

The Line of the Horizon

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Let us think about metaphysics not as the subject matter of a discipline—as classical rationalism puts it—but as the “natural place” that arouses our curiosity. Let us see in it something that completes and exceeds, shelters and disables, inspires and invalidates all the questions raised by the effect of a primeval impulse. Rather than metaphysics we should hence speak of “the metaphysical,” a horizon rather than a form of knowledge which vainly tries to emulate divine wisdom, we are forced to ponder our point of view, the inquisitive gaze cast on that horizon, not so much as determining a position—since horizons tend to dissipate positions, to blur all point of references—but as a sign revealing a disposition, i.e., the trace of an attitude. As an attitude, this disposition is a disruption or decentering of our habitual positions concerning the world and a bias that stimulates us to demand another kind of responses to questions which obviously are not those of every day.

I have yet to ascertain whether the question here posed about “what we do not know” has the virtue or the drawback of referring us to that mode of asking questions, since it places us at the exact dis-positional point to which I have drawn attention. In fact, the content of this sentence is atypical, cautiously questioning and very problematical because it does not refer to specific subject. The sentence does not require us to take up a position; rather it removes us from all positions and puts us in the dispositional mode characteristic of the reference to the metaphysical. It is, indeed, an awkward question.

However, before focusing on that metaphysical horizon to which this question seems to refer, it is perhaps worth considering it exactly as it has been presented to us, i.e., as a mere utterance. First, it should be noted that it is a negation. Whatever the object of the sentence, it has a negative sign. Second, it is appar-

ently being raised as a problem of knowledge since: it alludes to knowing, even if we cannot see in the names the delimited domain of the reference ; that is, it uses an idea of knowledge without specifying what kind of knowledge it is. At the same time, however, we notice that the cognitive element in it seems to have been discarded beforehand. This is not, in my view, an epistemological question. In other words and returning to the basic distinction I proposed above: the phrase does not refer to our position in the world, but rather—and reinforced by the negative sign of the formula—to the negative character of the dis-position. In fact, our position in the world, whichever it is, implies knowledge; on the other hand, our disposition toward the metaphysical horizon, our propensity to approach and solve all the mysteries, vainly aspires to be satisfied by a knowledge that expresses itself as a not-to-be-aware.

The Determination

Nevertheless, the most suggestive and obviously the most decisive aspect of the question “What do we not know?” does not reside in the negation nor in the meaning of “knowing” which constitute the semantics of the phrase. It is the determination, focused in the “what,” the neutral particle that organizes it and subtly poses alternatives to understanding.

All the force of meaning of the phrase is distributed between its negative schema and the determinative “what.” This particle “what” is the real problem of the sentence. We can read “what” as being the direct object, as the allusion to a *positive* content, as an object that we cannot know. In this case, the question would be an epistemological one and it will speak about a content, whatever it may be (certitude, news, *techne*, knowledge, truth, etc.) that is denied to us and upon which we would even then bestow attributes and values. “What do we not know?” sounds like an invitation to speak about what we do not know in the scientific and technological fields, in language or art, about the origin of the Universe, about Fermat’s theorem, or about the properties of series of irrational numbers.

However, nothing stops us from reading “what” according to another dimension of the possible syntax by putting an imaginary comma between the French version of *ce* and *que* in order to retrieve the latent meaning of the French *ce*. “What” would thus become “that,” and the phrase would let us see its hidden side, or what is usually lost in illocution during a fast reading. The sentence would now read like this: “What is ‘that,’ what we do not know?,” and its meaning would not refer to a *positive* content before the knowing that is denied to us, forbidden to us, which we have not yet attained. It would refer instead to the *dis-positive* or *dis-positional* bias in our relationship with what is denied to us. In consequence, the utterance would become the discursive form of an ostensive gesture, like a finger pointing *at the horizon*. The phrase would not, then, constitute an invitation to speak about the limits of knowledge, but be the direct expression of our dis-position toward a blurry horizon, made up of what escapes the range of knowledge. It would then fully introduce us to a metaphysical problem.

Read in such a way, our phrase would present itself as a cardinal sentence, similar to the finger of the compass, which always points North. And the gesture represented in it would pinpoint two landmarks: our limitation in terms of knowing as positive knowledge, that is, the contours of our position, on the one hand, and, on the other, our capacity to determine what transcends this position, what we can foretell beyond the limit. It would be the sign of this limit—of finiteness as a trait of conscious being—and the expression of our condition at the limit in which we are still able to transcend that limitation in some way, even if only by *pointing toward the horizon*.

Kaspar’s Enigma

I would like to rely on a model through which to consider these observations, where “knowing” would enable us to see another dimension of its usual cognitive and positive meaning, thus revealing the dis-positive or dis-positional and metaphysical aspect.

It occurs to me that we can use as a model the film by Werner Herzog, *Jeder für sich und Gott gegen Alle*, made in 1974 and based on a play by Peter Handke, who collaborated with Herzog.

