ARTICLES

WHAT IS REALLY REAL?

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When Plato conceived of the realm of Ideas as the realm of the "ontos on," or of that which is really real, he introduced an immortal distinction into philosophical thought. To be sure, he was preceded by Parmenides who had also spoken of what is truly real and had separated it from that which merely seems to be real, but is not real at all. However, there is a vast difference between Plato and Parmenides, for according to Parmenides, no degree of reality is conceded to the seemingly real; this is, rather, deprived of any truth. It is the realm of error and illusion while the realm of reality alone deserves the assent of the thinking mind; it alone represents being and truth. Plato, on the contrary, wanted to "save" the phenomenal world. This world has its own truth by participating in the realm of the Ideas, though a truth of lower degree. It has a phenomenal reality.

This distinction between something that is really real and something that is seemingly real is of great moment. It cannot be dismissed, even though the Platonic scheme in its historical form might be abandoned. There are degrees of reality in the contents of our experience. Fleeting impressions or emotions are less real than the eternal nature of things. Errors, falsities, illusions and deceptions are less real than truth. And yet it cannot be denied that the fleeting impressions and emotions, that even erroneous statements, illusions and deceptions have their own mode of reality, though on a lower level.

Plato united reality and truth. Parmenides simply identified them. According to Parmenides the real is the true, the false is not real; this majestic dictum underlies his whole philosophy. Plato was more subtle; although he preserved the substance of the

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Parmenidean thesis, he differentiated the degrees of truth when he differentiated the degrees of reality. I agree with both Parmenides and Plato that truth and reality cannot be separated from each other.

The really real is the truly real. The sensations and emotions of my soul are less real than are the Platonic Ideas or the laws of nature. The four elements are less real than the atoms of modern physics, because modern physics is more true than was ancient speculation about nature. The chemical relations between elements as conceived by modern chemistry are more real than the same relations as conceived by medieval alchemy. The activity of the stars as discovered by astronomy is more real than that accepted by astrology. In all these cases reality and truth are inseparably united. To the degree to which there was a certain truth, though distorted or obscured in ancient speculation or in medieval science, to that degree there was also reality in the objects as defined by them. And to the degree to which there is still some obscurity in modern science, to that degree the chemical elements or the astronomical relations are not really real themselves. What is really real is absolutely true, and what is not true at all is absolutely unreal. The degree of reality depends on the degree of truth and conversely.

Modern science can define what is real only to a certain degree, or in a certain sense. Two reasons may be given for this thesis. First, the natural sciences are never finished, but are at all times on the way towards the discovery of the full and absolute truth. There is, therefore, always truth and error mixed up in scientific theories, as the presence of hypothesis shows. Second, the natural sciences need an interpretation of the sense in which they are true and in which their objects are real.

There is truth and there is therefore reality outside the modern natural sciences. The fleeting impressions and emotions are not completely unreal, as they are not completely untrue. On the contrary, they can claim a reality and a truth never to be "saved" by the sciences. The artist can and does "save" them to the degree to which he is a real or a true artist. Paintings do preserve his impressions, and lyrics or music his emotions,
so that we feel there is a universal truth and a universal reality in these fugitive phenomena.

The example taken from the fine arts shows that reality is bound up not only with truth in the scientific sense, but also with the truth revealed and presented by the painter, the poet, the composer or the artist in general. And it might be bound up with other realms of human life and activity, too. In this respect we can no longer rely upon the ancient heritage—be it of Parmenides or Plato; both were more convinced than we are that science or scientific investigation of whatever kind is the only, or at least the best, way of finding truth and reality, and therefore of discovering what is true and real to the highest degree. If we call such a conviction rationalism, we must state that we are less rationalistically minded than they were. We must insist that the real is not to be found only in the exclusively logical realm—not in the realm of the natural sciences, nor in the wider realm of ontology, as we will see. The beautiful also is real. It reveals a certain truth which cannot be expressed in any other way.

