings to the confidence of conceptual and technological mastery. It is the openness of one willing to see, to hear, to receive. Whatever the flaws of phenomenology—and they are a legion—there is a greatness in its courage of leaving the safety of preconceptions behind in its act of radical bracketing. It is, though, not only concepts that blind us but also the artifacts in which we have embodied them. That is why a radical bracketing must be a practical one, reclaiming the gifts of darkness, solitude, and pain. Those gifts enable us to see.



The Gift of the Word

There still is night, beyond the powerline, where the silvery moonlit river transforms pain into a gift. In the purity of the starry night, humans can see not only the mundane fact and the vast wonder, but also the *sense* of being. Nor see only: they can also speak of it. For here words are not intruders, interposing themselves as a veil between humans and being. That may so appear when we conceive of being on the model of our artifacts, as dead matter impelled by blind force. For if we conceive of being as meaningless, then there is no meaning to which our words could point. Inevitably, they appear arbitrary. Discourse would have first to create meaning and to impose it on the

meaningless world so that, as Jacques Derrida[12] would have it, a discourse could describe nothing but the meaning it itself brought into being. Discourse can be more than the monologue of our species within its collective monad when, in the solitude of dusk, we recognize that what surrounds and penetrates us is not merely being but, primordially, meaningful being. As Paul Ricoeur reminds us,[13] something must be for something to be said—there must be meaning to which our words point, not as intruders or impositions, but as expressions of the meaning that stands out at dusk. The word is not philosophy's handicap. It, too, is a gift.

That, to be sure, is not a view with which most philosophers of our time would feel comfortable. Perhaps not since the days of Gorgias, at least as Sextus Empiricus reports his views, has Western thought labored under so profound a fear that, even if there were truth and humans could know it, they could never communicate it. The word, in our time, appears not as a gift but as a burden, concealing rather than revealing. Philosophers of a century ago seem naïve today, not in their views but in the innocence of their unquestioning confidence in their ability to speak of philosophy in univocal assertions. There is something wistful about the uncritical optimism with which Husserl speaks of "seeing clearly and articulating faithfully," as if the latter were no more than a matter of care.[14]

In that assertion, Husserl identifies, though perhaps unwittingly, the two cornerstones of the perennial, elusive vision of philosophy as a "rigorous science" which could settle our doubts once and for all. It would be a *scientia*, not shadowy opinion or precarious speculation but true insight, with a direct access to reality, and it would be *rigorous*, that is, so articulated that its assertions would be as univocally true as the insight they express, requiring only assent, not wonder. That vision involves an assumption about the nature of reality for which Husserl argues strenuously—that being is intrinsically meaningful being, not mere being on which meaning must first be imposed. It involves, however, a second assumption about the nature of language which, except for a few scattered passages, Husserl leaves largely unexamined—that language is a wholly transparent, nondistorting medium through which reality is present with the same clarity and immediacy as in lived experience itself.

Husserl's first assumption, about the nature of reality, is admittedly crucial and worthy of being argued. In it, Husserl confronts the basic fear of *skepsis* through the ages, that *there is no truth*. It is the fear that reality is either so utterly One that any finite affirmation about it is a distortion simply by virtue of its finitude—the night vision of

poiēsis—or that it is so incurably Many that any universal affirmation about it is a speculative construct—the daytime vision of *technē*. Husserl's confidence in the possibility of philosophy as true sight and insight, as *scientia*, is based on the unshakable recognition that the eidetic structure of being, which we have been calling its moral sense, *is there* to be seen. Being is not Schrödinger's One,[15] an infinite presence defying finite comprehension. There is the "intermediate" level of reality between fact and wonder, the level of meaningful being.

Throughout his life's work, Husserl never wavered in his conviction that precisely that intermediate level is reality in its most primordial sense.[16] A discrete fact is an abstraction from it, a universal construct an elaboration of it. The basic datum, though, in the strict etymological sense of a pure experiential given, that which presents itself in experience, is the intermediate level of meaningful being. *Meaningful being*, not pure meaning or sheer being, is reality. More than any other discipline, philosophy can aspire to be a *scientia* because, without having to posit special regional criteria of relevance, it has presented to it, in lived experience, an intrinsically intelligible subject matter. The special sciences are special in the sense that, in order to carry out their work, they must impose upon experience or isolate within it a special perspective, choosing to see reality from the viewpoint of, say, chemical composition or of patterns of behavior and nothing else. The sense of being they seek is a special sense. Philosophy can claim to be the *scientia generalis* because it seeks to see and articulate the sense of being as it presents itself primordially, prior to the imposition of any special perspective or purpose. While Husserl's self-identification as a "positivist" may be misleading in the context of our terminological conventions, it is not arbitrary:[17] though not a positivist of putative "brute facts," Husserl is genuinely a positivist of meaningful being.

The encounter with nature in the radical brackets of solitude at dusk powerfully confirms Husserl's first assumption. Freed from the categories of our collective monad, nature and our life therein do present themselves as ordered and meaningful. There is an order, there is a moral and a vital law, there is a place and a task for humans therein. Abandoned by its human maker, our urban world may appear absurd. The forest, abandoned by humans, lives on in its ageless rhythm. The order, the sense, which stands out at dusk is what makes philosophy as the intermediate vision of meaningful being, between *technē* and *poiēsis*, possible in the first place.

It is Husserl's second assumption, left largely unexamined in his works, which is deeply troublesome—that the verbal articulation of the intermediate level of reality is nonproblematic, so that philosophy,

like chemistry, can establish a terminology and a body of true propositions capable of claiming an autonomous validity that is independent of the lived experience they articulate. Husserl even posits that as the hallmark of science and bids philosophy strive for it.[18] In that injunction, he focuses the second assumption underlying his project: that in a *faithful* verbal articulation nothing is added to and nothing subtracted from the experience so articulated. Though seeing and speaking may be modally distinct, their content can, in principle and with sufficient care, be identical.

That confidence is hard to sustain today. Its foundation, through the centuries, was a conviction of the adequacy of the analogy of proportionality as a means of extending the scope of language from an ostensive, mundane use to a philosophic one. Though, as Aristotle tells us, "being is said in many ways," on that assumption those ways are not wholly equivocal. As a man can be said to be one, good, or true, so can being—though in the latter case the sense of those terms is extended in the same proportion as that obtaining between the finitude of humans and the infinity of being. Conversely, those attributes can be predicated of both a man and a raccoon, though in the latter case their sense is decreased in proportion once more, this time the proportion of a personal and a solely vital being. The analogy of being here assures an analogy of meaning.

Humans who see themselves and the nature around them as God's creation, lovingly crafted in His image, have little difficulty with the analogy of being. Once, however, we see the world around ourselves as the arbitrary product of a cosmic accident, we have no guarantee of an analogy of being. With that confidence waning, little ground is left for a confidence in the analogy of meaning. The ever more vehement announcements of the demise of metaphysics—Kant's, Nietzsche's, Heidegger's, most recently Derrida's and Rorty's—may well reflect less a conviction that nothing is than the all-corroding fear that nothing can be said—that, though language retains an internal sense, it is incapable of a referential meaning extending beyond merely factual or merely formal reference. All that seems to remain for humans is to speak of fact in the sciences and of language in philosophy.[19]

We need not, to be sure, accept the extreme linguistic preoccupation of our time. Like the idealist assumption that seeing can only be a seeing of seeing, the linguistic assumption that speaking can only speak of speaking, though capable of making significant contributions to our understanding of language, seems a transient fashion. It may well be based on a misapprehension not uncommon in the history of philosophy, the confusion of the medium with the message. Even so did the

materialists of a century ago note that all finite being is incarnate in and as matter—that matter is its universal medium—and conclude that therefore matter is also the message. Noting that, say, love is embodied in a series of behavioral manifestations and a wheelbarrow in planks and hardware, they assumed that therefore love *is* a series of behaviors and a wheelbarrow *is* planks and hardware. They overlooked Melville's Queequeg, who had the planks and the hardware all assembled but, lacking the idea, did not have a wheelbarrow: he placed his sea-chest in it, hoisted it on his shoulder, and carried it down to the harbor. The researches predicted on the materialist assumption did make a significant contribution to our awareness of radical in-carnation. The way in which nineteenth-century thought and policy breezily ignored material factors seems naïve and unacceptable today. Where, however, the materialist confusion of the medium with the message became the basis of thought and practice, the results proved disastrous. Analogously, we could say that in our time, with its vast increase in communication, we, rather like the Greeks with the expansion of their seaborne commerce, have been made forcibly aware that all meaning is embodied in language and have assumed that here, too, the medium is the message—that *die Sprache spricht*, that it is the language itself that speaks.[20] Since a philosophy reduced to a study of speech acts can be far more easily presented as a *technē*, such a conception is understandably appealing to a technological age, and can significantly increase our understanding of the medium—so that we would not confuse it with the message. Those very contributions, finally, reveal rather than conceal the inherent vacuity of language stripped of its referential function and of the intent to communicate.[21]

Still, even if we reject the extreme assumptions of the philosophy of language, it is hard to recapture Husserl's unproblematic confidence in the intrinsic neutrality of language and the possibility of "faithful articulation." While speaking is surely far more closely linked to experiencing than conventionalist philosophers of language would have us believe, it is also more distinct from it than the nineteenth century assumed.

The radical brackets of solitude at dusk bring out both the continuity and the divergence of speaking and being. In a forest clearing, the word is not an intruder upon experience. Nor is its function restricted to naming, whether as objectification or as a passive conceptual mirroring of discrete entities. For that is not how reality presents itself. The reality of the pole bean or of the porcupine is never their momentary presence. It is the *sense* of the cycle which is the life of the bean, from planting to bearing, or of the porcupine through all the

stages of his life. Words do not merely mirror—they reach beneath the transient surface to grasp the enduring reality it manifests. So, too, with the sense of a human life. Words are the way in which that sense, the very reality of that life, emerges through the manifold doings of the seasons.

I have become keenly aware that I live my life in words. Through the days of work in the forest, the long evenings before the house, and the poetry of the nights, the experiences I live never take the form of a speechless wonder. I speak out my life as I live it. It is not the case that I first live, then verbalize. It would even be inaccurate to claim that I am "simultaneously" living on one level and verbalizing another. The two modes, living and speaking, are indistinguishable. Even when I took to writing out what I was living, introducing a temporal lapse, I was never aware of a gap or an incommensurability of the two modes. What I was writing *was*, indistinguishably, the experience, not a set of statements *about* it. More than anything else, it was that awareness of convertibility, constantly and powerfully present, that convinced me of the fundamental truth of Husserl's conviction that there is no inherent contradiction but rather a continuity and a congruence between word and experience, meaning and being.

