

The Intelligible and The Absurd

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I'd rather learn from one bird how to sing
than teach ten thousand stars how not to dance.
e. e. cummings

There are many points of view from which one might enjoy pondering the intelligible and the absurd. I am going to tackle absurdity in three ways: as (a) the residue left in reality after intelligibility has been exhausted; (b) the complement of intelligibility; and (c) as a mode of intelligibility (which is one of the absurdest words in the language, when you come to *look* at it).

(a) *Residual Absurdity*

Although no doubt it raises all sorts of problems to talk like this, it does seem that one can meaningfully say that there is a certain intelligibility built into reality. This would appear to be involved in any doctrine of creation, whether Platonist or otherwise.

To start with 'otherwise': in English we more naturally talk of people understanding one another, than of understanding non-personal objects, trees for instance; as against Platonist thought, where the object of intellection is generally non-personal.

Understanding each other means, let us say, being on each other's wavelength, speaking the same language, and so on. It has something to do with the old definition of friendship as *idem sentire* and so on. 'I see what you mean' does not merely indicate that I, with my inner eye, perceive your meaning; it also suggests that with my outer eye I see things from your point of view, with your perspective: we share for a while a common vision.

In the same sort of way, it might be possible for us to say that we see 'eye to eye' with God, leaning on him as the *prima veritas*, as St Thomas puts it. We have the mind of Christ, we see with the 'eye of faith' (which perhaps might mean the eye of the Christ who lives in our hearts by faith). Creation takes place by God's Word (words), and it is this same Word who comes to us in faith, these same 'words' in which we put our hope and confidence. And so, in a sense, we talk the same language as God.

Now this already gives us a sort of ontological intelligibility. God's Word is constitutive of reality, it is the source of being as well as of meaning. And so, for us to talk the same language as God, means that we assimilate ourselves to him, we respond to reality on the terms involved in that Word which is originally constitutive of reality. Seeing what God means is, therefore, not simply an exercise in intersubjectivity, it is also the ultimate objectivity.

This has already brought us fairly close to the neo-Platonists. For the Christian Platonist, for St Thomas, in fact, creation actually takes place through God's intellectuality: intelligibility and being are twin 'emanations' from the same source. The creative Word which gives reality to things, also (and, according to St Augustine, anteriorly) gives understanding of these things to the angels. The fact that, for us, it takes our *intellectus agens* to make material reality intelligible, does not mean that the resulting intelligibility is something secondary, or abstract in any pejorative sense.

Now, there are two ways, it seems to me, in which reality can, as it were, escape from intelligibility, and this is where the 'absurd' makes its appearance.

The first way is through free will. Certain creatures, ourselves included, have the option, in some mysterious way, of being untrue to God's word. And, if God's word is the measure of intelligibility, in some sense, then to place oneself outside the scope of God's word is to place oneself outside the scope of intelligibility. And so one talks about sin and such-like as absurd, in an ontological sort of way. Sin is, almost by definition, non-sense. It is the *fool* who says in his heart 'No God!'. To be on God's wavelength involves, in some way, not knowing the way of sinners. There is no account that can be given of Hell, it is non-sense, because damnation is only the manifestation of ontological absurdity. (According to the repeated teaching of the Old English church, at least, the sins of converted sinners do not appear as anything at the Resurrection: in themselves they are absurd, unreal, and, since their perpetrators have since been converted, they can derive no parasitic intelligibility or reality from them either.) Intelligibility presupposes that a thing is *ens in actu*; according to the very influential Dionysian tradition, evil is precisely a falling away from being *ens in actu*. In so far as a thing *is*, it is good; in so far as it is evil, it has fallen away from reality.

The other possibility of absurdity arises most clearly in a more Platonist scheme of things. A higher level of reality is always incomprehensible to lower levels, according to Proclus, though being intelligible to itself and to higher levels. Here there is no question of ontological absurdity, but it seems possible to talk of absurdity *quoad nos*. This is where one could fit in Luther's whole thing about God's irrationality, which is quite an important theological insight. As far as *we* can see, much of God's behaviour is absurd. And so, what we are saying, I suppose, is that there can be an apparent absurdity, arising from our lack of information, insight, whatever; but we surmise that, underneath, 'there is some explanation'.

