

The Philosopher's Rest

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In the invisible darkness which shrouds each one of us as an individual, and at the same time shrouds all forms of knowledge, there are things which we do not know, things which thrive in the interstitial spaces between established forms of knowledge. The attitude towards such things of those who reflect on the state of knowledge seems to convey a self-evident fact: we wish to know those things that we do not know. To put it more aptly, we are bound to want to know those things. How could it be otherwise? If humankind is regarded as a vast collective brain which stores up its knowledge, preserving that acquired in the past, gathering and centralizing new information from all sources and making sure that it is passed on, how could we wish to do otherwise than continue to broaden this domain of enlightenment and intelligence?

Of course, knowledge cannot be reduced to the sciences; the sciences have their own procedures, goals, and styles. They are certainly not capable of representing all the relations which human beings maintain, or rather would wish to maintain, with things that they do not know. The place of science—as a body of knowledge and a set of attitudes—is essential but far from all-embracing. The mental and emotional life of each individual at every point in time brings him into contact with things that he and others do not know. Can these encounters, this coexistence, be described? Can such a description be expected to reconstitute and, specifically, to throw light on the very essence of human life, the space in which we have our being which is not simply geo-political or physical space but also perhaps a space *sui generis*, an ecological niche of a different order?

Yesterday evening, the World Cup final was being played in Pasadena. I listened to the broadcast on the radio with my ear glued to the set so as not to disturb other people. From time to

time somebody would ask: "What's the score?" "Nil-Nil." Here we are on the verge of knowledge. If we wait long enough we shall know. At the end of the second half or extra time or, if the worst comes to the worst, after the penalty kicks we shall certainly know. But we do not wish to know before that—of course not. We must on no account know if we are to be able to wait, hope, take an interest and weigh up the alternatives. Once the match has been played and won, there are bound to be plenty of commentators to suggest that the outcome could not have been different—given the superiority of one of the teams, the nature of the playing field, or the weather conditions. They might even claim that the match was fixed in advance. The fact is that until the last whistle is blown, and unless we assume that some cheat or other was influential enough to arrange everything behind the scenes, the suspense will be kept up. Nobody—not even God, one might venture to suggest—knew the outcome. And even if there was a cheat, it is reasonable to assume that he was not entirely certain and must have been waiting in the wings to find out if everything went according to plan. During the Moscow trials in 1937–38, Stalin had a special room fitted out from which he could watch the court in session. Did he simply want to enjoy the show, as you might enjoy seeing some kind of fantasy played out in real life? Or was the outcome still of necessity just a little uncertain because the accused did not pretend to admit their guilt simply to please the boss (as one sexual partner may pretend to please the other) but were acting under constraint, so that a change of mood on their part, a sudden sense of honor, a passion for truth or an act of pure courage might occur—must indeed be able to occur for the success of the trial to be total. Stalin wanted to eliminate his opponents and to eliminate them in such a way that they had no political future, even after their death, because they admitted their guilt. But he also felt an imperative need to witness their debasement, their consent to that debasement over a period in time, in a battle fought against each minute—a battle which left some room for reversibility. Stalin would not have been content to see look-alikes of his opponents playing the part of Bukharin or Zinoviev. He wanted them to be there in person, with their own sensitivity and their potential

strength of character. For that to be possible he, like the Christian God in certain interpretations of the theory of free will, was obliged to let one small fragment of the ability to know escape from his own grasp.

In that sense, the fact that we do not know the outcome of things serves to enhance the importance of the present because it keeps attention aroused and in a state of suspense (so defining the present as a presence in the here and now: there can be no present in a state of indifference and lethargy) and because it enables us to define retrospectively particular moments by reference to the impossibility that existed at the time of knowing what was going to happen. Take this photograph of a group of adolescents on holiday in the summer of 1939, sitting on a wall in various postures, cheerful and friendly; our interpretation of the scene is weighed down by what we know of subsequent events and what happened to the persons later on: one who joined an FTP terrorist group in Paris was (will be) arrested in 1944 and shot. The others, or most of them, are still here with me sharing their memories. All that each one of them knows of himself as a survivor distances him from this photograph which portrays a present that now belongs to the past. All that each one of them does not know about the future, his own future and the collective future, situates him in a particular present and defines that present. Moreover, a distinction must be drawn between this particular lack of knowledge and other manifestations of the same phenomenon. In the case of this photograph, seen fifty years later, we need to be unaware of facts which will inevitably come to be known¹ and can be reduced to straightforward answers to such vital questions as: will I be killed on the day of the landings or will I die in the evening? Who will live and who will die? How long will the war last and who will win? It is that lack of knowledge which defines the present: we know the questions but not the answers. There is an evident difference between this kind of unknown fact and the unknown which can easily be dispelled through the invention of new knowledge that may even make the question obsolete in the form in which it had been posed previously: this is the unknown that is made known by the progress and revolutions of scientific knowledge. This second form of lack of knowledge (which also relates to

