

A SERIES OF ESSAYS, 1958-1974

by

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Prefatory Note: For six days early in the summer of 1958, during the International Exposition at Brussels, a "Colloque Orient-Occident" was held there. Thirty participants with diverse professional backgrounds but convergent reflective interests were invited from countries of the East and of the West by our Belgian hosts. The six days were devoted to discussion of themes which had been proposed for the occasion. Our written contributions were prepared for the record of the colloquium in retrospect upon the discussions that had taken place, and with such selective emphases as each participant might deem appropriate. The following essay touches in particular on three foci of the colloquium: (1) 'criteria of reflective judgment,' (2) 'la durée historique,' and (3) the distinction and correlation, repeatedly invoked during the discussions, between 'the rational' and 'the non-(or 'extra-) rational.'

The expression "the Same" which figures in this essay should be acknowledged as a naming of the grounding of a truly destinate existence which seemed to me particularly fitting at a time when I was absorbed in reading later works of Heidegger.

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A Venture in the Open

Again and again the considerations made vivid by Monsieur Lambilliotte at the beginning of our symposium come to mind with a sense of practical urgency: the unprecedented increase of peoples; the rate of technical development, so fraught with ambiguous import; and the acuteness of our plight as peoples thrown together more and more. The International Exposition, as the setting of our meeting, enhanced this atmosphere of practical urgency in which we met. How did our symposium answer to the demands of an occasion keyed to such practical considerations and pervaded by such an atmosphere of practical urgency?

At times our reflections seem to have taken a programmatic direction; and at times each of us may have felt that our discussion was not sufficiently to the point, in view of those sharply etched features of our current situation on Earth from which we started. Yet the basic character of our discussion seems to have been that of a reflective exchange on reflective themes, involving us in the declaration and interpretation of our own basic attitudes. In weighing the significance of our symposium,

then, I find this question of especial interest: How can reflective life, and the relationships we establish with one another in sharing it, be consonant with the urgencies of our practical situation, especially in so far as reflection mindful of the latter nonetheless is not primarily directed to the solution of practical problems?

I see the answer to this question along two related lines suggested by our experience in the symposium. First, I believe we brought to pass, in a measure, the kind of human relationship in which the future of men is decisively touched; something that goes deeper than the engendering of amicable feelings. Second, in and through this relationship, I believe we are able to approach the kind of mutual reflection in which thought itself assumes the character of decisive action.

The more I have thought about our meeting and reviewed our discussions, the more I have been struck by the sense of enduring encounter with so many who were there. Now such encounter between persons seems to me to put thought in its place; not to make it of incidental importance, but to provide us with a stand in which we are more able to take the measure of what is thought and said. The more we called one another out into the open of living speech, the more we declared ourselves in direct encounter with one another, the more our thought testified to the heart of our experience bearing on the themes discussed--the more we could feel ourselves subject to the touch through which thought itself becomes a fundamental and decisive human deed.

It is from this experience of our meeting that I would like to offer retrospective comment on some of the themes we discussed.

In any undertaking of real concern it is natural to raise the question as to how we may be sure that we are on the right track. It is a question of judgment, and we try to answer it by formulating criteria of judgment. We try to formulate the conditions under which a man may trust in what he is thinking or doing. Human

reflection in every civilization is perennially concerned to define such conditions, to develop basic criteria of judgment of relevance in the appraisal of thought and action. On this theme of 'criteria' to which we addressed our attention I find our meeting itself the fruition of thinking and acting. Criteria are themselves situational and attitudinal. They are a function of our situation and of our mode of being in it. The criteria which occur to us and develop into governing considerations grow out of the way we assume our existence in our situation. Therefore criteria cannot assure us that we are not arbitrary in what we think and do. They must themselves share the questionableness of our very existence, and require to be distinguished from methodological or procedural rules.