(b) *Complementary Absurdity*

But perhaps we might want to go further; we might want to suggest that reality is in itself not *simply* intelligible. There is, perhaps, always something about reality which systematically eludes

our intellectual grasp. For St Thomas, what thus eludes us, is precisely the individual particularity of things. Things can be understood in depth, perhaps we could say, but their ordinary everyday presence, 'thereness', has to be, say, enjoyed, or something; it cannot be grasped intellectually.

Some such doctrine is built into Proclus' system, and probably into that of St Thomas. According to Proclus, the highest Cause of all is higher than Nous, and so reaches further down the scale of reality in its effects than does Nous; so Nous can neither reach to the top nor to the bottom of the hierarchy of being (I know this is rather oversimplified, but it will do for our present purposes).

St Thomas places *Intellectus* at the very top of the scale, so that in principle both top and bottom are available to intellectual apprehension; but in fact, in accordance with the neoplatonist doctrine already mentioned, only God's *intellectus* can grasp his own intelligibility, and only the divine and angelic intellects reach down to material particulars. So that on either account, the human intellect stands perplexed before particularity.

And this is just as it should be. It is eminently proper that, after the botanist and his friends have finished with the daisy—the *dayesye* or *elles the eye of day*—there is still something left, something individual, wilful, incomprehensible, wildly free; absurd, in fact.

For Proclus, this is a simple ontological fact: Nous does not extend down as far as matter as such, so that there is always something unintelligible about material reality.

For St Thomas, the story is rather more complicated, but I think it can be read in the same sort of way. The ultimate source of each particular reality is God's creative choice; this is beyond the grasp of any created intellect. And so now we shall say that there is something too high for us to grasp in any created thing; if you like, we have not got outside the scope of intelligibility as such—God can grasp everything intellectually. But we have found something which systematically eludes the grasp of any created intellect.

(c) *Intelligible Absurdity*

The really exciting step is the third one, of saying that absurdity and intelligibility ultimately converge.

There is nothing intrinsically difficult about this notion. How else do you understand a joke? Absurdity is not necessarily unintelligible.

But the possibility I want to explore now, is how far one can say that absurdity is really the ultimate intelligibility of everything—a profoundly unThomistic sentiment, I suppose.

There is a double approach to this. One, most obviously, is by way of Zen. The man who laughs is the man who has understood. Absurdity is all there is to understand.

The other approach is something like this. Explanations are only required for those things you do not understand; or, to put it the

other way round, with Jung, 'it is only the things we don't understand that have any meaning'. . . .

Explanation takes place by reference to things beside the immediate object of enquiry; you explain one thing by connecting it with others, by tracing it back to its causes, and so on. (And by 'causes' we are going to mean something other than the thing itself, unlike the neoplatonist sense, which means rather the thing itself in depth. It is helpful to remember the ambiguity in the maxim that things are understood by means of their 'causes'.)

In contrast to explanation, 'understanding', in this sense, concentrates simply on the thing itself (*simplex intuitus intellectus*). It is the thing in itself, precisely in its own contingent particularity, its own unpredictability, which is interesting, and ultimately rewarding. Understanding a Thou is a more fully human affair than understanding an It.

Martin Buber is said to have begun a lecture once with the words: 'I have always wanted to meet a tree'.

What I am saying is that, after all the scientists, lexicographers, encyclopaedists, and so on, have finished their various systematizing jobs, the really authentic mode of intellection still remains untouched: and this is the mode by which we respond to the sheer 'thereness' and uniqueness of particularity. One seems then to escape from the necessity always to justify and interpret everything in terms of something else, one loses the possibility of the concept of 'importance' ('I am not sure importance is important', J. L. Austin). One sees the whole of creation, in its *polypoikilia* (cf. Eph. 3.10), as a huge dance, play, joke, party, laugh, song . . . 'Leviathan you made to play with' (Ps. 103(4)).

There is no reason for anything. That is the central Zen doctrine, I suppose. Everything just *is*. *Ens et bonum convertuntur*. The same thing follows from the Christian doctrine of the self-sufficiency of God: there was no *need* for creation. The ultimate mystery of all being far transcends 'sweet reasonableness'.

Reality is only finally grasped in and through its irrationality.