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Essential Characteristics of Metaphysics

While the religious point of view necessarily implies the intervention of an element drawn from the sentimental order, the metaphysical point of view is exclusively intellectual; but although for our part we find such a remark sufficiently clear, to many people it might seem to describe the metaphysical point of view inadequately, unfamiliar as it is to Westerners, so that a few additional explanations will not come amiss. Science and philosophy, such as they are to be found in the Western world, also in fact have pretensions toward intellectuality; if we do not admit that these claims are well-founded and if we maintain that a gulf separates all speculations of this kind from metaphysics, this is because pure intellectuality, as we understand it, is a very different thing from the rather vague ideas that ordinarily pass under that name.

It should be explained first of all that in adopting the term "metaphysics" we are not greatly concerned with the historical origin of the word, which is open to some doubt, and which would even have to be regarded as purely accidental if one were prepared to admit the opinion, a decidedly improbable one in our view, according to which the word was first used to denote that which came "after physics" in the collected works of Aristotle. Likewise, we need not concern ourselves with various other rather far-fetched interpretations that certain authors have thought fit to attach to this word at different times; these are not reasons, however, for giving up its use, for, such as it is, it is very well suited for what it should normally be called upon to express, at least so far as any term borrowed from the Western languages ever can be. In actual fact, taken in its most natural sense, even etymologically, it denotes whatever lies "beyond physics"; the word "physics" must here be taken to denote the natural sciences viewed as a whole and considered in quite a general manner, as they always were by the ancients; it must on no account be taken to refer to one of those sciences in particular, according to the restricted meaning in vogue at the present day. It is therefore on the basis of this interpretation that we make use of the term "metaphysics", and we must make it clear once for all that if we persist in using it, this is solely for the reasons just

given and because we consider that it is always undesirable to have recourse to neologisms except in cases of absolute necessity.

It may now be stated that metaphysics, understood in this way, is essentially the knowledge of the Universal, or, if preferred, the knowledge of principles belonging to the universal order, which moreover alone can validly lay claim to the name of principles; but in making this statement we are not really trying to propose a definition of metaphysics, for such a thing is a sheer impossibility by reason of that very universality which we look upon as the foremost among its characteristics, the one from which all the others are derived. In reality, only something that is limited is capable of definition, whereas metaphysics is on the contrary by its very nature absolutely unlimited, and this plainly does not allow of our enclosing it within a more or less narrow formula; and a definition in this case would be all the more inaccurate the more exact one tried to make it.

It is important to note that we have spoken of knowledge and not of science; our purpose in so doing is to emphasize the radical distinction that must be made between metaphysics, on the one hand, and the various sciences in the proper sense of the word, on the other, namely all the particular and specialized sciences which are directed to the study of this or that determinate aspect of individual things. Fundamentally, this distinction is none other than that between the universal and the individual orders, a distinction that must not however be looked upon as an opposition, since there can be no common measure nor any possible relationship of symmetry or coordination between its two terms. Indeed, no opposition or conflict of any sort between metaphysics and the sciences is conceivable, precisely because their respective domains are so widely separated; and exactly the same thing applies to the relationship between metaphysics and religion. It must however be understood that the division in uestion does not so much concern things themselves as the points of view from which they are considered. . . . It is easy to see that the same subject can be studied by different sciences under different aspects; similarly, anything that may be examined from an individual and particular point of view can, by a suitable transposition, equally well be considered from the universal point of view (which is not to be reckoned as a special point of view at all), and the same applies in the case of things incapable of being considered from any individual standpoint whatsoever. In this way, it may be said that the domain of metaphysics

embraces all things, which is an indispensable condition of its being truly universal, as it necessarily must be; but the respective domains of the different sciences remain nonetheless distinct from the domain of metaphysics, for the latter, which does not occupy the same plane as the specialized sciences, is in no wise analogous to them, so that there can never be any occasion for making a comparison between the results arrived at by the one and by the others.

On the other hand, the metaphysical realm certainly does not consist of those things of which the various sciences have failed to take cognizance simply because their present state of development is more or less incomplete, as is supposed by certain philosophers who can hardly have realized what is in question here; the domain of metaphysics consists of that which, of its very nature, lies outside the range of those sciences and far exceeds in scope all they can legitimately claim to contain. The domain of every science is always dependent upon experimentation in one or other of its various modalities, whereas the domain of metaphysics is essentially constituted by that which cannot be investigated externally: being "beyond physics" we are also, by that very fact, beyond experiment. Consequently, the field of every separate science can, if it is capable of it, be extended indefinitely without ever finding the slightest point of contact with the metaphysical sphere.