I am not suggesting, however, that relevant criteria of thought and action are impossible. But I would suggest that they tend to arise as enduring forms of presence of mind only as we give ourselves with constancy into the reality of relationships entered upon and renewed in earnest. Then our situation itself tends to lay hold upon us, summoning us to be wholly present within it. Then presence of mind emerges as a function of the unique occasion to which we give ourselves. Then we are bound anew to that Same which comes to us, in which we--and therefore our minds--can meet. Such was the reality of our meeting itself, as I read it now, and sense in it a possible measure of what we thought and said.

If enduring encounter is of criteriological relevance--even to the point of emerging as a fundamental condition in which thought and action can be free, it is no less significant for the interpretation of "durée historique". What distinguishes enduring encounter is that we become bound up in it with destiny which is ours to participate in fulfilling. Since historical continuity is essentially that of destiny to be fulfilled, its meaning cannot be discovered and disclosed apart from our taking it upon ourselves and affirming it in the way we assume our existence. It cannot be clear apart from that sense of solidarity with the

generations of men to which Canon Raven bore unmistakable witness at a memorable point in our discussion. Times of encounter are times of destiny, and through them the meaning of temporal existence is established. If they are enduring it is because they partake of the one life in which we may all actively share, in which they prove themselves enduring through their evoking, strengthening, and confirming the fundamental commitment of which we are capable. They lead us on and out of ourselves.

In essential continuity of human life, brought out through enduring encounter, we are liberated from that otherwise overwhelming incubus which weighs upon the actualities of human affairs. Our ventures no longer hinge on their success or failure, nor upon ideals or values proposed for realization or attainment. They are grounded, in so far as they are grounded, in that which nothing can destroy, on the strength of which we may transcend--and so become ourselves, for as long as it may be given us to live.

Yet from this we lapse. From this we fall away. In this we prove failing, and the very thought of it becomes vague. Our actual existence is surely, for the most part, ambiguous. And it is a faithful reflection of that ambiguity to pose the issue for an interpretation of "durée historique" as that of conceiving the possibility of our "overcoming time", just as Mr. Dhingra did in his introduction of the theme into our discussion. What we have to distinguish are the aspects that time and historical continuity can hold for us, depending on the way in which our existence is assumed.

Monsieur Abel has provided us with a very direct and exact statement of one aspect which time can assume, and of which we must take account:

"Pour ceux qui plongent dans la réalité des choses, pour ceux qui vivent penchés sur ce qui se passe à tout moment dans le monde, les considérations sur les différences fondamentales qui existent entre la façon dont historiquement telle ou telle civilisation est née dans telle ou telle contrée, de la façon dis-je dont diffère

l'appréciation du temps ou des choses qui intéressent certainement l'intellectuel qui a le temps, les loisirs, le confort de se livrer à des spéculations gratuites et agréables, mais pour l'homme qui vit dans la réalité, le temps, le nombre et l'espace sont précisément les cadres de cette cruelle réalité."*

*Colloque Orient-Occident, Seance du samedi, 28 juin 1958, Compte rendu provisoire, p. 91.

This statement precisely suggests a mode of existence which breaks into two correlative phases, each of which presupposes the other as its necessary counterpart. On the one hand there is "the reality of things" into which man feels himself to be plunged, to which he is attached. These things are constituted as 'in-themselves', posed 'objectively' and indifferently over against a 'subject', who can only suffer, in the end, the dominance of that 'objective order' which he struggles, meanwhile, to control in behalf of his interests and needs.

Existence assumed in these objective-subjective terms renders time accordingly, now as inherent in an objective order of successive events, now as time feels for a subject for whom reality reduces to such an order. The interests and needs of the subject prompt control of 'objective reality', and 'objective reality' appears precisely in those terms which invite and implement the possibility of control. As this equation works itself out with time, however, the controlling subject is bound to fail; he is haunted by that inevitable failure; and the human lot takes on more and more the guise of fate. The course of an existence so assumed can only culminate in our undoing. Thus time becomes that demonic power through which 'objective reality' temporarily indulges human life only to disown it utterly. In so far as we live plunged in the actuality-of-things-so-construed, dependent on what transpires in these terms, then time and space are indeed the backbone of "this cruel reality" to which Monsieur Abel alludes, and thoughts on the meaning of time in different civilizations must surely seem matter for rather idle speculation.

Yet not only thought but whatever else we may undertake loses point in the end, if the continuity of historical existence is essentially that of a fate. And the appreciation of this fact, as suggested in the legend of the life of Gautama Buddha, is often the point of departure for most urgent reflection. But how simple, unmistakable, and eloquent the testimony has been of those whose meditation on this predicament has indicated the possibility of its resolution! In so far as we do not disown what we meet on our way, but can affirm it with our being, reality tends to confirm us in this. 'Nature', persons, institutions, people, events: they become bound up in and bound into a destiny which is that of communal life, and at the same time uniquely and unrepeatably for each one of us to fulfill. Of life appreciated in these terms I remember a saying which I heard from Mr. Nikam some years ago: "If in this thy faint heart fail, bring me thy failure."

If it is our mode of existence, then, upon which discovery of the meaning of time and historical continuity depends, I hope I have suggested that our concern does not accordingly lie with "subjective" as opposed to "objective" meanings of time, but rather in transcending these interdependent and correlative meanings.

I believe Monsieur Abel is right, however, about the possible irrelevancy of thinking in determining the meaning of time. One might think till Doomsday and never transcend alternatives couched in terms of the correlation of objectivity and subjectivity. Thinking of itself cannot be decisive. Or more fundamentally stated, a man 'of himself' cannot decide the matter. Perhaps this point is nowhere more clearly stressed than in the annals of Zen Buddhism.

Finally, it seems to follow that we cannot strictly speak of "the bondage of time"--and in that event freedom cannot mean at all "a timeless state". Rather, both bondage and freedom must be construed in terms of the way we assume our existence, and with due recognition of the fact that in the way existence is assumed we are for the most part liable to misconstrue them both. On this point BHAGAVAD

GITA seems particularly suggestive in its emphasis on "the sense of ego" and "attachment to the fruits of action" as the nerve of bondage. These companionate phrases seem to signify accurately that from which freedom is to be interpreted as obtaining, in the aspect of 'freedom from'. It is from this that we may become free in time, and in so far as we do, space and time no longer threaten to freeze life in its tracks, we no longer suffer mere insular individuality amidst a whirl of 'things-themselves'. 'Space' becomes a recognizable abstraction relative to the concrete reality of a place that owns one, where a man belongs, to live and to die. And time is the amplitude within which existence is pledged to affirm the eternal meaning of what may come to be and pass away. That meaning, ever depending on the Same, but only uniquely discovered in being done and confirmed in faithful life--as the meaning of the beings we encounter--is the essence of historical continuity and of a free life.

At this point it may be possible to suggest how either a predominantly thoughtful or a predominantly active way of life, carried through decisively, may come to one, as the BHAGAVAD GITA suggests that they may. I should like to develop this suggestion now in order to expand the basis of my remarks during the symposium on the theme of "life", and in order to comment on the discussion of "the rational" and "the extra-rational" which kept cropping up in our meeting.

If it is meaning that requires to be worked out in life, then even a predominantly active way of life cannot be decisive except as a working out and confirmation of the meaning of the beings we encounter. But that is precisely the concern of a thoughtful life, the way of which is predominantly that of meditation. Therefore we might say that decisive action is itself essentially meditative, and the more clearly to be appreciated as such the more it is recognized as a way of "renunciation and devotion" (to employ these further terms from the GITA).

On the other hand, a predominantly thoughtful way of life cannot become

decisive without assuming an essentially active character, in that the meaning with which meditation discovers its proper concern can only be discovered as a meaning to be done, and done by a man with the whole of his being. Therefore we might say that decisive meditation is itself essentially active, and the more clearly to be appreciated as such the more it is recognized as a way of "renunciation and devotion."

Since neither meditation nor action can be carried out decisively under the domination of a sense of ego, however, it is characteristic of either, in so far as it is decisive, that it is as if it simply came to pass; in a sense one does not know what he thinks or does. In being truly oneself, it is just that old 'knower' and 'doer' from which one is free. Not that discrimination dissolves; no, it becomes fluent and freed from fixation. Not that interest dies, no, it becomes freed from obsession. Not that the beings one encounters are drained of reality; no, they become freed from the abstraction of existing 'in-themselves' even as they are affirmed in their independence. What they are is what they may be affirmed to be in that enactment of their eternal meaning through which creation dawns upon us--in so far as we accept our part in this.

If the rationale of our existence is to be taken in this vein, as served alike in active meditation and in meditative action, then we may understand how the two images of Buddha referred to by Mr. Malalasekara* are both necessary,

* See "Vie Active et Vie Contemplative," SYNTHESSES, Numero Special (#150), consacré au Colloque Orient-Occident, Bruxelles, 1958 (November 1958).

and necessarily of the one Buddha: the Buddha must be seated on the lotus, and the Buddha must be walking; but the seated Buddha is walking, and the walking Buddha is seated. Meditation is active, and action is meditative. 'Reason' is essentially active; and action is essentially rational. That is why either the

way of meditation or the way of action, carried through decisively, come to one in the Same. But as Mrs. Mehta said of karma yoga (the way of action), it is only carried through decisively as a 'way of renunciation and devotion', and the same would apply to a thoughtful life. Accordingly, the essential unity of thought and action could only be discovered in and through renunciation and devotion, in a way of assuming our existence for which no method of thought or of action can substitute, or even serve as guarantee. Concrete reality can only be that of awakened life, in which the rationale of existence is simply done.

The sleep and fantasy of reason is that it may never awaken into concrete reality, missing and failing its own essentially active character: that character through which it dawns on one that responsible existence is the defining of concrete reality. Then reason succumbs to the perspective of knowledge about things--as if that were final, and remains fundamentally at a loss to take account of action understandingly. Reality is reduced in principle to 'the objectively known', 'the objectively knowable'; and active existence, devoid of rationale, lapses into 'subjective life', whose "values", for all that may be said in their defense, remain the reflection of de facto interests and needs. A merely subjective life must feel itself gratuitous and ineffectual in the end, even if it ranges the keyboard of feelings to the heights of spirituality.

The sleep and fantasy of reason is to relinquish--all inadvertently, no doubt--the rationale of human existence as requiring to be done, even in a thoughtful way.

The sleep and fantasy of action is that it may never awaken into concrete reality, missing and failing its own essentially meditative character: that character through which it dawns on one that responsible existence is the defining of concrete reality. Then action succumbs to the play and interplay of wants and needs, satisfactions and frustrations, of liking and aversion, which of themselves presume to the status of raison d'être of active existence. The sleep and fantasy

of action is to relinquish--all inadvertently, no doubt--the rationale of human existence as requiring to be done, even in an active way.

And so it is that the rationale of existence may be appropriated as the concern of reason unawakened to its own essentially active character; while action, unawakened to its own essentially meditative character, perfectly corroborates the reading of action which reason is likely to accord to it. So it must seem from the standpoint of a self who arrests himself in a merely individualized existence. But meetings such as ours suggest that we may be drawn out of ourselves in the power to rise into encounter with one another. Then we may come into that vein of personal life in which we share actively and thoughtfully in working out that meaning of existence through which we discover again and again that we have to do with one another essentially. Such experience is neither rational, nor extra-rational, nor a synthesis of the two, in the terms which this distinction is likely to suppose; it transcends those terms and confirms the unified character of human life, in which reasonable action and active reasoning come to one in the Same.

What I have derived from our symposium above all is a more accurate appreciation of the world which may be brought to pass through men, in so far as we stand forth into the open in which our encounter with one another becomes fundamental and enduring. It was not ours to suggest a program to cope with the practical urgencies of which we remained rightly mindful in our reflections together. It was ours to go to the root of urgency in action and reflection alike. It was ours to declare unmistakably the irrelevance of optimism and pessimism alike in the face of an unknown future. It was ours to suggest a foundation of hope and of faith more ultimate than either our needs or a practical perspective can of themselves provide or confirm. Such a work of reflection can become of the nature of the deed itself through which genuinely communal life is brought to pass on Earth. It may also clarify the more-than-practical character of those actions through which alone even the most practical exigencies of our situation can be met.