the questions and sometimes means that we are not even aware of what we might know) also defines the present and certainly does so from the point of view of the history of knowledge. Finally, there would seem to be a third type of lack of knowledge which does not correspond to any future knowledge, or at least not to any foreseeable and imaginable future knowledge: the unknown to which no answers are sought and which is not even structured in the form of questions because no intellectual construct or research can approach its meaning. This third form of lack of knowledge will, for example, include our ignorance of everything that happens at any particular point in time on earth or in a human mind, our ignorance of the *big bang* or the invention of language. This unstructured ignorance nevertheless creates its own structures, just as the horizon may structure our vision which moves over a field extending from infinity to the point of departure of our gaze close to our own body.

In fact, these three spheres may have points of contact and the boundaries between them may vary at different times in the process of reflection; on the contrary, we have the impression that they do not exist on the same plane and that it is only the use of the same word to describe them which creates any form of relationship between them. This fluctuation is interesting in itself, being as it were the incarnation, or manifestation, of a perhaps ineluctable, but nevertheless arduous, movement which separates the different areas of knowledge and causes specializations to jell, confining them to their own *cantons* (in the sense in which Pascal speaks of humanity living in a little "canton" of the universe).

II

There is another approach which maintains that this third type of lack of knowledge (which cannot be dispelled by any later knowledge) lies at the heart of all things. There are things of an order and multiplicity such that they cannot be known. We might, in a kind of game, theorize on the shape in which they might become known. But that in no way changes the fact that they are unknowable, being in the nature of things that cannot be known. They are

not known and yet they exist. But they do not exist as the primordial and divine, venerable and even august forces which burden down the lives of primitive peoples while at the same time uplifting them (one presumes that Job's response after God had evoked Leviathan and Behemoth must refer to the unknowable: "Therefore have I uttered that I understood not; things too wonderful for me, which I knew not." The fact remains, however, that although Job could not conceive these wonders, the author of the Book of *Job* was certainly prepared to imagine and give expression to things that God alone is presumed to be capable of conceiving). No, the things to which I refer do not instill fear: they tend on the contrary to protect human life, which, in part at least, focuses on thoughts, knowledge, and the content of our mental processes which remain hidden from others unless we ourselves speak of them; things of which no one else will know anything other than what I am prepared to tell them. No individual can be completely known to anyone else (nor indeed even to himself in his own mind). The human being exists on a different plane from nature (which goes about the performance of its allotted tasks without ostentation or posing to an audience). He is a reality that must be seen, failing which he ceases to be part of material existence, being without language and the features of humanity. Conversely, he is a reality which seeks to escape visibility by hiding his knowledge, thoughts, intentions, and even emotions behind the barrier of his brain. The existence of language as a means of communicating emotions and thoughts relegates these thought contents to a space specific to them which is the preserve of the unknowable. That consequence might be expressed in a logical form: what I decide or agree to express, or what I do express despite myself, is necessarily of a different order from the things which I communicate. Those things are presented as an object of knowledge for myself and others while at the same time remaining unattainable. In reality, this pseudo-logical presentation is altogether insufficient as the individual is merely the bearer of the unknowable, a kind of invariable structure whose effects are suffered by him: he opts for the unknowable which is an integral part of his make-up and turns it into his ally. I make myself unknowable to others (and, by the same token, become unknowable to myself; I represent myself

to myself as unknowable; I gain an awareness of what is going on within me but nevertheless lies beyond my ability to know), otherwise I would be a mere nothing to the extent that my acts would become predictable whereas being human presupposes the opacity of decisions, the fact that they cannot be completely reduced either to the needs or to the pressure of circumstances. But that too is merely one facet of the unknowable side of the individual. The second, and by far the most important facet, is of a more quantitative order and has already been hinted at: the expressible will be overwhelmed by a torrent of varied perceptions, thoughts, and feelings. Those things which occur in my mind and to which I give expression, which I try to put across to myself, are by definition taken from a rent and undefined fabric (which is more in the nature of a "mosaic" than of a "continuum" according to the terminology used by the German writer, Arno Schmidt, who has tried several ways of conveying its complexity in the pages of his novels, beginning with *Scenes from the Life of a Fauna*). Once I keep within my brain (or sheltered behind the "barrier of my teeth," to use that fine Homeric expression) things to which I might otherwise give expression, I become aware of the existence of so many things that might be said about what is going on inside me; things that I shall only know, at least in part, if I try to give expression to them for my own benefit but which exist in any case. However limited my thoughts and feelings may be, the very fact of seeking to know them causes them to multiply and breaks down the barriers. But the situation of the mental life of the individual is such that he cannot devote all his time and energy to familiarizing himself with it; on the contrary, he does not wish to know it all or to make it known to others. Not knowing gives protection and shelter. If everything were known, the consequences might be disastrous.

I am referring here to the conclusions that may be drawn from the existence of knowledge at the level of the individual. Therefore many attempts have been made to add, globalize, integrate, and render compatible the different forms of knowledge so as to be able to discuss not just the knowledge possessed by an individual (knowledge which he holds only to the extent that he is able to transmit it), but the knowledge which resides within all humankind

and whom it inspires. From time to time that form of knowledge seems to escape from any limitation which one might seek to impose: nothing can restrict its progress and its ambitions. The potentially rich fund of knowledge present in humankind might break the barriers of the impossible through concentration, reduction, and miniaturization. In those moments of feverish and rather abnormal excitement, all that remains is the memory, attenuated but sobering, of what in fact happens to each of us, of a constant imbalance between all that happens and what is known about it, of the intimate and essential link between all humankind and its individual incarnation. To get our feet back on the ground it is sufficient to remember that, save for the purpose of certain reasoning processes, there is no need to know more than a bare minimum.

To say "I know" ("*Je sais*") (here I would refer the reader to the superb analysis by Austin in the article entitled "*Other Minds*"²) is to assert the absolute certainty of the statement that one is making and to prohibit anyone else from calling it into question without insulting you; this is the outcome of an affirmation which is so trenchant that it cannot even be regarded as a straightforward affirmation or statement of a particular position. To use the term "*Je sais*" is tantamount to claiming that knowledge is using me as its mouthpiece. Use of the expression "*savoir*" may thus lead to the blurred representation of a knowledge with no specific subject who possesses that knowledge or of a more personal form of knowledge which nobody really needs to know. The knowledge would be there, available (perhaps on a magnetic medium itself placed in orbit round the earth), ready for anyone to consult at any time and virtual even if it were never given practical shape. However frivolous this reflection on "that which we do not know" may seem, it might perhaps serve to remind us that knowledge exists only through the act of an individual who breaks down the walls of his own ignorance and reshapes the structure of his thoughts to bring about a new way of thinking.

III

Continuing in the same vein, there is also that which we do not know but will know one day; that which we do not know and will

perhaps never know; and knowledge that we do not possess and will certainly never acquire. But there are also things that we (I for instance) do not know, while others do. Because of that distribution of knowledge, the word "we" itself has a divisive effect, setting people apart one from the other instead of uniting them. The knowledge that we might possess revolves around our heads to threaten or at least disturb us from the moment when we have become aware of its existence, if not of its content and its forms.

Like millions of my own contemporaries, I react to this threat in different ways and in particular by reading publications: in my case *Time*, *Le Monde*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review*, the *London Review of Books*, *Le Nouvel Observateur*, *Le Courrier International*. In the same order of ideas (publications which might give me information on things that I do not know, and leaving aside purely literary reviews) I feel bound to mention *La Recherche* and *Pour la Science* through which I browse sporadically when I am overtaken by remorse or by a particularly pressing wish to read an article. Last but not least, I shall make no mention of publications which touch on the areas in which I consider myself to be a specialist or perhaps more aptly a serious amateur (the history of philosophy, especially Greek philosophy, Greek philology, and literature). Is it possible to give any real idea of the process which occurs during this reading to gain a better awareness of the varied relationships which I establish with things that I do not know when I try to keep them at arm's length, at a safe distance, to make an ally of them, to gain access to them or to give them access to me?