As error and falsity exist only in the logical sphere, though on a lower level than the truth, so also the ugly and the trivial exist in the aesthetic sphere only as the counterpart of the beautiful and the sublime. They exist only where the measure of aesthetic values is applied or applicable. In fact, as error and falsity are real only to the degree to which they are logically relevant, so also the ugly and the artistically, or aesthetically, imperfect are real only to the degree to which they are still aesthetically pertinent. Both the false and the ugly borrow their reality from the true and the beautiful; they live only in a secondary way, by the grace of the positive values. In a paradoxical fashion one might say, that the false and the ugly do not exist, wherever truth and beauty reign, and yet that they do exist only where truth and beauty reign. This paradox points to a problem we have to discuss later.

What has been said about the logical and the aesthetic sphere can also be said about the moral values. Moral goodness alone makes morality real. Acts of the will which disagree with the moral standard are not really moral acts as they are also not morally
real. And yet they exist only in the moral realm; they borrow their reality from the morally good. They are morally less real as they are also really less moral than morally positive acts. They follow the good as the shadow follows the object on which the sun shines. The good is creative and has a lasting power while the bad is destructive and annihilates itself eventually. Like the false and the ugly so the morally bad, too, has only a negative existence; it derives what existence it has from the negation of the good.

II

The term “negative existence” raises a hard and important problem indicated by the paradox we have encountered. Does the false, the ugly, the bad really exist? Has the term “negative existence” any meaning at all? Is not Parmenides right after all in insisting that Being alone is, while Non-being is not? Is it not true that truth, beauty and goodness annihilate their opposites, that they negate the very existence of the false, the ugly and the bad? Is it not true, therefore, that nothing can exist in the logical, the aesthetic, the moral realm which does not fully agree with the standards of these realms? Parmenides was driven to this conclusion in order to avoid the paradoxical idea of “negative existence.”

The Kantians of the 19th century also ruled out negative existence and maintained that negation always rejects falsity or error. In other words, they dealt with negativity only in an epistemological and logical way and denied its ontological meaning as they denied ontology altogether. Consequently, they also denied any gradation of reality. Negativity, they thought, has only a subjective function; reality itself cannot be negative, it is always and entirely positive. In that way the Kantians ironically were nearer to Parmenides than to Plato, although on the whole they rightly believed themselves to be nearer to Plato than to Parmenides.

There is a sense in which Parmenides and the Kantians are right. The really real is thoroughly positive, because it is thoroughly true. It does not tolerate negativity as it also does
not tolerate falsity. If the opposition of truth and falsity is occasioned by human thinking, that is to say by the finite mind, and if the real and the true are inseparably connected, then indeed negative reality is rooted in finite subjectivity. But finite subjectivity itself has its own reality and so has the world in which we live, this world of ours in which truth and falsity, beauty and ugliness, good and bad are strangely mixed up. This world is not really real, precisely because of this mixture, but, nevertheless, it is real in a sense and to some degree. And since it is real only to some degree, we must conclude that the negative also has some reality or that there are lower stages of reality which contain negativity, and finally that negativity is not only caused by the rejection of the false, but that the false itself has a negative existence. And so Plato is right in the last analysis.

But Plato did not see that this finite world of ours has a subjective root. Although negativity is not merely the rejection of the false, it is, nevertheless, a symptom of falsity. Only in a world in which negativity exists can falsity also exist, for the false is itself the negative of the true. Since there is truth and falsity mixed up in this world of ours, there is also gradation of reality and value in it, and consequently there is positive and negative existence. Gradation of reality and value imply approximation to the really real which as the top of the hierarchy is above and beyond the alternative of truth and falsity.