When, however, I first started translating my notes into English and focusing on the text simply as a text, a code to be processed, edited, and recoded, I became aware of something else as well. It was not the putative impossibility of translation. Even though I could not detach the experience from *a* language, living or reliving it nonverbally, there was yet an experience, with its own distinct sense, constant through several languages and not reducible to a particular linguistic expression.

The difference between the text and the experience was of a different order. The experience I lived was fundamentally and profoundly an experience of the *sense* of life, the *sense* of nature. That intermediate level of meaningful being is what I saw and put into the text. That, too, is what I encountered in the text when I was rereading and reliving it as a reader. It was when I approached the text as a translator, a technician, that I found none of the intermediate dimension of sense in the words themselves. There were pages upon pages of minute descriptions of the world around me. There were the sixty pages describing the way the snow thaws and disappears at the end of the winter—the imperceptible receding of the snow level as droplets of water seep from the surface into the snow on sunny days, letting each layer of dust particles sink down on the earlier layer, now revealed anew, the reemergence of stumps and boulders long hidden, an inch at a time, as when water recedes, the unexpected patches of ground

in the morning, bared by the warm wind, the snow-eater of March nights. Those were the notes of the first winter, with the house barely enclosed and firewood short, when spring came as a miracle, no longer expected. I put into those notes the anguish and the wonder of a hard winter and the equally hard-won insight into the invisible renewal that takes place in the thawing of the snow: the *sense*, even the *moral sense* of thawing. It was indeed there, in the text. The response of two widely different audiences, one Czech, the other American, to a few pages I published in the two languages,[22] confirmed it. My readers responded powerfully to a philosophic vision of sense. Yet the text, simply as a text, a code, contained on the one hand only factual statements which any accession librarian would unhesitatingly catalogue under "Nature, descriptions of," and, on the other hand, reflections so abstract that the same librarian might be torn between "Mysticism" and "Platitudes."

That is the crux of the divergence between discourse and a text. Discourse is a subject's intentional act, inseparable from the intentionality of communication. Its components function as meaningful in the context of communications, as pointers evoking the intermediate level of sense. Seen as the components of a code, however, no words are intermediate.[23] Separated from the intentionality of communication, words are capable of ostensive definition as designators, labels attached to objects: a "rose" means this ⟶. Alternatively, they are capable of a formal definition in the context: as here used, "beauty" shall mean *X*. The level of sense remains suspended between the subject and the word.

In discourse, articulating lived experience, words function typically not by designating but by evoking the lived sense of experience. Cataloguing fact content or speculating about it is secondary. The discourse of personal communication is of a different order. It depends on the evocation of *sense*—not simply Goodman's "system of associated commonplaces," but on a reference to being as meaningful. For here words function no longer as designators, linked to a clearly identifiable referent. They now evoke not the content but the sense of an experience, speaking by indirection to bring it out.

Here it is hard not to wonder whether the conception of language which Cassirer labels "primitive" or "mythical"—words embodying experience, participating in it and representing it *pars pro toto*—may not in truth be far more basic than the factual, ostensive usage we tend to take for normative.[24] The detachment of the word from the lived reality it presents, while crucial for a whole range of tasks on the level of *technē*, may represent not an advance but a degeneration of linguistic usage for the purposes of a philosophy which seeks to grasp and evoke

the sense of being. "Nominalism," in its original sense of regarding words as conventional labels, is a powerful and legitimate tool for special purposes, but highly questionable as an interpretation of significant human discourse. For here words do not mean autonomously, with reference to a conventionally defined special region. Rather, they mean as ciphers in Karl Jaspers's sense of that term: like the parables of the Gospels, they evoke an insight and so depend on the hearer's willingness and ability to see himself, to sense and feel the sense of lived experience to which they point.[25]

Statements of chemistry and physics are not of that order. Those are special sciences whose referential matrix is not lived experience as such but a special, conventionally defined set of principles positing a special regional ontology. It is the "nothing but" principle again: a chemist, working in his field, is not concerned with water within the totality of lived experience, water as such, but only in one specific aspect of it, say, nothing but its molecular structure. That is why the statements of the special sciences can be "exact": they need not depend on the evocation of lived experience, contingent on the hearer, but can refer simply to the conventional regional matrix of their endeavor.

Philosophy, in the terminology of another age, is a general, not a special science. Its referential matrix is not the regional ontology of a science but lived experience as such, as lived, prior to all regional delimitation. Its statements, contingent on a subject's lived experience, mean as they evoke an insight, and become meaningless when they are simply memorized and recited. Their task is to call up an experience, not merely to speak of it within a formally definable matrix, since it is the sense and not merely the fact of experience which is the proper object of philosophy. Take the experience of beauty, one of the most basic elements of being human. We cannot describe it directly, in designator terms. If we speak of beauty directly, we inevitably speak of a formal construct. To speak of the experience of beauty, we can only speak of an object as red, round, fragile, hoping that, as we evoke the experience, the hearer will grasp directly the beauty which is its sense. The goal is *Eindeutung*, a sharing of the sense of an experience in empathy. The same is true of the experience of value, of the sense of nature and, inherently, of the entire "intermediate" level of reality, the meaningful being which is the ground of philosophic reflection. In a real sense, philosophy is possible only because words are capable not only of designating but of evoking—or, in contemporary terminology, because they can function *as metaphors*.