The play which inspires the film is a sort of parable on communication. The film version, by contrast, combines this theme with an implicit critique of the enlightenment and its educational ideal, presented as an assault on human nature. Set in 1828, it tells the story of a savage child who, after having spent 17 years locked up in a cellar, is abandoned by its captor and taken care of by a German community. The protagonist is rescued from degradation and abandonment after so many years of isolation through a late apprenticeship, which, after much exercise, yields magnificent results. With time, and due to the efforts of his companions, Kaspar becomes the pride of his mentors. However, when the stage appears to be set for a promising future, Kaspar's education ends in a sort of final and absurd holocaust: having been transformed into the most brilliant product of the enlightened will—Kaspar develops an impressive intelligence and enormous gifts of expressiveness—, this bizarre fellow cannot cope with the hypocrisies of the times. Soon his presence engenders suspicion and the need to get rid of him. And although he who murders Kaspar is his old jailer who does not want to be denounced, it is clear that the assassin's guilt stands for a guilt that can be changed to the Enlightenment as a civilizing project. It seems as if Herzog's and Handke's purpose was to show that modern and secular society and culture have the means and the methods to rescue us from barbarism, but are unable to resolve the conflicts of ambivalence triggered by the spiritual liberation that resulted from Enlightenment. According to this pessimistic evaluation, the film is the reverse version of a *Bildungsroman*.

At any rate, my interest in Herzog's screenplay does not derive from this ideological aspect of Kaspar's story. It derives from an episode which illustrates with great precision the primary difference I have established between a knowing that is positive knowledge (adoption of a position in the world in an unequivocally enlightened sense), and another, negative knowing, one which expresses our disposition toward the metaphysical and which cannot be fulfilled by any positivity. It is no coincidence that this subtle difference is realized by an unusual being.

In Herzog's film Kaspar goes back again and again to a story in the desert (?), to the fact that he knows only the beginning of that story even though he aims in vain to know it (and tell it) com-

pletely, to its end. The first mention of this story is, so to speak, methodical. Kaspar says he only knows its beginning and does not know its dénouement, more or less as happens to us all with the stories of our lives: we know when we were born and what happens to us afterwards, but we do not know when we will die. Our life, happy or unhappy, unfolds as an incomplete tale.

The second mention comes in connection with a dream of Kaspar's, in which the elements of the story appear more clearly. Kaspar says that he sees the sea and a mountain and many men enthusiastically climbing the mountain in the fog; at the peak, Death can be seen.

But it is only in the third and final version that some of the story's enigma and meaning is revealed. The tale comes out in an agonized monologue by Kaspar, who lies, fatally wounded by his unknown captor, surrounded by his benefactors, and accompanied by a clerk who records the event. The camera carefully focuses on the scene. Kaspar is about to speak, in a sort of last confession: he tells his tale to himself as a sort of extreme unction bestowed upon himself. He mumbles: "There's a story I have to tell you all: a caravan travels through the desert, led by a very old and blind guide. The caravan stops its course when it reaches some mountains: they are afraid they're lost and consult the compass, but they do not know what to do. The blind guide takes a handful of sand, tastes it as if it were food, and says: 'You are mistaken, there are no mountains ahead of us, it is all just a produce of our imagination. We will head North.' The caravan resumes its journey and arrives in a city where the story unfolds. The story I want to tell you is the story of that city. But *I do not know* this story." The final sentence comes back to us in the image of a dying Kaspar as he murmurs: "Thanks for listening to me."

Perhaps there are many—albeit not so easy—ways to interpret this final incident in Kaspar's strange life. The story he is obsessed with is—like all stories—a typical narrative elaboration on the theme of inconsolable finiteness (that is, it is a tale of finiteness), whose symbol is first an end that is impossible to grasp, and then, more clearly, Death. But, on the other hand, when the tale is clearly defined, the expression of the problem of finiteness also becomes more precise. It does not deal with knowing the end of a story but with knowing that it continues in an unknown story. Kaspar knows

that the story he wants to tell is the story of the city that the caravan approaches; but he also knows *that he does not know it*. That is, he is not there to tell his own story, which is about to end (like the story of the caravan which is about to enter the city). It is rather another one, about others, about another city (or cities that are always others). To say that the story is clearly defined is the same as to state that the sense of finiteness is growing. The problem is no longer not knowing the dénouement of his own history, because he is at the threshold of its revelation, at the point of death, but to be certain that it continues in another story which he does not know.

