

CHAPTER III

THE PROBLEM OF BEING

How comes the world to be here at all instead of the nonentity which might be imagined in its place? Schopenhauer's remarks on this question may be considered classical. 'Apart from man,' he says, 'no being wonders at its own existence. When man first becomes conscious, he takes himself for granted, as something needing no explanation. But not for long; for, with the rise of the first reflection,

Schopenhauer on the origin of the problem that wonder begins which is the mother of metaphysics, and which made Aristotle say that men now and always seek to philosophize

because of wonder — The lower a man stands in intellectual respects the less of a riddle does existence seem to him . . . but, the clearer his consciousness becomes the more the problem grasps him in its greatness. In fact the unrest which keeps the never stopping clock of metaphysics going is the thought that the non-existence of this world is just as possible as its

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existence Nay more, we soon conceive the world as something the non-existence of which not only is conceivable but would indeed be preferable to its existence, so that our wonder passes easily into a brooding over that fatality which nevertheless could call such a world into being, and mislead the immense force that could produce and preserve it into an activity so hostile to its own interests. The philosophic wonder thus becomes a sad astonishment, and like the overture to Don Giovanni, philosophy begins with a minor chord.'¹

One need only shut oneself in a closet and begin to think of the fact of one's being there, of one's queer bodily shape in the darkness (a thing to make children scream at, as Stevenson says), of one's fantastic character and all, to have the wonder steal over the detail as much as over the general fact of being, and to see that it is only familiarity that blunts it. Not only that *anything* should be, but that *this* very thing should be, is mysterious! Philoso-

¹ *The World as Will and Representation*. Appendix 17, 'On the metaphysical need of man,' abridged.

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phy stares, but brings no reasoned solution for from nothing to being there is no logical bridge.

Attempts are sometimes made to banish the question rather than to give it an answer. Those who ask it, we are told, extend illegitimately to the whole of being the contrast

Various treatments of the problem to a supposed alternative non-being which only particular beings possess. These, indeed, were not, and now are. But being in general, or in some shape always was, and you cannot rightly bring the whole of it into relation with a primordial non-entity. Whether as God or as material atoms it is itself primal and eternal. But if you call any being whatever eternal, some philosophers have always been ready to taunt you with the paradox inherent in the assumption. Is past eternity completed? they ask: If so, they go on, it must have had a beginning; for whether your imagination traverses it forwards or backwards, it offers an identical content or stuff to be measured; and if the amount comes to an end in one way, it ought to come to an end in

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the other. In other words, since we now witness its end, some past moment must have witnessed its beginning. If, however, it had a beginning, when was that, and why?

You are up against the previous nothing, and do not see how it ever passed into being. This dilemma, of having to choose between a regress which, although called infinite, has nevertheless come to a termination, and an absolute first, has played a great part in philosophy's history.

Other attempts still are made at exorcising the question. Non-being is not, said Parmenides and Zeno; only being is. Hence what is, is necessarily being — being, in short, is necessary. Others, calling the idea of nonentity no real idea, have said that on the absence of an idea can no genuine problem be founded. More curtly still, the whole ontological wonder has been called diseased, a case of *Grübelnsucht* like asking, 'Why am I myself?' or 'Why is a triangle a triangle?'

Rationalistic minds here and there have sought to reduce the mystery. Some forms of

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being have been deemed more natural, so to say, or more inevitable and necessary than others. Empiricists of the evolutionary type — Herbert Spencer seems a good example — have assumed that whatever had the least of reality, was weakest, faintest, most imperceptible, most nascent, might come easiest first, and be the earliest successor to nonentity. Little by little the fuller grades of being might have added themselves in the same gradual way until the whole universe grew up.

To others not the minimum, but the maximum of being has seemed the earliest First for the intellect to accept. 'The perfection of a thing does not keep it from existing,' Spinoza said, 'on the contrary, it founds its existence.'¹ It is mere prejudice to assume that it is harder for the great than for the little to be, and that easiest of all it is to be nothing. What makes things difficult in any line is the alien obstructions that are met with, and the smaller and weaker the thing the more powerful over it

¹ *Ethics*, part I, prop. xi, scholium.

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these become Some things are so great and inclusive that to be is implied in their very nature The anselmian or ontological proof of God's existence, sometimes called the cartesian proof, criticised by Saint Thomas, rejected by Kant, re-defended by Hegel, follows this line of thought. What is conceived as imperfect may lack being among its other lacks, but if God, who is expressly defined as *Ens perfectissimum*, lacked anything whatever, he would contradict his own definition He cannot lack being therefore. He is *Ens necessarium*, *Ens realissimum*, as well as *Ens perfectissimum*.¹

Hegel in his lordly way says: 'It would be strange if God were not rich enough to embrace so poor a category as Being, the poorest and most abstract of all ' This is somewhat in line with Kant's saying that a real dollar does not contain one cent more than an imaginary dollar. At the beginning of his logic Hegel seeks in another way to mediate nonentity with being.

¹ St Anselm *Proslogium*, etc Translated by Doane Chicago, 1908, Descartes: *Meditations*, p 8, Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*, *Transcendental Dialectic*, 'On the impossibility of an ontological proof, etc'

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Since 'being' in the abstract, mere being, means nothing in particular, it is indistinguishable from 'nothing', and he seems dimly to think that this constitutes an identity between the two notions, of which some use may be made in getting from one to the other. Other still queerer attempts show well the rationalist temper. Mathematically you can deduce 1 from 0 by the following process: $\frac{0}{0} = \frac{1-1}{1-1} = 1$. Or physically if all being has (as it seems to have) a 'polar' construction, so that every positive part of it has its negative, we get the simple equation: $+1-1=0$, *plus* and *minus* being the signs of polarity in physics.

It is not probable that the reader will be satisfied with any of these solutions, and contemporary philosophers, even rationalistically minded ones, have on the whole agreed that no one has intelligibly banished the mystery of *fact*. Whether the original nothing burst into God and vanished, as night vanishes in day, while God thereupon became the creative principle of all lesser beings; or whether all things have foisted or shaped themselves im-

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perceptibly into existence, the same amount of existence has in the end to be assumed and begged by the philosopher. To comminute the difficulty is not to quench it. If you are a rationalist you beg a kilogram of being at once, we will say, if you are an empiricist you beg a thousand successive grams, but you beg the same amount in each case, and you are the same beggar whatever you may pretend. You leave the logical riddle untouched, of how the coming of whatever is, came it all at once, or came it piecemeal, can be intellectually understood ¹

If being gradually *grew*, its quantity was of course not always the same, and may not be the same hereafter. To most philosophers this view has seemed absurd, neither God, nor primordial matter, nor energy being supposed to admit of increase or decrease. The orthodox opinion is that the

¹ In more technical language, one may say that fact or being is 'contingent,' or matter of 'chance,' so far as our intellect is concerned. The conditions of its appearance are uncertain, unforeseeable, when future, and when past, elusive.

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quantity of reality must at all costs be conserved, and the waxing and waning of our phenomenal experiences must be treated as surface appearances which leave the deeps untouched.

Nevertheless, within experience, phenomena come and go. There are novelties; there are losses. The world seems, on the concrete and proximate level at least, really to grow. So the question recurs: How do our finite experiences come into being from moment to moment? By inertia? By perpetual creation? Do the new ones come at the call of the old ones? Why do not they all go out like a candle?

Who can tell off-hand? The question of being is the darkest in all philosophy. All of us are beggars here, and no school can speak disdainfully of another or give itself superior airs. For all of us alike, Fact forms a datum, gift, or *Vorgefundenes*, which we cannot burrow under, explain or get behind. It makes itself somehow, and our business is far more with its What than with its Whence or Why.