Our world and we ourselves are finite precisely because of the antagonism of positivity and negativity which govern the reality as well as the validity of everything that exists in this world including ourselves and all that we perform. Since the contrast of truth and error is generated by our own thinking, finiteness is subjective and everything belonging to our world has consequently a subjective tinge and taint. Only the really real is exempt from this destiny. It is, therefore, not only above and beyond the antagonism of value and disvalue, of positivity and negativity, but it is also beyond and above all finite existence. It is absolutely infinite, as it is also absolutely real and positive, absolutely true, beautiful and good. It is thus separated by an abyss from our existence and from our world. It is beyond the reach of our knowledge, our creativity, our will and our intentions.
But the paradox of negative existence reappears when we put the question: how is the really real compatible with the finite, the phenomenal, the subjective, the relative, if it is true that the really real is free from falsity, ugliness and badness? Compatible it should be with this its antagonistic existence, since this existence, though negative and finite, nevertheless participates in reality as it also participates in truth, beauty and goodness. It is real to the degree to which it does participate in the really real, although on a lower level and only to a certain degree.

If the really real represents the full and perfect truth, it must itself contain the reason of that antagonism; it must conceal the precondition of negativity and subjectivity; it must be the key to the riddle of finitude and of its own counterpart, the realm in which the true is mixed up with the false, the beautiful with the ugly, the good with the bad. We may be so bold as to say even that the really real must be the ground or the cause of the partly and relatively real, the source of the negative, the origin of the finite and so of falsity, ugliness and badness. Or to put it even more boldly: we must conclude that the really real partly negates itself, inasmuch as it has to account for this finite world and our finite existence. But if we have gone thus far, we would be justified in being frightened by our own boldness, because we have met the abyss of incomprehensibility, even of absurdity. How can the Infinite, the truth, the really real negate itself? Does this not imply that it contradicts itself? And how can we ever hope to understand that contradiction taints what is above and beyond the whole sphere in which the antagonism of the negative and the positive prevails?

However, we cannot give up our own boldness, since consistency and not caprice leads us to this conclusion. If we do not abandon the idea of the really real altogether, we are logically coerced to accept the contradictory statement that truth contradicts itself, that reality pure and unalloyed negates itself, that the Infinite is the ground of the finite, the self-sufficient the cause of the insufficient and the perfect the origin of the imperfect. With great admiration but also with emphatic disagreement we remember again the proud thesis of Parmenides who avoided the absurd by denying the reality of the negative, the finite, the
deficient and imperfect altogether. But even Parmenides could not help bringing in the excluded sphere through a back-door under the title of a second-class truth which nevertheless persuades the human mind.

If we avoid the rigorism of Parmenides, we are ultimately driven to the extremity of Hegel who introduced contradiction into his system of ontology, but insisted that this procedure leads to a solution, if the system is made a perfect circle ending where it begins. I do not believe that this can be done. It offers not so much a solution, as an acute and accurate formulation. Taken as a solution it is as ingenious as it is desperate and self-destructive for it really destroys the whole metaphysical adventure. If this is the only possible way of building up an ontology, then Hegel has but shown in practice what Kant demonstrated in theory, namely that ontology is an impossible possibility; its problem transcends the range of the human mind. If there is no other possibility of attaining knowledge of the really real than Hegel’s, we have to renounce ontology altogether.

III

Even if ontology dealt with insoluble problems, it still might point to an important truth and harbor the most worthy of all philosophical topics. Even if ontology cannot be carried out the way Parmenides and Plato thought it could, the problem of ontology is real and cannot be avoided. There is the gradation of reality in this world of ours: at the top of its scale is the really real, no matter how hidden it may be and how great the obstacles in the way of ascertaining it.

The really real is also the standard of all truth, beauty and goodness; in some way, too, it is the source of all that exists, at least of the positive, the constructive, the creative, the lasting values. This at least we know about the really real. But it is true that even this knowledge is hedged about by our inability to define the nature of what I have called “source” or the nature of the activity by which the really real generates the finite, relative and forever partly unreal world to which we belong. And our
knowledge is even more seriously endangered by the insight that any attempt to comprehend this generation or production leads inevitably into the impasse of contradiction, even of a contradiction that threatens to destroy all positive value of our ontological knowledge.