That assertion ceases to be startling once we break free of our Aristotelian conception of the metaphor as a displaced use of a word,

deviating from a putative "literal" meaning and capable of being replaced by words literally used with perhaps a loss of elegance but none of content. Even were we to admit a "literal" level of meaning, a metaphor still would not be mere deviant use. A metaphor does not describe a fact—it seeks to evoke a sense. To speak of the rosy-fingered dawn, as Homer does, is not an indirect way of conveying information about the hue of early morning clouds but a way of evoking the sense of the coming dawn. Or again, to speak of the agony of a falling tree is not to describe, however poetically, the facts of the case. Since it lacks a nervous system, there is at present very little evidence for positing sensations in a tree, nor is that the intent of the metaphor. Its task is, rather, to evoke the sense of the event, of the resistance of life to its inevitable demise. So, too, when we speak of God's mercy or engage in any nontrivial discourse: we are not describing indirectly a set of facts susceptible to a "literal" description. Our usage is not even analogically literal. We are speaking in metaphors, evoking the sense rather than the mere fact of being.

It is because of its dependence on metaphor that philosophy cannot be a *rigorous* science. The meaning of metaphoric usage is nonfactual and nonformal. Its effectiveness and accuracy remain contingent on the subject's ability to respond. Factual usage might be defined independently of any reference to a subject, in terms of the relation of words and the objects they designate. Formal usage can likewise be defined autonomously, in terms of the place of a term within a formal matrix. Metaphoric usage, however, remains as intrinsically subject-related as experience itself. Though we are heir to the texts of those who preceded us, we need to rediscover, relive their meaning. A text, once true but repeated without comprehension and no longer lived, loses its truth.

Still, though philosophy because of its dependence on metaphor cannot become a *technē*, it need not become solely *poiēsis*. It is capable of being genuinely a *scientia*, not speculation about but a clear, direct grasp of the truth of being. Metaphoric usage is appropriate to it because *reality is itself metaphoric*. It is the *sense*, not merely the fact or the theory, of being which constitutes its reality.

Nothing, finally, is as fleeting, as ultimately unreal as a "fact." The thousand daily tasks that act out, say, a marriage are imbedded in the order of time. In themselves, individually and collectively, they are trivial, capable of being replaced by a wholly different set. Nor is the reality of marriage simply the idea thereof, a set of obligations and privileges which could be itemized in a contract. All those are incidentals. The reality of a marriage is its sense, ingressing in time and

giving meaning to fact and substance to idea. So, too, with the raccoon and the porcupine, no less than with my table or with the man that I am. Their reality is always their sense, intrinsically yet contingently embodied in this or that factual instantiation, in this act or this object at this time. We recognize that when we replace one table with another yet speak of it as the "same" table or when we darn away a silk stocking in worsted and still think it the same stocking. No less so when we treasure a gift not for its factual value but as a token: the "fact"—the concrete particular present in space and time—is a metaphor, evoking the living reality whose bearer it is. For philosophy, whose task is to speak of reality rather than of the contingent modes of appearance, metaphor is a "literal" usage and the most appropriate mode of speaking, best corresponding to the nature of its subject.

It is a great gift of the radical brackets that they enable philosophy to recognize in fact the metaphor of reality. The starry heavens so immensely high above the glowing embers in the fire ring are a metaphor. When the Psalmist writes, "the heavens declare the glory of God," he is not making a factual assertion about the stars appearing on the evening sky conjoined with a speculative theological one. He is, quite literally, evoking the reality of the presence of the heavens.

Philosophy at its most primordial, as the vision of the moral sense of being, can not only see but also speak precisely because a fact is a metaphor of meaning as much as a word. Its statements will, superficially, take on now the form of factual assertions, then again that of speculative abstractions, each with criteria and a validity of its own. Their true significance, however, remains suspended between those two levels, as an awareness of the moral sense of life which it does not teach but evokes in its hearers. When Robert Czerny entitled his translation of Paul Ricoeur's monumental work *The Rule of Metaphor,* the title he chose may not have been a mechanically faithful rendition of the original *La métaphore vive,* yet it was most apt. Metaphor is the rule of philosophic discourse and the condition of the possibility of speaking of the intermediate realm of the sense of lived experience, perennially suspended between the fact and the idea.

The moon is a metaphor, suspended between heaven and earth. It is a metaphor that, through the millennia, has been central to humankind. The diurnal cycle is too short to set life's rhythm; the cycle of the seasons in turn much too long. Though amid the crystal-pure austere black and white world of a January snowscape a human may theorize about the green profusion of the summer, he cannot evoke

the lived reality of it. It is the lunar cycle, transforming the night after each day, which sets the rhythm of life. It is also the cycle most obscured by the lights of the city. An urban winter does still differ from the summer, an urban day differs from the night, yet all urban nights appear the same.

Beyond the powerline, the moon transforms each night with its phases. There are the nights of the new moon when the forest is swallowed up in deep darkness. Those nights belong to the stars, so high above, so bright in the dark night, immutable in their order, their grandeur evoking the moral law suspended between the sky and the human heart. I feel sure that it was on a night of the new moon that Immanuel Kant wrote his famous line and the Psalmist sang of the heavens declaring God's glory.

The nights of the full moon are different. They are no less dark, but by moonlight the darkness becomes visible. The moonrise first announces itself at the rim of the sky. At dusk, the sky grows dark as on a moonless night, merging with the rim of trees around the clearing, letting the stars shine forth. Then, imperceptibly, the stars near the horizon seem to pale as the sky changes color. It is not a light which could be reflected in the treetops—those remain in deep darkness. Only the sky turns from black to a deep blue and then a light greenish hue, almost yellow, not lighted, as by the sun, but becoming visible until the stars have faded and the stage is set.

The rising full moon does not "shine," it does not illuminate the forest. Even to say that it "glows" would not be accurate. All our words for lighting seem inappropriate. They are active verbs, suggesting doing, while the moon does not do. It lets itself be seen, not crowding out the darkness but rendering it visible. The sun transforms the world in its image, the moon evokes it in its primordial presence. It is by moonlight that I have seen, with a searing clarity, that Being is not convertible with nothing.

The distance between the lived reality of the glowing darkness on the nights of the full moon and the scholastic abstraction of the dictum, "Being is not convertible with nothing," measures the full span of the rule of metaphor. Both are metaphors, the latter a conceptual one, the former a "radical metaphor" in the sense which Ernst Cassirer understood so well, presenting reality *pars pro toto.*[26] The reality itself, however, is more than either, just as the sense of the two poles is more than either.

Pause, for a moment, over the notion of convertibility. The Scholastics used that term to designate those predicates of being which, though presenting Being in different modes, can yet be used inter-

changeably or "convertibly." Thus we can say that Being is one, true, good. Each predicate describes being from a different perspective, yet does not designate different "parts" of being—only, in Duns Scotus's term, its "formalities."[27] Being is equally and entirely one, it is true, it is good. Its oneness, its truth, its goodness can be predicated of it in its entirety, "convertibly," with equal truth.

To claim that Being is convertible with nothing would, similarly, mean that whenever Being is said, nothing can equally well be said, that the difference between Being and nonbeing is "formal" only. The claim is a time-honored one in the history of human thought. The very concept of Being as distinct from a plurality of beings suggests it. To speak of Being as such calls first of all for a negation or a bracketing of all particularity. Being as such is *not this,* it is *not this* and *not this.* Being is what emerges when all particularity has been bracketed, not a predicate common to all beings but rather what is basic to them all and not restricted to any or to the sum of them. But when we have negated all particularity, what is there to distinguish Being from nothing? Formally, at least, Being and nothing would then seem indistinguishable. The Holy of Holies is empty. The mystics testify that the closer they approach God, the more all particularity disappears as God comes to appear as all—and no thing. That is the vision of *poiēsis:* that of ultimate reality which can be described, convertibly, as Being or as nothing and whose unity renders the multiplicity of the many illusory.

Philosophically, however, that claim has some consequences which we normally fail to associate with it. For one, if Being were an undifferentiated sameness, then all distinctions would be less primordial than Being itself, arising and fading in the *history* of Being and relative to it. The notion of the convertibility of Being and nothing is intimately linked to all moral relativism and historicism, entailing it and being entailed by it. Most specifically, if the primordial reality is indifferently Being *and* nothing, then moral categories can claim no ultimate ontological grounding. The distinction of right and wrong, of good and evil, could then reflect no fundamental distinction in the structure of being itself but only a preference which emerges at a particular stage of history and, possibly, fades again in its time. Such a relativism, certainly, need not be at all trivial. It can even affirm the validity of certain norms for a particular period and situation, but it cannot affirm the ultimate validity of the fundamental distinction of right and wrong, of good and evil. If ultimate reality were, indifferently, Being and nothing, then moral distinctions would become ontologically relative. The profound relativism of the mystical vision of the unity of life and death would find a paradoxic counterpart in the vicious relativism of

the mighty who use the interchangeability of life and death as a justification for murder.

There is, however, an equally ancient tradition which speaks of a fundamental asymmetry between Being and nothing. Saint Augustine is perhaps its most familiar spokesman. To him, nothing is not equiprimordial with Being. It is intrinsically secondary, contingent and parasitic on Being. *Ab initio,* Being *is.* Nothing occurs as a negation, as a disintegration or as a lack of Being. Moral categories, the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, thus have a basic ontological grounding in the asymmetry between Being and nonbeing. Being is convertibly one, good, true; contradiction, evil, falsehood are negations, defects. Though the specific formulations of moral categories may change from age to age, their sense remains constant, reflecting its ontological ground. Even when we speak of those moral strictures which are admittedly valid only relative to a highly particular situation—say, sharing water in arid climates—they are *absolutely,* not only "relatively," valid where they obtain. Even though Lazarus will die again, it is absolutely good that he is raised from the dead. Even though a flower will fade or a word of truth will be forgotten, it is absolutely good that it is spoken, that it blooms. The affirmation of value has an absolute, not only a relative, worth, since the distinction of good and evil is not rooted only in history but in Being itself. To speak of the torturer and his victim as indifferently caught up in the same mystery of pain is not sophistication but blasphemy.

The difference between the two claims, that Being is or is not convertible with nothing, is absolutely crucial for all thought and practice. In the former reading, all distinctions, including philosophic ones, would appear as no more than cunningly devised fables of humans—and so susceptible to being overruled by human convenience, passion, or history. The sense of being human would be exhausted by its history. In Heidegger's terms, *Sein,* or at least *Dasein,* would be *Zeit:* the being of humans, even if not Being itself, would be wholly exhausted by acts and events in the order of time. By contrast, in the latter reading, morality and humanity would not be reducible to temporality. The line of value, the dimension of eternal validity, would intersect time in each of its moments, ingressing into time and opening it up to eternity.

The crucial choice between these two fundamental alternatives, however, cannot be made simply on conceptual grounds. It is a gift of the full moon, and must be so, since it is an experiential difference, not between the ways Being and nothing are thought but between the ways they present themselves. Considered strictly conceptually, Being might

well appear formally indistinguishable from nothing, yet in lived experience the two are utterly, irreducibly different. Here philosophy needs not to speculate but to see.

The experience of Being is all around us, just below the fleeting particularity of what is. It is there in the trees that merge into a forest. At a first glance, the forest in the noonday sun presents a solid curtain of greenery latticed by the vertical lines of the trunks and the horizontals of branches. As you sit still, your eyes gradually begin to penetrate that curtain. The light patch that seemed a part of the laced front recedes—there is a shaft of sunlight deep among the trees. As you walk toward it, it recedes before you and the dense green profusion surrounds you. All about you there is the curtain of the forest, but as you look it parts and recedes. There is a nearness and a depth, drawing you in. You stand still in the stillness and realize it is full of minute life. First the insects, then the birds, then, in the thicket, you distinguish the movement of an animal. A snake, perhaps—the woodchucks and the porcupines are seldom abroad at this hour. Then you break a twig and startle at the noise. You, too, are a part of that green, living stillness of a summer noon. That stillness penetrates you: distinctions merge, the living stillness becomes a unity. It is all around you and in you. The hoary assertion, the Absolute is One, becomes an observation statement: you feel and see the unity of Being.

Darkness, too, can penetrate the soul, fusing the trees, the rocks, and the wandering human in a unity. In the forest it is seldom completely dark. Even on the starlit nights of the new moon there is light between the trees. As your eyes grow accustomed to it, the shapes of the trees and the rocks emerge out of what at first seemed undifferentiated darkness. You learn to see not straight ahead but circumspectly, out of the corner of your eye. It is there that the things obscured in thematic focus appear to you. The world of the starlit forest is soft and receptive. Its shapes blend, welcoming the wanderer who treads softly, who does not insist on being the center and the focus of the night. Then the forest enfolds you in a profound peace and there is the same feeling, the sense of the unity and fullness of life. It is not the experience of the darkened forest, the boulders, the path, or the solitary walker. All that has receded and a different reality has moved into its place, that of the fullness of Being. In such moments you sense it is always there just beneath the surface of the insistent individuality of subjects and objects, ready to rise up when their clamor subsides. You must not insist, you must not impose yourself upon it.

But if you are willing to listen, it is there, the fullness and the unity of life, the presence of Being—and it is one and good.

There are the opposite experiences as well. It was early in the year, when the hard freeze sets in after the January thaw. By the third night of the full moon after Epiphany the iced crust on the snowdrifts grew strong enough to support a man without snowshoes. I could range all across the land, even the corners that grow inaccessible with underbrush in the summer, across the two-dimensional moonlit world. The January landscape does appear two-dimensional by moonlight. The crusted snow evens out the ground, the blackened tree trunks and their dark shadows become undistinguishable. The trees, frozen through, ring out as their branches clash in the wind. It is winter, and freezing hard: in the forest only an occasional whiff of wind-borne smoke from my chimney disrupts the austerity of a January night.

On such nights the stove acquires a special significance. It is an old cast-iron Franklin with ill-fitting panels: the fire glows and breathes through the cracks. It takes three armloads of seasoned hardwood but the house remains warm through the day and the long night. Over the table a white gas lamp casts a cone of bright light on an island of books, drafts, page proofs, and scribbles. So I sit on winter evenings, warm between the glow of the stove and the light.

So I sat on the third night of the January full moon. The evening comes early: it could have been no more than a single stroke past seven when the full moon swung past the uncurtained window in the peak and cast a cone of cold white light into the room. Preoccupied with my doings, warm between the stove and the lamp, I hardly noticed it at first. Only gradually I grew aware of the immense, intergalactic emptiness bearing down on my house, leaning against the shakes, leaning into the windows, pressing down on the frozen forest and deep into the snow. The familiar things of my daily work disappeared, swallowed up in the vast emptiness. Only the moon remained, and the vast, cold emptiness of the space, the deep all-devouring cold, freezing all life, pressing down on me and demanding its own.

Something like a panic seized me. I sat, paralyzed, blinded by that vast emptiness. The warmth of my stove, the warmth of my body suddenly seemed utterly anomalous: the eternal emptiness of the cosmos, freezing all life, seemed the dominant presence. There was nothing. Somewhere in some inaccessible corner of my mind I was not unaware that deep under the snow were the humble denizens of the forest, the woodchucks, the beavers, the gentle brown mice; that in their season they would reemerge, the sun would melt the snow and the green world of summer spring forth once more. But that was

theory. The present reality was the vast cold emptiness, leaning hard on the frozen world from the infinitely distant stars, demanding its own.

Suddenly it seemed an immense effort to restoke the fire. Why? I was living alone. I could not strike the spark of the divine eros, I could not renew life. Only when there are two, sleeping side by side, sharing dreams, does life renew itself. I could only live it down as a fire burns down, stick by stick, burning up a scant supply of dreams until there are no more and the cosmic cold reclaims its own. A man alone is a waste of good firewood, unable to resist the cosmic cold. It would be so much easier to stop the clock, douse the fire, and open the doors and windows wide, letting in the immense cosmic cold. There was nothing. Let there be nothing, let nothing be.

The moon passed by my window and the experience passed on with it, as suddenly as it had come. The familiar objects of my world reappeared, the cup with the flower design, the embroidered pillow, the blue snail of happiness, the old clock and my stove. I got up, selected a length of fragrant cherry and put it on the fire. There were once again things to look after, page proofs to finish, lentils to soak for the morrow, a wick to trim and a fire to tend. I walked out into the moonlit night. Even the moon was the familiar brother moon once more, lighting up my path to the orchard, outlining tiny tracks by the wood pile with sharp shadows: a wood mouse had been there before me. I walked slowly along the path, pausing occasionally to hear and to remember, giving thanks for the miracle of warmth, the miracle of life, for the fullness of Being. For what I had seen in the light of the cold January moon was the terror of sheer nothing—and it is not convertible with Being.

Gorgias was mistaken. There is truth. It may become obscured among artifacts which have no truth of their own, but it stands out clearly and unmistakably in the light of the full moon upon the silent forest, in the fullness of Being and in the terrifying emptiness of nothing. Those may seem convertible as concepts, since both represent a suspension of particularity. As experience, though, they are utterly different, and their difference categorizes all experience. One is the experience of life-sustaining fullness, the other of a life-withering emptiness. Neither is a *thing*, some thing or no thing. They are the double sense of Being which philosophical metaphors evoke in lived experience.

Can we, though, legitimately speak of the awareness of Being and of the confrontation with nothing as experience? If it is experience at

all, is it not a rather "mystical" one? I should feel more confident of the answer if I knew just what is being asserted about an experience when it is qualified as "mystical." If "mystical experience" were to mean, as it often seems to, an inward certitude concerning a particular set of conceptual constructs, then it would indeed be suspect. But the awareness of Being and the confrontation with nothing are not at all like that. Both are far more closely analogous to the experience of seeing at its most ordinary, not the bestowal of some esoteric *gnōsis* but a recognition of something which simply is there, to be seen, to be grasped in a direct encounter, something overt, not hidden.

Neither of the experiences I have cited is, actually, very uncommon. Though our solipsistic age may prefer to register them simply in terms of their subjective impact—as, say, a "feeling" of overwhelming joy or of a withering dread—they are still common enough and freely accessible to all observers. They require no special apparatus or conceptual equipment or, for that matter, a consciousness "altered" in any esoteric sense. The shift in the level of awareness which they involve is not qualitatively different from the change of focus which we carry out routinely in ordinary experience and in the sciences alike. Thus, for instance, there is a difference in focus between observing a triangle as this particular figure, drawn in chalk on slate, and seeing the same triangle as an instance of an eidetic relationship among angles and opposed sides—or, for that matter, between seeing two Baldwins and two Jonathans as four apples and seeing that, in principle, two and two make four.

In that change of focus, our insight does not become "mystical," nor does it shift from some "outer" to an "inner" perception. We are still seeing the same lived reality, though now in a different focus or at a different depth. Nor is the shift from seeing the number of board feet in a mast pine to seeing its beauty essentially different. The beauty is no more in the eye of the beholder than the board feet of lumber. Both are there, waiting to be acknowledged—to be *seen*. So, too, is the fullness of Being, the one, the good, the beautiful, as well as the corrosive emptiness of nothing. In encountering them, we are not looking past reality or away from the "world": we are shifting our vision from the appearance to the reality of what is, from the fact to the metaphor. If that be "mystical," then so is the lumberjack's practiced grasp of the number of board feet in a butt log, an essential survival skill for all who work the woods. For *there is* Being, and it is not nothing. Experience, even at this primordial level, is not inchoate: there is a fundamental truth to it, and, as our reflection on the metaphor as a tool of philosophic discourse sought to show, humans

can not only know that truth but communicate it as well. Humans have done so for millennia. Their discourse has never consisted solely or largely of factual observation statements. It has always included statements of insight of essential necessity, of beauty and ugliness, of right and wrong. The radical bracketing of the forest clearing powerfully confirms the validity of such usage.

The question that remains is of a different order. Why does the Georgian skepsis, refuted by argument and experience, still persist? What in experience lends it its plausibility? It is not plausible as the question of whether the truth can be spoken. It may, however, be plausible as the question of whether the truth can be *put into words*, captured by them and presented in them independently of the act of discoursing. Poets have always spoken the truth, and philosophers with them. The question now is whether, independently of them, philosophers can put truth *into* words.