From the preceding remarks it follows that when reference is made to the object of metaphysics it must not be regarded as something more or less comparable with the particular object of this or that science. It also follows that the object in question must always be absolutely the same and can in no wise be something that changes or that is subject to the influences of time and place; the contingent, the accidental, and the variable belong essentially to the individual domain; they are even characteristics that necessarily condition individual things as such, or, to speak still more precisely, that condition the individual aspect of things in its manifold modalities. Where metaphysics is concerned, all that can alter with time and place is, on the one hand, the manner of expression, that is to say the more or less external forms which metaphysics can assume and which may be varied indefinitely, and on the other hand, the degree of knowledge or ignorance of it to be found among men; but metaphysics in itself always remains fundamentally and unalterably the same, for its object is one in its essence, or to be more exact "without duality", as

the Hindus put it, and that object, again by the very fact that it lies "beyond nature", is also beyond all change: the Arabs express this by saying that "the doctrine of Oneness is one".

Following the same line of argument, we may add that it is absolutely impossible to make any "discoveries" in metaphysics, for in a type of knowledge which calls for the use of no specialized or external means of investigation all that is capable of being known may have been known by certain persons at any and every period; and this in fact emerges clearly from a profound study of the traditional metaphysical doctrines. Moreover, even admitting that the notions of evolution and progress might have a certain relative value in biology and sociology—though this is far from having been proved—it is nonetheless certain that they cannot possibly find a place in metaphysics; besides, such ideas are completely foreign to the Easterners, just as they were foreign even to Westerners until almost the end of the eighteenth century, though people in the West now take it for granted that they are essential to human thought. This also implies, be it noted, a formal condemnation of any attempt at applying the "historical method" to the metaphysical order; in fact the metaphysical point of view is itself radically opposed to the historical point of view, or what passes for such, and this opposition will be seen to amount not only to a question of method, but also, what is far more important, to a real question of principle, since the metaphysical point of view, in its essential immutability, is the very negation of the notions of evolution and progress. One might say in fact that metaphysics can only be studied metaphysically. No notice must be taken of contingencies such as individual influences, which are strictly nonexistent from this point of view and cannot affect the doctrine in any way; the latter, being of the universal order, is thereby essentially supra-individual, and necessarily remains untouched by such influences. Even circumstances of time and space, we must repeat, can only affect the outward expression but not the essence of the doctrine; moreover there can be no question here, as there is in the relative and contingent order, of "beliefs" or "opinions" that are more or less variable and changing precisely because they are more or less open to doubt; metaphysical knowledge essentially implies permanent and changeless certitude.

Indeed, from the very fact that it in no wise shares in the relativity of the sciences, metaphysics is bound to imply absolute certainty as one of its intrinsic characteristics, not only by virtue of its object,

which is certitude itself, but also by virtue of its method, if this word can still be used in the present context, for otherwise this method, or whatever else one cares to call it, would not be adequate to its object. Metaphysics therefore of necessity excludes every conception of a hypothetical character, whence it follows that metaphysical truths, in themselves, cannot in any way be contestable. Consequently, if there sometimes is occasion for discussion and controversy, this only happens as a result of a defect in exposition or of an imperfect comprehension of those truths. Moreover, every exposition possible in this case is necessarily defective, because metaphysical conceptions, by reason of their universality, can never be completely expressed, nor even imagined, since their essence is attainable by the pure and "formless" intelligence alone; they vastly exceed all possible forms, especially the formulas in which language tries to enclose them, which are always inadequate and tend to restrict their scope and therefore to distort them. These formulas, like all symbols, can only serve as a starting-point, a "support" so to speak, which acts as an aid toward understanding that which in itself remains inexpressible; it is for each man to try to conceive it according to the extent of his own intellectual powers, making good, in proportion to his success, the unavoidable deficiencies of formal and limited expression; it is also evident that these imperfections will be at their maximum when the expression has to be conveyed through the medium of certain languages, such as the European languages and especially the modern ones, which seem particularly ill-adapted to the exposition of metaphysical truths. . . . Metaphysics, because it opens out a limitless vista of possibilities, must take care never to lose sight of the inexpressible, which indeed constitutes its very essence.

Knowledge belonging to the universal order of necessity lies beyond all the distinctions that condition the knowledge of individual things, of which that between subject and object is a general and basic type; this also goes to show that the object of metaphysics is in no wise comparable with the particular object of any other kind of knowledge whatsoever, and indeed it can only be referred to as an object purely by analogy, because, in order to speak of it at all, one is forced to attach to it some denomination or other. Likewise, when one speaks of the means of attaining metaphysical knowledge, it is evident that such means can only be one and the same thing as knowledge itself, in which subject and object are essentially unified; this amounts

to saying that the means in question, if indeed it is permissible to describe it by that word, cannot in any way resemble the exercise of a discursive faculty such as individual human reason. As we have said before, we are dealing with the supra-individual and consequently with the supra-rational order, which does not in any way mean the irrational: metaphysics cannot contradict reason, but it stands above reason, which has no bearing here except as a secondary means for the formulation and external expression of truths that lie beyond its province and outside its scope. Metaphysical truths can only be conceived by the use of a faculty that does not belong to the individual order, and that, by reason of the immediate character of its operation, may be called "intuitive", but only on the strict condition that it is not regarded as having anything in common with the faculty which certain contemporary philosophers call intuition, a purely instinctive and vital faculty that is really beneath reason and not above it. To be more precise, it should be said that the faculty we are now referring to is intellectual intuition, the reality of which has been consistently denied by modern philosophy, which has failed to grasp its real nature whenever it has not preferred simply to ignore it; this faculty can also be called the pure intellect, following the practice of Aristotle and his Scholastic successors, for to them the intellect was in fact that faculty which possessed a direct knowledge of principles. Aristotle expressly declares[1] that "the intellect is truer than science", which amounts to saying that it is more true than the reason which constructs that science; he also says that "nothing is more true than the intellect", for it is necessarily infallible from the fact that its operation is immediate and because, not being really distinct from its object, it is identified with the truth itself.

Such is the essential basis of metaphysical certainty; it may thus be seen that error can only enter in with the use of reason, that is, with the formulation of the truths that the intellect has conceived, and this follows from the fact that reason is obviously fallible in consequence of its discursive and mediate character. Furthermore, since all expression is bound to be imperfect and limited, error is inevitable in its form, if not in its content: however exact one tries to make the expression, what is left out is always much greater than what is included; but this

[1] *Posterior Analytics*, Book ii.

unavoidable error in expression contains nothing positive as such and simply amounts to a lesser truth, since it resides merely in the partial and incomplete formulation of the integral truth.

It now becomes possible to grasp the profound significance of the distinction between metaphysical and scientific knowledge: the first is derived from the pure intellect, which has the Universal for its domain; the second is derived from reason, which has the general for its domain since, as Aristotle has declared, "there is no science but that of the general". One must on no account confuse the Universal with the general, as often happens among Western logicians, who moreover never really go beyond the general, even when they erroneously apply to it the name of universal. The point of view of the sciences, as we have shown, belongs to the individual order; the general is not opposed to the individual, but only to the particular, since it is really nothing else than the individual extended; moreover the individual can receive an indefinite extension without thereby altering its nature and without escaping from its restrictive and limiting conditions; that is why we say that science could be indefinitely extended without ever joining metaphysics, from which it will always remain as completely separate as ever, because metaphysics alone embraces the knowledge of the Universal.

. . . All that we have just said can be applied, without reservation, to every one of the traditional doctrines of the East, in spite of great differences in form which might conceal their fundamental identity from the eyes of a casual observer: this conception of metaphysics is equally true of Taoism, of the Hindu doctrine, and also of the inward and extra-religious aspect of Islam. Now, is there anything of the kind to be found in the Western world? If one were only to consider what actually exists at the present time, it would certainly not be possible to give any but a negative answer to this question, for that which modern philosophical thought is sometimes content to label as metaphysics bears no relation whatsoever to the conception just put forward. . . . Nevertheless, what we said about Aristotle and the Scholastic doctrine at least shows that metaphysics really existed in the West to a certain extent, if incompletely; and in spite of this necessary reservation, one can say that here was something that is without the slightest equivalent in the modern mentality and that seems to be utterly beyond its comprehension. On the other hand, if the above reservation is unavoidable, it is because, as we said earlier on, there

are certain limitations that seem to be innate in the whole of Western intellectuality, at least from the time of classical antiquity onward; we have already noted, in this respect, that the Greeks had no notion of the Infinite. Besides, why do modern Westerners, when they imagine they are conceiving the Infinite, always represent it as a space, which can only be indefinite, and why do they persist in confusing eternity, which abides essentially in the "timeless", if one may so express it, with perpetuity, which is but an indefinite extension of time, whereas such misconceptions do not occur among Easterners? The fact is that the Western mind, being almost exclusively inclined to the study of the things of the senses, is constantly led to confuse conceiving with imagining, to the extent that whatever is not capable of sensible representation seems to it to be actually unthinkable for that very reason; even among the Greeks the imaginative faculties were preponderant. This is obviously the very opposite of pure thought; under these conditions there can be no intellectuality in the real sense of the word and consequently no metaphysics. If another common confusion be added as well, namely that of the rational with the intellectual, it becomes evident that the supposed Western intellectuality, especially among the moderns, in reality amounts to no more than the exercising of the exclusively individual and formal faculties of reason and imagination; it can then be understood what a gulf separates it from Eastern intellectuality, which regards no knowledge as real or valuable excepting that knowledge which has its deepest roots in the Universal and the formless.

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