

The Temptation of the Undifferentiated. From the World Without Qualities to the Man Without Qualities

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My topic will be philosophical and, more precisely still, *ontological*. If we wish to conceive of what is at stake in the 'dehumanization of the world' and if we want to oppose it, we need to widen our perspective and take in not only the destiny of the human but the status of things and beings in general.

The thesis I am going to put forward, which is still quite daring given the current stage of my thinking, is a hunch and a hypothesis that I am trying gradually to clarify. My theory is that there was a kind of *originating decision*, a primal ontological choice made by the Greco-Latin as well as the Judeo-Christian West about the way of viewing beings in general; a decision in favour of differentiated forms and against the representation of a real, supposed to be composed in the final analysis of a basic single substrate whose differentiated forms were merely states, pure appearances without substance. I am also putting forward the notion that this primal choice, which is or was our choice and remains my own, was not absolutely necessary; it was a contingent free opting in favour of something and against another possible option.

This primal choice could also be called a cultural choice or a 'socio-historical creation'. That is partly true, but my western patriotism encourages me to think that the preference for visible forms and appearances that characterizes us is not a mere aesthetic choice or purely arbitrary decision on the part of our culture, but also one that confirms a preference that was already within being itself and in particular within organic life. This is the conclusion I draw from reading the zoologist Adolf Portmann (see for example his book *Die Tiergestalt*): if a clear structural difference can be discerned between an animal's invisible functional structure (the viscera) and its visible shape (the external morphology), consisting of both a symmetry contrasting with the asymmetry of the invisible parts and a distinctive shape that draws the eye, it must also be recognized that this difference is not simply a question of chance, but is linked in the living being to something like an 'intention to appear' that implies a tendency to separate from the undifferentiated functional substrate. In other words if we find an animal's external morphology more beautiful and interesting than its viscera or (like Goethe) a plant's leaves and flowers more interesting than its roots, this is not simply a subjective (or culturally determined) aesthetic preference of ours, but the expression of a tendency inherent in life itself and 'willed' by it.

Nevertheless, even if this primal choice that I attribute to the West is somehow ontologically rooted in the real, that in no way means it is absolutely obvious and necessary. Quite the reverse, I believe that it was free and that there were therefore other possible

primal choices: for instance, the one made by Buddhism which means believing appearances are mere illusions. And I also think that, insofar as this primal choice was free and contingent, it is eminently fragile and vulnerable: it could easily be challenged. My fear is that the West could very well be in the process of questioning the primal choice it made and that this is associated with the 'dehumanization of the world'.

Now if we accept this idea of a preference for visible forms and the phenomenal diversity of the world, then, using this intuition, we can read differently Aristotle's metaphysics, for instance. In some works I have read I am attempting to find intellectual tools to support the hypothesis that the *raison d'être* for the metaphysical concepts developed by Aristotle, and in particular the ideas of substance and substantial forms, might have been in order to articulate conceptually this primal choice. Among these books there is the very interesting work by Gilbert Romeyer Dherbey, *Les choses mêmes. La pensée du réel chez Aristote*. But I have also found some important ideas in Heidegger's essay on the *physis* in Aristotle (translated in *Questions II*), where there is a commentary on Aristotle's critical dialogue with the sophist Antiphon from the Eleatic School. The question is what truly is, or, as Heidegger puts it, where is the 'truly being' situated. If, for example, we imagine a wooden bed, we can decide to emphasize the elemental, what is common to all things, and so consider that the 'truly being' is wood and not the bed that has been shaped from it, or alternatively earth and not wood. But on the other hand we can decide to emphasize what makes a substance like wood distinct from the elemental, or what makes something like a bed distinct from wood. Antiphon's decision is an option for the formless. In his view 'in accordance with the *physis* Earth is truly and solely, and Water is, and Air is, and Fire is'. Thus a 'decisive choice' was made, a choice with far-reaching effects: in every case where something might seem *extra*, for instance wood which is formed from the earth or the bed constructed from wood, all this 'extra' is in fact 'less being'. This 'extra' has an articulating, distinctive, structuring character, in short that of *rythmos*. But it is also what can change: it is inconstant and not lasting. That explains the decision to consider the 'truly being' or 'properly being' to be what is free of all structure and most constant: the elemental or undifferentiated, Earth, Water, Air, Fire.

This seems to me to illustrate well this idea of a primal choice that was not necessary. It is somehow easier, and it is perhaps a kind of natural inclination of the human mind, to seek true being in the elemental, what has no form of its own, particularly insofar as that is also what endures and is in some way immortal. This points up, in contrast, the specificity of Aristotle's primary choice (and, according to my hypothesis, the west's primary ontological choice): thinking that 'truly being' is in the 'being extra', what has a form, is separate from the undifferentiated background and distinct from other things or beings.

Similarly (and I am again thinking of Portmann) it could be said that living beings (animals or plants) do not simply try to keep themselves alive and the essence of life is not just this survival that might be located in a basic indivisible stratum: in life itself there is already the need to be distinct and so to become separate from the undifferentiated background by creating recognizable forms.