Putting the truth into words is not the *intentio* of discourse. Discourse seeks to communicate by evoking an experience shared. It does, however, become a possibility when humans learn to transform discourse into a text—and far more so when they conceive of the text not as indirect discourse addressed to "you, gentle reader," but as a mechanism for the storage and processing of data.

What is at stake here are two fundamentally different models of communication. In the communication between two humans who share the fundamental experience of being moral subjects, the intentional thrust of the act of communication is the evocation of understanding and the basic technique one of evoking an analogous experience. The hearer can be said to have understood when he can, albeit vicariously, "relive" the experience. Thus the purpose of an exclamation such as "See the green table!" is not to have the hearer repeat correctly the counters, see, green, and table, but to have him look in the same direction and to duplicate the experience of seeing a green table, whether in fact or in imagination. The truth is not in the statement but in the experience to which it directs us. The hearer has grasped the truth when he is in turn able to say, "I see it, too," not when he can repeat it correctly.

The example need not be trivial. A lifetime ago, when my children were small, a tiny friend of theirs, rain-soaked and scared, knocked unannounced on our door on a stormy night. She drew a well-worn doll from under her coat and begged us anxiously, "Please save my dolly. Mummy wants to burn her." She disappeared as quickly as she had come. Only a year later, hiding behind a stack of canned soup in a supermarket, she whispered to me, "Mr. Kohák, how is my dolly?"

When last I saw that house, the dolly was safe, tucked away with my own daughters' old toys and a liberal sprinkling of naphthaline under the time-darkened rafters in the attic. That girl was an American. She will never have to live through the fate of central Europe a generation ago. But she will understand, as few of her compatriots can, the desperate love of women going to their deaths who could save their children only by giving them away. Human understanding is possible because human experiences, no matter how factually divergent, are yet eidetically analogous. In human communication, the purpose of words is not to contain experiences but to point to them and to evoke them.

The case, however, is quite different in the transfer of information between two computers. Computers have no understanding, having no lived experience which words could evoke. The information conveyed to a computer or transferred between one computer and another must be wholly contained in the words themselves. The experience must be literally encoded in bytes which point to nothing so that it can be decoded and reconstructed in a perfect duplicate at the other terminal. The process engenders no understanding, no vicarious reliving of an experience. It is not communication in the human sense of engendering shared understanding, only a transfer of a code which might do so when received by a human.

In human communication, there are innumerable occasions on which the transfer of accurately encoded information immensely facilitates the evocation of understanding. Anyone who has ever had the experience of having a poet try to convey, over a badly functioning telephone, instructions for setting up a 750 cc NSU engine can appreciate that. Zen is a desperately inefficient vehicle for communicating the art of motorcycle maintenance. This is a situation which calls for the accurate encoding of information.

The basis of Gorgian skepsis is not simply the fact that humans have developed, as a subcategory of meaningful communication, the skill of reducing knowledge to data which can be adequately encoded in a set of binary electronic signals, but that they have taken it as normative for all communication. Were it so, then philosophic discourse, using metaphor to evoke a lived truth, would indeed be defective and philosophy would have no task more pressing than that of devising ways of encoding data accurate enough to match the art of the programmer.

The point, though, is that it is not so. The inversion of what is normative and what is special is here a special instance of the more general inversion of recent thought which comes to think of conceiving of reality as matter-in-motion but as a special theory for special purpose, legitimate within the framework of reality encountered as mean-

ingful, but as the norm of what is to be judged real. On that assumption, Gorgian skepsis seems irrefutable. The great gift of silent evenings in a forest clearing is that they dispel that illusion. Reality encounters us as a meaningful *kosmos,* only contingently reducible to a mathematical schema. The intent of discourse by which its adequacy must be measured is that of communication: the encoding of data in words but one of the tools, highly useful for some specific purposes, but by no means the norm of all valid discourse.

Humans, as Husserl points out, can know the truth because the truth, the sense of being, even the moral sense of life, is not a construct but a given of lived experience. They can speak about it because, as Jaspers and Ricoeur point out, words are not only designators but also metaphors capable of evoking experience and its sense. Husserl's call for faithful articulation, finally, is not vain, though faithful articulation in philosophy must take the form of an evocation of sense rather than of an encoding of data.[28]

As the sky grows light in anticipation of dawn, the trees once again stand out as black lace against it and the clearing opens up once more in the dissolving darkness. Then the Gorgian skepsis has little force. There still is night and the promise of a new day, and a truth which stands out in the transition. Humans can see it and speak of it, they can communicate it not in words that claim to contain the truth but in metaphors which evoke it. That truth is not the veridical factual assertion of *technē* or the mute wonder of *poiēsis.* It is more basic, as basic as the distinction between good and evil and the recognition of the moral sense of life.

The Gift of the Moral Law

There still is night, star-bright and all-reconciling. As it gathers softly beneath the hemlocks, muting the harshness of the day, there is also a truth that stands out in the dusk. It is not simply the truth of the great green peace of the forest. Though in the shipwrecks of our civilization we may seek refuge therein, resigning the distinctive task with which humans are charged and seeking renewal by sinking back into nature's green peace, the truth that stands out at dusk is a reaffirmation of our humanity, not an alternative to it. We can encounter that humanity, at times obscured and grotesquely distorted, yet still present, wherever humans dwell. It is there in the great city, in the