My motives are varied: I want at one and the same time to gather information and avoid boredom (in other words to escape that searing sensation of time which passes without really moving on). But these two sets of reasons are self-reinforcing: if I am too bored nothing interests me any longer and nothing can now relieve my boredom. In one representation of myself which these moments of reading provisionally revive, I deserve to be a citizen of my age since I try to keep in touch with what is happening, with new ways of thinking, the latest developments and what has only become known recently (in the sense that we—the orbital "we" to which I referred just now—know more and more). In doing so, I imagine myself taking seriously my share of the con-

cerns of my own day—as is so excellently defined by T.S. Eliot when in his “Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry” (1928) he makes one of his characters, excessive and ironical by nature, compare the knowledge that contemporary theoreticians have of the theater with that of their extraordinarily talented predecessors: “To return for a moment to Aristotle,” Eliot writes, “think how much more we (unfortunately) know about the Greek theater than he did. Aristotle did not have to worry about the relationship between theater and religion, about the moral traditions of the Hellenes or the relationship between art and politics; he did not have to contend with German or Italian aesthetics and read works (however interesting they may be) by Miss Harrison or Mr Cornford or the translations of Professor Murray. Similarly, neither Dryden nor Corneille (from whom Dryden learned so much) were bothered by an excessive familiarity with Greek civilization. They read the Greek and Latin classics and were not aware of all the differences between Greek and Roman civilizations and their own. For our part, we have too much knowledge and not enough convictions” The knowledge to which Eliot refers, that modern knowledge which he equates with a concern and anxiety does not consist of a contact with known things. Otherwise we should have to point out that Aristotle manifestly knows infinitely more than we do about the Greek theater in the sense that he must be an exceptional witness in his own work, if only we could come to grips with his true being. But modern knowledge (e.g., of the classical Greek world) is in fact an intellectual construct which presupposes a degree of alienation from the object that is to be known and the possibility of comparing it with similar objects to establish its specific difference, the respect of differences between fields and methods, the competition between interpretations What is strange and inherent both in the democratic character of our societies and in the growth of leisure activities and culture is that the natural concerns of scientists which define their particular discipline eventually color, in a blurred form and with distant authority, all those readers who feel that they are being addressed as potential subjects of knowledge.

In seeking information, or trying to obtain information on the cognitivist conceptions of memory or of the hypotheses pro-

pounded by neurologists (in the July-August 1994 issue of *La Recherche*), what am I doing which might be regarded as serious? Unfortunately, not very much: as soon as the reasoning becomes relatively demanding or obscure, I lose my bearings. It might also be said, as an excuse on my part, that the article generally fails to provide me with enough data to enable me to situate the reasoning and see how it is deployed in the space of the questions and the representations which it endeavors to modify. I follow the reasoning and, having come to the end, I find that I have got nowhere. That is probably an inherent difficulty in any process of scientific popularization and one which is seldom overcome. These articles which purport to allow communication with the uninitiated often seem to me at best capable of serving as relays for specialists in neighboring disciplines who might find in them the distorted but suggestive representation of research or a line of argument and bibliographical references which will enable them to find out more, or perhaps to hit upon a clearer and more precise, or potentially more convincing, statement that will carry more weight precisely because it puts the same question in somewhat different terms.

Is the situation not the same when I obtain information on Bosnia or on the way in which the epidemic of AIDS is treated today all over the world? After a few minutes, or a few hours, my brain retains no more than a few new names or undigested items of information (so and so said such and such). Sometimes, fortunately, the anecdote is told well and a scene is vividly described and imprinted on my mind. But what am I to do with everything that is left over?

The main use that springs to mind, to derive profit from these readings, is to show them off to others in order to convince them of the accuracy of a particular opinion or to convince my interlocutor that I am well-informed and perhaps even an expert. By doing so, we are drifting away from any effective knowledge. The lonely traveler who reads the newspaper as he eats in a dismal dining room where he cannot talk to anyone, is ultimately less alienated from the act of knowledge when he reads to obtain the company of written thought than the same traveler who, faced with a person whom he has met by chance, pretends to know

something that he has simply read and is still present in his brain like the leftovers of the meal because the waitress is so busy that she has not yet had time to clear his table.

Surely, pretending to others that one knows is tantamount to giving up any idea of ever knowing?

Conversely, is there not a whole cognitive virtuality in the attitude of the person who gives up knowledge and resigns himself to not knowing and not becoming familiar with things? By reading magazines I learn nothing. I simply acquire some idea of things that I do not know and of areas of knowledge which are remote from my own. I know nothing about them? Big deal! Other people know them for me, or for them. I am surely not responsible for everything and I even need this fresh and refreshing ignorance which shelters me like the leafy branches of a tree and enables me to turn my mind to other things through which different knowledge will perhaps open up to me. In those moments of frankness, boldness, and clarity, I maintain a relationship with the things that I do not know which does not engender shame. Recently, I heard a psychoanalyst at a conference on psychoanalysis, after listening to a remarkably clear presentation which had nothing whatever to do with the meeting as it dealt with quantum mechanics, say how satisfied she was, while still reminding us of her lack of expertise in this area (of which everybody was already aware); she went on to mention her long-standing wish to understand what this branch of physics was about. I was ashamed for her and also for myself to the extent that her words seemed to imply that everyone who was present shared her view. I would have liked to have had the courage to distance myself from her remarks. I should have wished—and would have done so had I not been a mere amateur, an eclectic guest at this meeting—to point out that for most of the time different areas of knowledge should turn their backs on each other and avoid a face to face confrontation.

Ultimately, I say to myself that if I read these magazines, I do so largely for my own entertainment and partly to obey the command of belonging to my own age and so of being able to communicate with my contemporaries (especially with the youngest among them, with those who at all events take a keen interest in the future, the imminent) but also to measure my own ignorance.

Not to dispel it, but to be able to situate it a little better, to profit from it and receive the radiated influence of the things that I do not know and shall never know. Why are things like this? Perhaps because of the essential affinity between ignorance and the very substance of the human mind. Thinking, reflecting, knowing, presuppose an ability to measure ourselves against that substance which, because of its torrential outpourings, is hard to control. Ideas escape me, some escape under pressure from others, while representations remain insistent: if humankind has found it necessary to invent the whole panoply of aids for the intellect (arithmetic, writing, books, libraries, calculating machines, and computers), has it not done so precisely because thought is of a different order from those physical means in the sense that thought, as it is individually exercised, is to all intents and purposes shrouded in a grey area which enables it to progress? It is stimulating to compare memory with a library, the progression of an idea with the application of an algorithm, and the activities of the mind with mechanisms, provided that we do not lose sight of the fact that these are all realities of a different order. The activity of thinking requires the unknowable (provisional or definitive) behind which hides a great deal of the substance which gives it sustenance. That explains the dramatic, indeed revolutionary, nature of thought in which events occur which stand out against a background of routine, exist in a quiet atmosphere and go unnoticed. To enable these events without which nothing could ever be grasped from the domain of past thought, from that which is already too well known to permit those "throws of the dice" of thought (Mallarmé's expression remains totally valid today since "every thought is like a throw of the dice"), it would seem that we need the strength of non-knowledge. In Mallarmé, non-knowledge, to which reference is so often made, is not the abstraction that it is so often made out to be when Mallarmé is regarded as an over-zealous reader of Hegel. On the contrary, it refers us to an intimate, painful, yet triumphant experience of the absence of self in thought: thought perceived as a "corpse away from the secret that it possesses"; such at least is one possible representation of the experience in "the throw of the dice." In the sonnet entitled "To a whore" written in 1864, the aspiration to non-knowledge is

neither the sign of a renunciation nor of the aspiration to a kind of "philosopher's rest" just as there is a "warrior's rest." On the contrary, if the task of thinking does aspire to rest and if it tries to "brazenly drown the soul which obsesses us" (Tristesse d'Été—Summer melancholy") and escape from thought ("enjoy that void in which thought does not exist"—another version of the same poem) we shall do so, as is apparent from the successive variants of Mallarmé's work, by immersing ourselves in a sleep which is itself knowledge, knowledge of nothingness, a state in which the powers of the negative (sleep without dreams, the lie of prostitution, the absence of ethics) produce an acute and undescrivable knowledge which is destined to surpass all others. That mythical knowledge is not subscribed to by Mallarmé who does not even want to know about it. He merely recognizes the fact that it holds sovereign sway.

May your bed bring heavy dreamless sleep
Hovering behind curtains of remorse
(which know not remorse, including remorse at not
seeking knowledge, since remorse cannot know them?)
And may you then savour your black lies,
You who of nothingness know more even than the dead.

Notes

1. In the words of Georges Bataille: "History is incomplete. When this book comes to be read, the youngest schoolchild will know the outcome of the war which is being waged at the time of writing (1939–1940). Nothing can give me that schoolboy's knowledge. A period of war reveals the incomplete nature of history to such an extent that it comes as a particular shock to see someone die just a few days before the war ends (that is like putting an adventure story down ten pages before its dénouement)" *Le Coupable*, Paris, 1944–1961, p. 29.
2. J.L. Austin "Other Minds," *Philosophical Papers*, Oxford, 1961, pp. 96–100.