Based on this theory a whole story of the West could be developed, not a historical or even purely philosophical one, but an ontological one, a story in which certain relatively minor figures might have a more important role than high-ranking philosophers, and other phenomena, of a social or other nature, would also be taken account of. I will make

a great leap backwards in time and swiftly indicate some significant moments in this story. At the start of modern times there was Galileo's famous ontological decision, which was taken up by Descartes and Locke, and which was to distinguish between 'primary' and 'secondary features', with the latter being considered as belonging only to the subject. A decision that in the end means denying that a quality might be attributed intrinsically to things and beings. Thus there arose a situation where it was assumed that nature is in itself undifferentiated and it is only the human mind (or language) that introduces something like forms or even qualities into this chaos or flux. An ontological situation occurred that was characterized by dualism: on one hand a real assumed to be in itself without properties, on the other the act of the human mind making distinctions and imposing forms. And this situation coincides with the emergence of nominalism which, through various modulations of thought, led to what might today be described as 'constructivism'. What I called in a recent article (published in *La revue du MAUSS*) 'the constructivist stance as a manifestation of the *Zeitgeist*', which currently typifies a large section of the social sciences, can be seen emerging at the start of modern times with nominalism and the dismissal of secondary features or all features in general.

I will again make a huge leap forward in time and land in the nineteenth century, when other primary events took place and other 'decisions' were made that were also counter-decisions, challenging the initial choice. We need to think first of all of the theory of evolution and in general the birth of *evolutionism*. What typifies evolutionism from an ontological viewpoint is in particular the disappearance of the perception of species as species, as entities that are self-perpetuating and remarkably constant. Everything is said to 'evolve', in other words to be caught up in a vast continuous flux where everything is moving, constantly changing (which thus means a form of Heraclitism). The discontinuous forms before our eyes are supposed to be simply moments, or more precisely ephemeral transitory states on the single continuum called 'evolution'. As Chesterton wrote: 'That means there is no such thing as a thing. At most there is only one thing: a flux of everything and anything.' This is where the 'primal decision' I have mentioned is reversed: it is no longer a question of accepting the intrinsic existence of recognizable forms; it is suggested that all that is merely illusory appearance, just transitory states of the same continuous substrate. Robert Spaemann, one of the contemporary philosophers who influences my own thinking, has correctly characterized this ontological mutation in these words: 'Evolutionism always understands things, substantial entities, as being simply states of something else. Of what? An underlying substrate.'

However this not only affects living species or things and beings in general. It also concerns humanity itself, the fate of the human race, and it is indeed here that a situation in which a 'featureless human' tends to prevail was preceded by a situation of a 'featureless world'. According to the ontological all-change brought about with evolutionism, we are now ourselves assumed to be just states of a substrate or single substance that changes and 'evolves', even if this representation runs counter to our experience of ourselves. In this regard Spaemann suggests a profound analogy between evolutionism and Buddhism. Of course there is another nineteenth-century figure we must mention here who is very significant for this ontological story, even though he is a minor philosopher: Schopenhauer, who had an influence that was considerable and partly submerged. A passage from Jean Clair summarizes his basic thesis: 'The world is simply appearance, a veil, an illusion, an infinite succession of transitory phenomena to which only our erotic

desire gives the appearance of continuity and meaning.’ As we know, Schopenhauer drew his ideas from Buddhism: it was he who in a way brought Buddhist ontology into the western environment.

We should also mention Hannah Arendt and her analysis of evolutionism in writings such as “The Concept of History” (Between Past and Future). Here she describes very well one of the consequences of this ontological transformation in the social field, that is, ‘processality’, the fact that society itself is increasingly seen as a process. Thus she underlined a basic aspect of the contemporary situation, typified by the growing dominance of a representation of social reality which is assumed to reside in flux without beginning or end and without entities having clear recognizable outlines; but what was initially just a representation is increasingly tending to become effective reality.

The question arising in this connection is whether this is an entirely real change, that is, an effectively accomplished one, and what marks the boundary between a before and an after, or whether it is only a phenomenon that tends to be so, in which case it should be assumed that something in the real is still resisting that tendency. I do not deny that there is today something like a new social or ontological figure, a ‘new context’, for instance the one that Marcel Gauchet described in relation to religion. But we cannot rule out either the possibility that all this belongs more to the realm of a fascinating dominant representation, a discourse that everyone is starting to use, rather than a description that corresponds precisely to reality. Furthermore, the current dominance of a certain kind of discourse is itself a social phenomenon whose scope and true effect cannot be underestimated: this discourse by which we tell ourselves that visible forms and appearances and, for example, landscapes, but also species of animal and even the human race, all of that passes and flows, or is perhaps nothing but the temporary state of a great flux, a vast circulation (I heard Peter Sloterdijk declare in Berlin that *homo sapiens* itself is caught up in a *glissando*). And so it is that all those who are still sentimentally attached to recognizable forms such as landscapes, species of animal, or works of art in the cultural area, are suspected of backward-looking nostalgia or criticized for their inane naïvety.

My conclusion is contained in my title: The Temptation of the Undifferentiated, which links with what Alain Caillé suggested in his introduction: why try to react, why not rather let go?: there is something resembling a temptation to give up trying to remain separate and distinct from the undifferentiated flux, the elemental foundation for everything, a temptation to let go and give in to being just part of a great whole or rather a great flux. The temptation and attraction of the undifferentiated, which in my view is a fascination for death, for that from which life, composed as it is of distinct forms, separated itself long before the emergence of human existence. Maybe there is something within us that is ready to hear that seductive voice inviting us to let go and return to the undifferentiated. Of course this all seems quite gloomy and Cassandra-like, but I am setting out my thinking on the current situation in the hope that I am wrong and with the wish that other aspects of reality that I myself do not suspect will contradict this pessimistic prognosis.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell