

ON EXPERIENCE AND REASON

• D. C. Schindler •

“While the conventional contemporary view of the world conceives of thought as opposed to, or at any rate outside of, the real, the classical worldview understands thought as a deepening of the real, and therefore as a bringing of experience to fruition.”



In an essay written at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the notoriously abstract Hegel wrote what was no doubt a counter-attack against his critics. The title of his atypically brief article was “*Who thinks abstractly?*”¹ If to abstract means to take away a part, to focus on only some aspect, of a reality, Hegel suggested that it is the gossip, rather than the philosopher, who is hopelessly abstract. The sensationalism and shocking trivialities that bombard one, for example, in the supermarket aisle are pure abstractions, because they demonstrate no effort to get to the most essential heart of whatever matter it is they happen to address, and therefore cannot be said to present any sort of whole. Indeed, a similar charge might be brought against even our most respected newspapers. One cannot grasp the whole without finding the center of a thing, and that center by definition is not any one of the thing’s parts. Rather, it is “inside”

¹Hegel, *Texts and Commentary*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), 113–18.

of all the parts, which means it does not, and in fact *cannot*, appear “on the surface.” It is precisely *thought* that is capable of penetrating beyond the surface to what Hegel elsewhere calls the “inner pulse,” the “core” of a reality, and at least in principle the more “rarified” or speculative thinking is, the closer it is capable of coming to the center. In that case, there is nothing in the end more concrete than speculative philosophy.

Whether or not one is willing to accept the dialectical process that Hegel identifies with speculative philosophy here, the basic point he makes seems to me a crucial one: those who oppose reason and experience have an abstract notion of experience, and those who dismiss thought as abstract have an abstract notion of abstraction. This opposition and this dismissal can take a variety of forms in our age. On the cruder side of the spectrum, one hears that privileging reason and its ideas betrays the complexity of life, imposes a straightjacket on reality, reduces unique individuals to pre-conceived labels, seduces us to the comfort of facile generalizations, and so forth. It is said, moreover, that a theory is meaningless unless it can be put into practice, or that ideas are empty unless they are *lived out*. Thought has to justify itself by showing the *difference* it makes to our lives, it must demonstrate its relevance to our experience. Ideas have value only if they can be “cashed out,” which means that, like cash, they represent merely instrumental goods, which become perverse when made an end in themselves. Within a Christian context, this spirit takes the form of separating not only pastoral questions, but even spirituality, from dogmatic theology, or more generally one says that theology as a whole has its justification only in the service it provides to the life of the Church—whether “life” here is meant to indicate morality, spirituality, liturgical practice, or social justice. For Christians, the truth is not an idea, it is a Person, which means what we seek as Christians is not in fact an understanding or insight, but a particular way of life or experience.

Now, it is not that any of these claims or the concerns expressed by them are *simply* false. Indeed, whatever may have been the motive in the early modern period’s positing of experience as a *corrective* to reason in someone like Francis Bacon (or perhaps, further behind him, William of Ockham), there are at least three grounds one can offer to support this epistemological turn: First, as Goethe insisted in the early nineteenth century, there is something in

experience that can never be adequately translated into concepts.² This is most evident in the basic *qualia* of experience: You cannot finally explain what a color is, for example; to know what “green” means you have to see it for yourself. Second, it is precisely experience that opens our reason to movement in time and therefore to the historical. In this respect, an early modern thinker such as Vico may be said to bring to fruition an aspect of the Judeo-Christian spirit that tended to be left *in embryo*, as it were, in the classical tradition.³ Third, there is the difficult but crucially important question of the adequacy of reason to individuals qua individual. What distinguishes reason from sense experience is that it intends its object precisely *sub specie universalis*, so that if one seeks to interpret reason as *capax individualis* it will inevitably be by showing its dependence in some form on what the senses alone can reveal.⁴ Attention to the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the individual is an undeniable contribution of modernity and its privileging of experience.

But if the various claims mentioned above are not altogether false, they nevertheless do not express the whole truth, which means that they are themselves abstract and will become problematically so to the extent that they absolutize themselves. Let us consider in a brief way the basic implications of the one-sided affirmation of experience in order to set in relief what would be necessary for an adequate response. First of all, it bears emphasis that attention to the uniqueness of the individual qua individual would belong to experience alone only given the nominalist assumption that

²“The ultimate goal would be: to grasp that everything in the realm of fact is already theory. The blue of the sky shows us the basic law of chromatics. Let us not seek for something behind the phenomena—they themselves are the theory,” Goethe, from *Maxims and Reflections*, in *Scientific Studies* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988), 387.

³Vico establishes his “New Science” specifically on divine providence—and so on the particularities of history—which he explains stands above nature, the foundation of classical thought: see *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Bergin and Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University, 1991), 3–26.

⁴See Pierre Rousselot, *Intelligence*, trans. Andrew Tallon (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 1999), 91–109. As Rousselot suggests, one may not make human knowing able to grasp the individual *conceptually* without falling into contradiction. The radical dependence on sense experience, as abidingly *other* than reason, must not be lost from view.

universals do not have some role to play in the reality of things. We will return to the central question of the nature of that role in a moment. Such an assumption, in any event, appears to underlie the various claims we mentioned above. If experience is taken in opposition to, or even simply in independence of, reason, what it yields is not the meaningful, concrete individual but, as Hegel rightly insisted, the abstract particular. This abstraction can take either a subjective or an objective form. Subjectively, one speaks of “personal experience” and means by that precisely what cannot be universalized, and therefore what has no intrinsic claim on anything or anyone beyond the subject of the experience. It is simply a “fact,” which has significance only in an extrinsic way (for example, as a statistic). Objectively, we have the so-called empiricism of modern science, which has ironically understood itself precisely in *opposition* to the concreteness of individual experience. This opposition follows from the logic of the method itself: by restricting itself at the outset to mere quanta, that is, to only that sense data which can be measured, it attends not to the being itself of the reality it investigates, but only what we might call its most superficial aspect, which it subsequently generalizes. The result is not the universal idea that was sought in the Platonic tradition, which is in fact the innermost reality of every instance of that idea, but is an *extrinsic* generality to which individuals conform—i.e., it is not a *form* but a *law*.

Moreover, to say that universal concepts fail to do justice to real experience because of its essentially individual and unique character is to separate thought and being, or to put it in more scholastic language, to deny the transcendentality of truth. In this case, the intellect becomes a self-enclosed sphere that must *then*, in a second moment, find a way to connect to the equally closed world, an aspiration that is doomed from the start, as can be gathered from the various misadventures of Cartesian philosophy. If the real has no light of intelligibility in itself, if it is simply an opaque quantity, what would ever justify the application to it of an *idea*? This leads to a second point: conceived as essentially separate from the intellect, being gets emptied of any intrinsic meaning and is thus reduced to brute facticity. To take a contemporary example of this reduction in moral philosophy:

All we can understand from “nature” is the naked facticity of a reality, sexuality and sexual intercourse for instance; nothing else. “Nature” reveals to our attention, understanding, judgment, and

decision only its naked facticity, not our moral obligation. Everything beyond “nature’s” facticity is the result of interpretation by attentive, understanding, rational, and responsible human beings. . . . When we derive moral obligations from “nature,” we are actually deriving them from our human attention to and our interpretation and evaluation of “nature.” . . . The uninterpreted experience of “nature,” as of every other objective reality, is restricted to its mere facticity and is void of meaning, a quality that does not inhere in “nature” but is assigned to it by rational beings in interpretative acts. The decisive criterion for the meaning of any human action, including any moral action, is the project of the actor.⁵

There are two possible attitudes to take with respect to a world so reduced, and though they may appear at first to be diametrically opposed to one another, they turn out to be simply two sides of the same coin, which is what allows them to co-exist so often so easily. On the one hand, there is a sort of “hyper”-rationalization, and on the other a basic anti-intellectualism. In the first case, knowledge is conceived principally as power, and this follows naturally from its separation from reality: not only does this separation imply that reason has no intrinsic connection to the real, which would give it an inborn responsibility to it and for it, but by the very same token it implies that reason can connect to the world only by imposing itself on it from the outside. Reason thus becomes by its very nature something violent and its use is inescapably manipulative. The technological turn of science that we witness, for example, in Galileo, follows (as Heidegger has demonstrated⁶) from a particular conception of the essence of truth. In the second case, precisely because this power is asserted from the outside, the complete reduction of reality to the status of an abuse victim can coincide with an assertion of the utter impotence of reason in the face of reality. In its self-assertion, and self-preoccupation, reason can say nothing at all about what “truly” is, and the criterion for what counts as meaningful gets taken from reason’s hands. That criterion now

⁵Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Catholic Anthropology* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 48–49.

⁶See the excerpt of a lecture published as “Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics,” in Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, trans. David Krell (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 247–82.

becomes a standard by which reason itself is measured, and the criterion itself by that very fact ceases to be a rational one. There are all sorts of possibilities for what it may be instead, none of which is in principle incompatible with any other. Thus, for example, there is Rousseau's proto-romantic elevation of the "sentiment de l'existence,"⁷ Nietzsche's uncompromising judgment of all things against the standard of the affirmation of life,⁸ the "sociologizing" of philosophy that Spaemann takes to be the essential face of modernism,⁹ the "emotivism" that MacIntyre diagnosed in the realm of ethics,¹⁰ the historicist dissolution of philosophy that Leo Strauss and later Pierre Manent described,¹¹ and so forth. While these impulses seem antagonistic to the disproportionate elevation of the intellect to which they often react, in fact they share the same basic presupposition: the rejection of the unity of intellect and being. The dispute between rationalism and empiricism that dominated the early modern period turns out to be in fact at a deeper level a collaboration.

In reaction to the separation of intellect and being, many of the dominant strands of postmodern philosophy may be broadly interpreted as an effort to bring them back together, though one that—to quote Bob Dylan—"used a little too much force." This is

⁷In his "Fifth Walk," from the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (London: Penguin, 2004), 88–89, Rousseau speaks of this as a *feeling* of one's *natural being*, which "crowds out" any thought. He claims that this experience is altogether shut off from the world; it is a state in which we are "self-sufficient like God." This may be revealingly compared to Aristotle's description of the "perception [αἴσθησις] of one's existence," which he takes to be one of the highest goods: *Nicomachean Ethics*, 9.12.1171b34–35. For Aristotle, this is first of all cognitive (and in principle *inclusive* of the highest levels of thought) rather than being a mere sentiment, and, secondly, it is something shared with others. As he goes on to say here, it is "actualized in living together."

⁸See Nietzsche's succinct account of "'Reason' in Philosophy," *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (London: Penguin, 1976), 479–84.

⁹Robert Spaemann, "Der Irrtum des Traditionalisten. Zur Soziologisierung der Gottesidee im 19. Jahrhundert," *Wort und Wahrheit* 8 (1953): 493–98.

¹⁰Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd edition (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), esp. 6–35.

¹¹Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 9–34; Pierre Manent, *The City of Man*, trans. Marc LePain (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998), 11–85.

explicitly the aim, for example, of John Dewey, who identifies the distinction between reason and experience as fatal to the life of philosophical thought and who argues instead for a notion of reason that is essentially creative, because it does not occur, so to speak, in one's head, but rather out in the world in a way that is fluid and ongoingly fruitful.¹² On the other hand, Edmund Husserl can be said to follow a radically different path from essentially the same starting point: "Back to things themselves" means back, not to things as they exist in themselves and in some sense independently of us, but rather back to our experience of things. This experience is then viewed from the perspective of a transcendental ego, the universal "I," so that all of the intentionalities of subjective life may be interpreted as analogous to the intentionalities of conceptual reason. In the end, the phenomenological method shares the abstract form of the empirical method of modern science, though its scope is far broader and its yield far richer and more sophisticated. If postmodern pragmatism reprises in a higher key the anti-intellectualism we find in modern thought, phenomenology may be said to recapitulate and indeed reinforce the hyper-rationalism of a Descartes¹³—though once again these philosophical movements are not at all simply opposed to one another.

In contrast to the tendency to separate reason and experience in modern thought and the tendency to collapse them into each other in postmodern thought, the classical tradition affirms a relationship between them of unity-in-distinction. Truth and being in this tradition are understood to be perfectly co-extensive, if formally distinct, and human reason is *essentially* embodied, so that its perception of the truth of being will always occur by way of embodied experience. In this case, intelligibility is *in* being, it is not a conceptual construct that is then applied to or imposed on experience, and to know is therefore to be intimate with reality in a manner that can only be distantly imitated by physical contact. In

¹²John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), 77–102.

¹³Husserl calls Descartes' *Meditations* the "prototype of philosophical reflection," and observes: "one might also call transcendental phenomenology a neo-Cartesianism, even though it is obliged—and precisely by its radical development of Cartesian motifs—to reject nearly all the well-known doctrinal content of the Cartesian philosophy" (Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations* [Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997], 1).

contrast to contemporary claims that present reason as a kind of departure from life or reality, we have for example Aquinas affirming that “whoever does not understand possesses only half a life.”¹⁴ As Robert Spaemann has shown, Aquinas is giving expression in this passage to a long neoplatonic tradition that conceived of reality according to a hierarchical triad of being (or nature)—life—intellect, in which each term represents an intensification of the previous one.¹⁵ This means that life is not something simply added extraneously to being, for example, which would mean in turn that being is defined precisely as non-living, as altogether lacking in the qualities that constitute life. Instead, it means that, for all the novelty the intensification represents, there remains a continuity between the higher and the lower level so that the movement up fulfills what went before. In this case, life is more real than mere being, and understanding is both more alive than mere life and more real than mere being.

Conversely, within this hierarchy the lower level must be understood as ontologically open to the higher, as ordered to it and therefore as anticipating it in some respect appropriate to its own order. Note that Aquinas says, not that one would be left with *mere* life if one lacked intelligence—which would make intelligence something “tacked on” to life, as it were—but that one would have half a life, i.e., that life itself would be lacking if intelligence were lacking. In short, while the conventional contemporary view of the world conceives of thought as opposed to, or at any rate outside of, reality, the classical worldview understands thought as a deepening of the real, and therefore as a bringing of experience to fruition. From this perspective, we would say that experience becomes more truly itself the more it is truly penetrated by mind, which would make sense, of course, only if it were true to say that experience *as such* were in some sense intelligent from the beginning.

Now, portraying life as an intensification of being, and intelligence as an intensification of life may seem to suggest a simple, unilateral relationship between experience and reason: whatever content is had in experience can be retrieved, so to speak, in a more intense and concentrated way by reason. In other words, in

¹⁴Aquinas, *In Eth. Arist. ad Nicom.* lib. IX, lect. 11, no. 1902.

¹⁵Robert Spaemann, “Die Bedeutung des ‘Sum’ im ‘Cogito Sum,’” *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung* 41 (1987): 373–82, esp. 374.

conceptualizing experience there is nothing to lose and everything to gain. But we observed at the outset that there are a number of ways that experience contributes essentially to reason, and that the new emphasis on experience that arose in modernity is not simply the result of a confusion. A complete understanding of the relationship between intelligence and experience must interpret the classical unity-in-distinctness in a manner that affirms a genuine reciprocity between them: not only does intelligence represent a deepening of experience, but experience also “adds” something to reason.