But a more careful study of the nature of contradiction may give us a clue to some further clarification. I said that the ultimate conclusion at which we arrive when we try to think through the relation between the really real and this world would be the self-negation and finally the self-contradiction of the really real. But this conclusion was too rash. We can speak about self-negation only if we are permitted to conceive of the really real as a kind of self. Such a conception is not warranted by the data. The unity of the really real with the absolutely true beautiful and good is, I admit, difficult to understand as long as we do not attribute to the really real a kind of selfhood. We are tempted to attribute selfhood to the really real because it is our subjectivity, i.e., our own selfhood, which alone secures us an access to the true, the beautiful, and the good. But even so, all our real and potential acts of actualizing truth, beauty and goodness, are finite, relative and to that degree mixed up with falsity, ugliness and badness. It is very risky and adventurous to transfer our self and our actions to the really real which is infinite, absolute and self-sufficient.

We may, therefore, abstain from attributing selfhood to the Infinite; and we must state that we ourselves in trying to think through what is meant when we conceive of the Infinite as the source of the finite, fall into the trap of contradiction. After all, contradiction originally and ultimately means that we contradict ourselves or that the human mind contradicts itself, whereby the human mind represents the thinking self which is always the self of a concrete individual person. Only in this sense is subjectivity the source of negative existence and of the finitude of the world in which we live. This world is finite, because the human self is finite and can never attain to absolute truth, beauty and goodness, but only to their broken copies. We contradict ourselves, therefore, the very moment we aim at the understanding of the unbroken, undisturbed, absolute real. We fail in grasping the
nature of the Infinite, because we ourselves are finite in thinking, creating and acting—finite, too, in the logical, the aesthetic and the moral fields of our activity.

The contradiction is, as it were, the wall that separates us from the free and unencumbered sight of the really real. This contradiction of ours we can understand very well. In fact, we could not understand ourselves, we could not understand the broken status of our existence, if our knowledge did not lead into this impasse that prevents us from seeing the Infinite in all its purity, splendour and glory. From the outset we conceive of the really real from our own point of view. Only because we live in a broken world, only because we ourselves are entangled in the relative and the finite, do we conceive of the really real as the Infinite and the Absolute, as the Self-sufficient and the Self-existent. We can never take the place of the Infinite itself and look from that place upon the Infinite. Contradictions are therefore the necessary, the inevitable restrictions laid upon our knowledge of the really real.

This knowledge finds its clarification in and by our self-understanding. In fact, only our self-understanding can grant us the right perspective in which we have to assess and to interpret our knowledge of the Infinite. Ontology is reasonable only on the ground of "heautology" (if I may use a word that I first used about 30 years ago), i.e., a doctrine or logic of the self. Contradiction is always in the last analysis our own self-contradiction. Only a self can contradict itself, and only the human, i.e., the finite self does contradict itself, because it cannot arrive at the absolute and perfect truth, beauty and goodness. Logic is rooted in the last analysis upon the self-identity of the thinking self. The so-called law of contradiction is a law for the sake of the self-preservation of this self.

Falsehood, ugliness, and badness negate not only the positive values, they also negate the reality and the integrity of the self. The self, therefore, is always concerned, wherever reality and truth are concerned. The human self being a finite self is involved in a life and death struggle as long as it is entangled in negative existence, for negative existence means that the self exists only on a lower level and to a lesser degree; its existence is encumbered
by contradiction in the logical sphere, by disharmony or disproportion in the aesthetic sphere and by wickedness or depravity in the moral sphere. Negative existence means with respect to the self that it is not really real itself. Its own reality is at stake together with its integrity, logical, aesthetic and moral.

One might thus rightfully state that the human or finite self negates itself, as long as it lives and acts in this world for in that world the really real is no longer really real but partly negated. The human self, not the really real as such, is therefore the real source of negativity. Error, insensitivity, and faultiness diminish the reality and the value of the world in which we live. They degrade the really real by their imperfection. They make man's existence altogether negative and finite.