Let us stop for a moment to consider the nature of this knowledge (or, rather, of this not-knowing). The question of finiteness is much better discernible at this moment. We are not dealing with a missing element anymore; Kaspar, much as the caravan, has come to the limit of his position or to his final position in terms of limit. Because of this position, before the gates of the city, he can turn back and tell himself that *he now knows*, and hence can take a position. But the nature of his position itself depends on a reversible attention that keeps him—thanks to his determinant capability—aware, attentive, dis-posed toward the other story, the story of the city, toward “that, what do we not know.” His “positional” knowing is sufficient to put an end to his own tale. Kaspar can say that he knows that part of the tale that corresponds to him. But, at the same time, this “positional” knowing leaves a reminder, similar to a crevice or a cleavage that opens up to what he does not know and that manifests itself in the end in the gesture of the pure determination through which he perceives a story that he cannot tell. A meager balance sheet: he is, just before dying, *positioned* at the limit of his knowledge, yet *dis-posed* toward what he does not know. His agonized story is a useless wisdom that he leaves as a final lesson to those surrounding him as: there is always a story, the true one, the one that we must know, that remains to be told, that we would have had to continue.

The Gesture and the Horizon

But is this the lesson that he leaves to his peers? Is it not his gesture that he tacitly suggests should be imitated? What is the true

meaning of this gesture? If man has not been bestowed with the knowledge of all stories, if it is in the nature of our condition not to trespass with our knowledge that fragment of becoming assigned to our destiny (our position in the world), to what purpose are we aware of another horizon of events, of lives or things that we are not allowed to handle? If the story that deserves being told always falls outside the reach of our position, why can we, at the same time, determine it without fulfilling or satisfying the impulse that guides our determination to finally repress it? Why do we take note, why do we know and have consciousness of what we cannot know?

These questions are perhaps not exclusively philosophical, but what I am certain about is that they appear only in philosophy. Paradoxically, philosophy's traditional solutions to these questions have not been as diverse as one would have believed. On the one hand, there has been an attempt to discuss the question of knowing and not-knowing by focusing it through an ontological difference, in Platonic fashion, between being and seeming, between truth and appearance. but only in order to redescribe the mode of the disposition as a kind of mystic experience. If one accepts this line of argument, the foundation of determination would be the mystical and would hence be foreign to philosophy. Judged in these terms, the perplexity of the dying Kaspar would merely be a final rapture that remains outside the confines of what is reasonable.

On the other hand, knowing and not-knowing have been understood in the manner of Aristotle and the tradition of scientific and technical knowledge, "what we do not know" being reduced to something that has no principle and no cause and that, since it is determined, throws us into a kind of abyss (*terra incognita*, maelstrom), that inevitably, as it happened to Aristotle himself with his idea of the Prime Mover, opens the doors to religion and to God, that greatest of consolatory fictions.

What is common to these two variants is that they treat as a problem of knowledge what is disposed to our determination; the truth is that neither approach would be able to dissipate Kaspar's perplexity.

How to approach the dis-position, the gesture pointing to the horizon of the metaphysical, without falling for the one or the

other of these approaches? A possible strategy would be to abandon all attempts to positively knowing what is signaled by the gesture and turn one's eyes to the dis-position itself. In fact, a possible justification of the human capacity to create, lies in this essential difference, in this imbalance between what we accomplish with our positive knowledge—of what we know and do not know about our position in the world—and this margin or this excess of determination, this plan, be it small or grand, that can always be dis-posed toward the horizon in the shape of countless questions without answers. What is really upsetting about this “what we do not know” of the metaphysical is not, as Kant put it, the fact that we are dealing with a noumenic substratum that is hermetic and closed in its mysteriousness and its silence, common to everything and unapproachable by reason even though it is accessible to our thoughts; rather it is the fact that it presents itself as the infinite depth that opens when we are dis-posed to ask questions. Every question, such as Kaspar's, refers to that depth. Every question resumes the story of the city even though it cannot tell it; because every single question is inspired by the human capacity for determination, which always transcends the scope of possible answers.

The crude Nietzschean disqualification of the thing-in-itself as being a by-product of a discursive fallacy, does not succeed in dissipating this mode of the metaphysical impulse in which language is supplemented by gesticulation. The disposition is beyond the limits of discourse. The gesture toward the metaphysical, toward “what we do not know,” is not inspired by a wish to communicate or signify, except to illustrate the spirit that motivates it. It consists merely of formulating the question, as when we lift our finger and point toward the horizon.

There is, then, a place or a legitimate and reflexive space for the metaphysical, a place that cannot be recovered anymore by laying claim to the old words of the transcendental and the sacred, to those categories written in capital letters, to those formulas of the rationalist emulation of the discourse of religion, in a vain attempt of refounding the discipline that, deliberately or not, Andronicus bequeathed to his successors. All these programs for contemporary thought are frequently just trivial manifestations of the repe-

tition syndrome which affects European culture since Hegel's death. They must be replaced by another program.

The metaphysical remains indicated by a gesture and now, within this limit, we know that it cannot be approached by a program of thought, we know that it does not belong to a doctrine of being or to a fundamental ontology, or to a *philosophia perennis*, but rather, to a *poetics* that is capable of understanding the ultimate meaning of each gesture. I can foretell that this poetics prolongs the neverending tale of philosophy toward the metaphysical; but, regrettably, I do not know it.

Anyway, thank you for listening.