With a view to this understanding, I propose an essentially analogical conception of experience (which would be different from the dialectical conception that we find in Hegel, though it aims to respond to the same problem). According to this conception, experience would be opposed to reason only by at the same time including it and being included by it. Thus, abstractly considered, experience is both historical and particular, while reason is universal and trans-temporal. They are, in that sense, different. Concretely considered, however, reason is always exercised *bodily* in every act and to that extent mediated by experience, just as experience is always illuminated to some degree by intelligence. It is not the case, in other words, that the senses perceive sense data, while the intellect cognizes ideas, which must subsequently be coordinated with the data, for this necessarily leaves the two merely extrinsically related to one another. Such an extrinsicism implies a fragmentation of both the human subject and of being more generally. Instead it is *I* that experience, and *I* that reason, and this “I” is a concrete whole in which these distinct operations are always already *intrinsically* related: that is, they are connected in such a manner that each informs the activity proper to the other.

Moreover, what the *I* both experiences and understands is not sense data and concepts, but *reality itself*, by means of the cooperation of senses and intellect. The real is always, without exception, an instance of a universal idea, the rationality of which transcends all time and space, and that idea is not *accidental* to its being, but *is* its reality in some respect, so that conceptualizing it does not take us away from being. At the same time, universals do not exist *as such* in abstraction, but have their own reality only *in* concretely existing beings. Their universal meaning is therefore always mediated and thus to some extent informed by history. Aquinas insists that ideas do not represent the object of knowledge,

but that *by which* being is known, and also that knowing has its completion in a *conversio ad phantasmata*: the implications of these affirmations ought to be unfolded from within the modern emphasis on history and individuality.¹⁶ However that may be, the cooperation of reason and experience in the knowing subject is a fitting correlate of the com-penetration of universality and particularity in the concretely real. If sense experience is subjective in content and objective in form, while reason is objective in content and subjective in form, only the integrated simultaneity of both allows us to speak of a unity in distinctness of the subject and the object as an encounter between two integral wholes.

A paradigm for this concrete sense of experience lies in the knowing of a person. Experience is indispensable in this sort of knowledge: we do not claim to know a person whom we have never met. The encounter—be it a singular event or a lifetime of daily contacts—presents something to us that exceeds what reason in abstraction can furnish. But this experience nevertheless *requires* reason to be experience in fact: a dog, for example, does not have what we would call experience of a person in spite of having sharper senses. A dog's perception of a human being will always remain more abstract than the perception available to another human being precisely because the dog lacks the sense-transcending reason that is able to grasp sense data in an integrated way as the manifestation of a real being that exists in himself, beyond whatever my experience of him may be: the manifestation, that is, of a person. A person is more than an idea, to be sure, but he is *also* the embodiment of an idea, and we come to know him better and experience him more fully the deeper we reflect, in this experience, on what it means to be a man, and conversely we deepen our understanding of humanity in our reflective experience of this absolutely unique individual person. Understood in a *properly* concrete way, experience is indeed intelligent, and intelligence offers in fact a privileged access to experience. The two reciprocally reinforce one another. According to the poet Hölderlin, “Wer das Tiefste gedacht, liebt das Lebendigste,”¹⁷ the one who has come to know what is most profound loves what is most alive.

¹⁶Aquinas, *Summa theologica* 1.84.7 and 1.85.2.

¹⁷From his poem, “Sokrates und Alcibiades.”

To return to the affirmations we cited at the outset, while it is true for example that theological speculation has to serve the life of the Church, it is also true that the life of the Church has its end, in part, in making evident the truth of faith. One who possesses an integrated view of the relationship between reason and experience will see—and indeed will experience—that just as praxis is the proper fruit of theoria, so too is theoria what ultimately justifies praxis.¹⁸ As Origen once expressed it, “contemplation of being is the fruit of works.” □

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¹⁸On the essential unity of the life of contemplation and the life of action, see the essay by Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Action and Contemplation,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 1: *The Word Made Flesh* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 227–40.