Negativity thus necessarily leads to contradiction and self-contradiction. The merely formal negation of a proposition or the negative proposition which the Kantians took as the model and pattern of all negation, as rejecting falsity, is itself based upon the ontological negativity of falsity; formal negation contradicts the false in order to rectify thinking and to approach the truth. Contradiction in the merely formal sense is nothing but gainsaying. But we would not have to gainsay, if it were not that the ontological contradiction which is originally self-contradiction alarms us and provokes action for the sake of the self's integrity and its very reality.

Ontological negativity or the negativity of existence is, therefore, always at the same time ontological contradiction, i.e., self-contradiction of the thinking self. Heautology is not merely the logic, it is the ontology of the finite self.

All ontology is finally ontology of self. We cannot establish an ontology of the really real, because as we have seen, such an ontology leads into the impasse of unavoidable and insoluble contradictions, and because it would be absurd to ascribe these contradictions to the self-contradiction and self-negation of the supremely real. It is true, the ontology of the self also leads to unavoidable contradictions, but these contradictions constitute the very essence and substance of the finite self which being finite is bound to be only partly real or positive and partly unreal or
negative; it is bound to contradict itself ontologically or heauto-
logically.

The world in which we live is the world of this finite self and is, therefore, finite, broken, contradictory and imperfect itself. We cannot mend it without mending ourselves by reconstruing the wholeness of our self which is degraded and debased by our own deficiency and insufficiency. But being what we are, namely finite and deficient, we can never hope to mend ourselves and our world sufficiently so that our and the world’s deficiencies would be completely erased and compensated. We can never hope completely to escape ignorance, illusion, fallacies and deceptions in the logical realm as we can never hope to make up for our lack of sensitivity and imaginative creativity or for our faultiness, negligence and frailty in the moral realm. We are definitely self-contradictory beings who participate in the really real but partly negate it in thinking, creating, and acting.

We contradict ourselves down to the very root of our existence. If we state that our finite nature is the source or precondition of our deficiencies, we contradict ourselves, because we presuppose that being what we are we cannot help doing what we do, i.e., diminishing our selfhood, our value, our reality and thereby magnifying the distance between ourselves and the really real. But on the other hand we morally know that the really real cannot and should not be made responsible for this diminution and degradation but that rather we ourselves, or more precisely each of us in his own way and to his own degree, brings about this diminution and degradation. At the bottom we thus have a self-diminution and self-degradation, and, therefore, we can say paradoxically, the effect produces its cause or the consequent its ground.

But this contradiction is just the root and the origin of our selfhood, as it is also its nature and substance. We are what we are because we are not really real, or because our existence is negative in its ultimate constitution and, therefore, self-contradictory, so that no statement about ourselves can be made that does not contain this stigma. I am not what I am, for I am not a real self, but always only on the way toward or away from the goal of full and true selfhood. My real status is not Being but
Becoming, which implies the alternative of positivity and negativity, construction and destruction. And even when I act positively, still a portion of negativity is immanent in the action. No finite ego can ever get rid of this portion altogether. No finite ego can ever hope to become a really real ego or self. Only an infinite self, should such a self exist, can say about itself: I am who I am. Every finite self has always to admit that it is not what it is, namely a self in the unstinted sense of the word.

Of the three realms of self-contradiction the moral realm comes nearest to the root of the finite self, because the self is there concerned with its own integrity directly. Therefore, moral self-contradiction is not only the most personal, or should I say, the most central contradiction, but it is also the most original. It interprets and illuminates the contradictions in all the other realms of life and world. Only in the moral realm does the self know itself, while in the logical and the aesthetic spheres the self contemplates objects that exist outside itself. Only the moral experience gives the clue to the nature of the original and constitutional self-negation and self-contradiction of the finite ego.

We must conclude, therefore, that, if there is any solution of this basic problem, it has to be of a moral kind. Only what morally resolves the basic self-contradiction, resolves the basic ontological problem concerning the relation between the really real and ourselves.

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