

Introduction to *The Other Metaphysics*

Pierre Montebello

Translated by James Kelly*

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If, after the invention of the cosmos by the Greeks, we were asked to identify the most profound mutation achieved by the human spirit, we would almost certainly find ourselves agreeing with Koyré: the “new theoretical or, rather, metaphysical conception of nature” that emerged in the 17th century.¹ It heralded the destruction of the divinised Cosmos, the geometricisation of space, the mathematicisation of nature and the effacement of the boundary between celestial physics and earthly physics, being and becoming. It paved the way for an experimental way of thinking that could not otherwise have been born. In the blink of an eye, another “image of the world” took shape. Yet three centuries later, various philosophies would seek to recast the foundations of the shattered experience of the originary unity of man and the cosmos.

But what could come of such an enterprise? Those philosophies set forth a conception of nature that was neither a mathematics of nature nor a physical theory of nature. While this scientific revolution did not pass unnoticed by Kant, these philosophies nonetheless overlooked Kantianism. They seemed behind the times. Moreover, they did not last long: with the arrival of Kantianism in France, they found themselves largely consigned to the museum of ideas with no future, at best met by a welcoming nothingness (the silent halo or deafening murmur reserved for an all-too singular genius). The rediscovery of German idealism, and the powerful influence of Husserlian phenomenology and Heideggerian ontology, accomplished their ruin.

It was, nonetheless, an extraordinary moment of philosophical creation, trailblazing perhaps. We saw the decision to think being in terms of what is given, and ultimately in terms of the experience of this “datum”, spring up in different contexts. Yet the word “datum”—the “given”—is undoubtedly misleading, allowing the assumption of a primacy of perception, when in fact what really mattered was the experience of a tension internal to our living whole (drive, effort, prehension, duration, etc.) on

* *L'autre métaphysique*, Les presses du réel, 2015, pp. 3–9. Pierre Montebello is Professor of Modern and Contemporary Philosophy at the University of Toulouse – Jean Jaurès. James Kelly is an independent scholar who holds a PhD in Translation Studies from the University of Edinburgh. This translation was produced as part of the Atelier des philosophes residential workshop held at the Collège international des traducteurs littéraires in Arles, France, from 28 November to 1 December 2019. The translator would like to express his gratitude to both the Association pour la promotion de la traduction littéraire for organising the workshop and the participants for their comments and suggestions on the first draft of the translation.

¹ Koyré, Alexandre (1968) *Études newtoniennes*, Paris: Gallimard, p. 29.

different levels. For Bergson, and, to a different extent for Ravaisson and Tarde, it was about “the immediate data of consciousness”. For Nietzsche, it was about the “given” of organic life: “our world of passions and desires is the only thing ‘given’”². For Whitehead, it was the actual datum of immediate experience: “Our datum is the actual world, *including ourselves*; and this actual world spreads itself for observation in the guise of the topic of our immediate experience. The elucidation of immediate experience is the sole justification of any thought”.³

As if distrustful of the modern metaphysics that never succeeded in subtracting this “datum” from the problem of the content of subjective perception, philosophy had been tempted to give itself over entirely to the experience of the world within us.⁴ Regardless, this about-turn revealed the possibility of a coincidence with a reality larger than that of our thought, perhaps infinitely larger, insofar as it could allow our thought to begin to once again grasp the unity of the cosmos. In submitting to the “datum”, that is to say to the dark force, to the active potency that traverses nature and ourselves, our thought somehow wrested itself from the giddy heights of idealist constructions.

However, as our thought turned toward this active potency, our explanation of the world had already become incredibly enlarged. Philosophy now faced a scientific explanation that multiplied day by day and the need to subject its categories to this explanation and the metaphysical principles it tacitly contained in an attempt to apprehend one last time the “picture of existence in its totality” (Nietzsche). If the task of philosophy is to elucidate being, the understanding of this potency of imposition within us was undeniably philosophical. In a certain sense, these were the last great ontologies to affirm that being was known absolutely. However, they are not philosophies that thought being as it was thought by metaphysics or by *Naturphilosophie*, since what is absolute about the question of being is the fact that it can be known. Yet this in no way presages its structure. The immense creativity of these forms of thought lies precisely in them having turned their backs on a rational and overly intellectualised conception of being, one they perceived as artificial and fictitious.

The *absolute* truth of being lay in the very fact that *being is relation*. Yet not relative to us but in its very structure: pure heterogeneity, neither substance nor one. As such, there is nothing surprising about the fact that these philosophies jointly dismantled the being–substance of metaphysics, in all its

² Nietzsche, Friedrich (2002) *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to the Philosophy of the Future*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 34.

³ Whitehead, Alfred North (1978) *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York: The Free Press, p. 4. There are many aspects on which Whitehead’s philosophy of nature and the philosophies of nature presented here are extremely close.

⁴ Hans Jonas rightfully notes that the “datum” cannot be a content of perception: it is an “actum” internal to the experience that is present in effort, drive, force. The transcendental point of view says nothing about this internal necessity: “Force,” writes Jonas, is “not a ‘datum’ but an ‘actum’ humanly present in effort. And effort is surely not a percept, even less a form of the synthesis of percepts” (*The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, Evanston IL, Northwestern University Press, 2001, p. 25). If Maine le Biran provided all the content of this experience of effort, it was Hans Jonas who rediscovered it.

dimensions – geometrical, atomistic, mathematical, psychological and logical. None of the substantialist categories corresponded to the experience of what is imposed on us, whether on our organic life (Ravaisson and Nietzsche) or our psychological life (Tarde and Bergson). Finding the substantialist explanation lacking rapport with what animates and moves us, these philosophies focused on a conception of being as relation (being as effort, difference, will-to-power, duration). Of course, this ontology of relation was not the last act in ontology in philosophy, since a whole other continent has formed around Husserl and Heidegger. However, it is certainly the most recent act in an ontology whose own requirement is to be a *cosmology*. This “other metaphysics” starts from the absoluteness of a relation of heterogeneity that forms the vast generative plane of nature, produces living nature and at its cutting edge forms the very effort of thought. It conceives nature as that process that coils inside us and in which ontological consistency wholly defines our inner experience. It has never confined nature to a “correlate” of absolute consciousness (its constitution at the heart of an ordered chain of consciousness), as is the case with Husserl.⁵ No doubt he would have found such an approach too subjective, too abstract, too detached from what consciousness itself must *suffer* from its presence in the world.

Before expounding further on this philosophy, it is necessary to say a few words about its significance. The shattering of the cosmos left only a broken nature, riven by immense cracks—between man and the living world, between human consciousness and the full spectrum of nature; in short, between man and the infinity of the cosmos. Infinitely dangerous cracks across the plane of psychology, ethics and politics. The singularity of man emerged exacerbated, even if it meant paying with a profound sense of finitude, perhaps even an essential anxiety, an existential nothingness (the ultimate condition of his solitary freedom). In contrast, this philosophy believed itself to have returned to the creative flux of the forces that travel through things, that it could set man in unison with a potency that gleams throughout the world. Ravaisson’s grace, Bergson’s joy, Nietzsche’s Dionysian affirmation, Tarde’s harmonic expectation, all constitute a form of ethics founded on the sense of the cosmos itself. It was not a matter of recurring to transcendence, to an absolute situated beyond the experience of things, but of submitting to the test of the real in its rawest sense. In other words, it was about experiencing what runs through our thought but which perhaps lay beyond the realm of analytic thought. Indeed, there was a genuine distrust of reason in Nietzsche, analysis in Ravaisson, logic in Tarde, intelligence in Bergson; a suspicion that, in all these cases, this was not how to get at things. Hence why, at the deepest level, this philosophy tended towards the total dehumanisation of man (reducing man to being) and the total humanisation of nature (the closeness of all natural forms to man). This other metaphysics, neither rationalist nor transcendent nor relativist, resonates as both the most human metaphysics of the cosmos and the most cosmic metaphysics of man since the Copernican revolution.

⁵ Husserl, Edmund (1980) *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, The Hague, London: Nijhoff.

Perhaps there is also a point of method that has been misunderstood. Why pass through the self to get at nature? Why first pass through *our* instinctive life (Nietzsche), *our* effort (Ravaisson), *our* psychic life (Bergson), *our* me (Tarde) in order to then beam out across the entire universe? Quite simply because we are, as living and thinking beings, the sum of physical, organic and psychic strata and that these strata are bound to communicate by the very fact that we are. The only coherent method is thus to find a common, crosscutting and universal process without which it would be impossible to understand the nesting of these expressions of nature. Of course, in nature there are differences, but are they differences in nature? Can we say for sure that everything is essentially and substantially separate? It is frequently objected that if we do not separate, we anthropomorphise. Tarde, for example, has been reproached—but also Bergson and Nietzsche—for making desire and belief the principle of the universe. However, is this the right question? The extension of desire, force or even belief may be a hypothesis but—and herein lies the crucial difference—it is the only one that holds, precisely because it is wholly anthropomorphic. Uncontested by facts, this hypothesis is thus less contradictory than pure psychology or pure materialism. This is the crux of the argument of Hans Jonas, whose epistemological position

confesses the much maligned delight of anthropomorphism. And this, after four centuries of natural sciences! Yet perhaps, in a certain sense, man really is the measure of all things—not, it goes without saying, through the legislation of his reason but through the paradigm of his psychophysical totality, which represents the maximum known concrete ontological accomplishment, us. Descending from this summit, classes of being are determined reductively, by progressive subtractions until reaching a minimum of pure elementary matter, that is to say a less-and-less, a ‘not yet’ that is further and further away; instead of the most complete form being deduced the other way around, cumulatively, starting from this base. In the first case, the determinism of inanimate matter is a dormant freedom yet to awake.⁶

It is clearly not a matter of enlarging man to the world but of placing man in the world. As Tarde notes, there is just as much complexity in the minuscule as in man. For their part, Nietzsche and Bergson detect the same “intimate essence” of being everywhere, in different degrees, but present nonetheless. This essence is in fact in us, just as it is everywhere; and it is in us *because* it is everywhere. In fact, strictly speaking, the *higher anthropomorphism* of the philosophers of this other metaphysics is the opposite of the other empirical anthropomorphism. To anthropomorphise empirically is to project oneself onto things, to see oneself, identical within the variety of the world. In contrast, the method of higher anthropomorphism posits that man can be found in all things because he is of the same nature as all things, albeit in degrees of difference, which can be explained by returning to the process of differentiation, to the becoming of difference.⁷ What is in man is thus in all things, not because it is in

⁶ Jonas, Hans (2000) *Évolution et liberté*, Paris: Rivages, p. 32.

⁷ See Deleuze, Giles (1999) ‘Bergson’s conception of difference’ in (J. Mullarkey ed.) *The New Bergson*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 42–65. Here, degrees of difference (qualities) are opposed to differences in degree (quantities).

man but because it is in all things. The higher anthropomorphism grasps man at his root: and his root is the cosmos.

Anthropomorphism must be re-evaluated as a method. In *The Phenomenon of Life*, Hans Jonas is brave enough to pose this true question: is it necessary to reject all desire to explain, to obstinately refuse to recur to the notion of force, as too anthropomorphic? How can we diagnose this refusal in terms of philosophical thought? Let us allow Jonas to respond: rejecting explanation means accepting the “agnostic renunciation of the idea of knowledge as an understanding of its objects”; this means accepting “[alienating] man from himself and denying [genuineness] to the self-experience of life”.⁸

⁸ Jonas, *Phenomenon of Life*, p. 37.