

# PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION, HOPE AND RAPTURE

CHRISTOPHER HAMILTON  
KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

“We *start* with dirty hands, we inherit the law of the strongest and its values, it's where we start from.”<sup>1</sup>

Michael McGhee

“Almost the whole of human life has always taken place far from hot baths.”<sup>2</sup>

Simone Weil

In *and our faces, my heart, brief as photos* John Berger writes this:

What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else is the image of a place: a place where your bones and mine are buried, thrown, uncovered, together. They are strewn there pell-mell. One of your ribs leans against my skull. A metacarpal of my left hand lies inside your pelvis. (Against my broken ribs your breast like a flower.) The hundred bones of our feet are scattered like gravel. It is strange that this image of our proximity, concerning as it does mere phosphate of calcium, should bestow a sense of peace. Yet it does. With you I can imagine a place where to be phosphate of calcium is enough.<sup>3</sup>

Philosophy does not know rapture. It analyses, deflates, suspects, dissects, organizes, controls, places, distinguishes. It always wants to say more, and say what it says for others. It is not a discourse of intoxication. It is not filled with ecstasy. It does not allow itself to be carried away, to long, to yearn. Its hope is the hope of clarity, of measure, of perspicuity. It does not weep and it does not know the melancholy tone, the nostalgia, the sense of the appalling depredations of time of Berger's comment. Or if it does, this is its exception, its guilty conscience speaking. Weeping, yearning are never at its centre.

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1 Michael McGhee, *Transformations of Mind: Philosophy as Spiritual Practice* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), 78.

2 Simone Weil, “L'Iliade ou le poème de la force”, in *Œuvres*, ed. Florence de Lussy (Gallimard, 1999 [1940]), 530.

3 John Berger, *and our faces, my heart, brief as photos* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005 [1984]), 101.

Berger's hope is a religious hope, not a philosophical hope. Religion knows the yearnings and longings of which Berger speaks.

Berger's religious hope says: this world is enough. Yet religious yearning often finds the world inadequate. It wants more than phosphate of calcium. Not in Berger's case.

Nietzsche says that Christianity is in love with extremes. Berger's religious sensibility finds hope in sensations of the most delicate and subtle kind, sensations that lie next to silence.

His image of his bones strewn with hers picks up on a moment when they were woken by children playing a piano. "The two children were playing lightly and dutifully and the notes filled the house. You were lying with your back to me, your breasts in my hands. Neither of us stirred."<sup>4</sup>

How can it be that philosophy has overlooked the importance of such moments in a life, moments that can be filled with so much hope? Her breasts in his hands, not stirring, listening: how could a human being ask for anything more in this shabby world of ours? How could one hope for more? Philosophical ethics has been unable to understand this and see it as enough. It is embarrassed by Berger's comment. It does not have its measure. It flees it. But if you have not known the kinds of moments Berger describes — there are many different versions of such moments of silence and delicacy — you have missed one of the most important dimensions of human experience. An ethics that cannot say this condemns itself.

Nietzsche never knew the comfort of a woman's warm body next to his in bed.<sup>5</sup> Who could possibly measure the loss to his life of this fact, of the endless deprivation it signifies? How much of his refusal to find hope in religion can be traced to that misery?

But Nietzsche longed for such moments. Bad luck and personal incompetence combined to deprive him of them. Philosophy, however, indulges a certain pride in passing by such moments. This is its image of *strength*, of *power*: philosophy takes pleasure in leaving aside experiences such as that of Berger because it sees them as — well, what, exactly? *Soft*, perhaps; too emotional; too minor and incidental. Philosophical ethics is in love with duty, obliga-

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4 Berger, *and our faces, my heart, brief as photos*, 99.

5 Stefan Zweig, *Der Kampf mit dem Dämon: Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche* (Frankfurter Taschenbuch Verlag, 1998 [1925]), 245.

tion, welfare, virtue; it sees these mountains and peaks of ethical experience, and it is right to do so, but it misses the plains and flatlands, the plateaux, the meadows, the groves and arbours, the valleys rich with fruit and ripe wheat in the sunshine; it shuns sensuality and the body, longing and yearning, the grief of loss of things never had, or had only fleetingly. But religion is about these things: the Buddha's vision of ageing, disease and death; asceticism; Jesus broken on the cross; Sufism; Yom Kippur, Sukkot...these are all about longing and yearning, the body delivered up to others or oneself in ecstasy or pain or pained ecstasy.

Writing of that moment of waking, as the children play the piano, Berger says:

If ours were the eighteenth century, when questions opened idly like doors onto gardens, I might ask you: Do you remember? But in our century, when only evil and indifference are limitless, we cannot afford unnecessary questions; rather, we need to defend ourselves with whatever there is to hand of certainty. I know that you remember.<sup>6</sup>

Lying in bed, with his hands on her breasts, is no answer to limitless evil and indifference. It solves nothing. But it is a miracle that it is still possible. In a world in which our lives are spun out from and woven back into the evil and indifference of which Berger speaks, the kind of moment he describes is a hope of better human possibilities. We are not sufficiently astonished that such possibilities are still available to us. We do not *stop* over them. We rush on, as if philosophy has to get on with some task more important. But how can there be a more important task for philosophy than reminding us how it is possible to be consoled for the wreckage that history is?<sup>7</sup>

Some contemporary philosophers find philosophy of religion arid, detached from the vicissitudes of lived faith. They find this because they see that the questions posed by those who write on such matters do not matter to them in such a way that the answer could turn their lives inside out. Callicles: "Tell me, Socrates, are we to take you as serious just now, or joking? For if you are serious and what you say is really true, must not the life of us human beings have been turned upside down, and must we not be doing quite the opposite,

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<sup>6</sup> Berger, *and our faces, my heart, brief as photos*, 99.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History", in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Pimlico, 1999 [1955]), 249.

it seems, of what we ought to do?”<sup>8</sup> If philosophy or religion cannot turn your life inside out, it loses its sacred dimension. The hope that either can do this is the hope that human life might not be emptied of all that makes it worthwhile.

If you tell someone what to believe, he or she will most likely resist and become even more embedded in his or her life as it is. So you need to avoid that if you want your words to mean anything. Berger avoids that, most philosophy and most religion does not. His is a philosophy in the subjunctive (Kierkegaard). This is why someone who said that the evil and indifference of our time is not *limitless*, would miss the point. The comment is written in the subjunctive, even if the verbal marker is lacking. The tone is the tone of the subjunctive. The assertions of literary culture are written, spoken in the subjunctive (which does not mean they all are... Here, as elsewhere, it is important to resist the temptation to literal-mindedness, a temptation philosophy often mistakes for rigour). Philosophy does not know what to do with that, so its permanent desire is to claim that literature is, or should be, there for our moral education. If you love literature and want to say why it is important to you, it is flattering to the ego and consoling to the intellect to suppose that its purpose is that of moral edification. You stop being puzzled as to why you love this thing and you feel good about yourself in devoting your time to it. But we should not strip literature of whatever it is in it — many things — that baffles us. It addresses the ways in which one's life is knotted, seemingly hopelessly tangled, that is true. But to think of that address in mainly moral terms is to fail to see the ways in which literature *goads* us, and that need not be a moral matter at all. Indeed, it may address the tangle of the inner life by pulling the knots even tighter, making you more baffled, less sure of your moral aims.

How could being phosphate of calcium be enough? Berger *loves* this woman. And he knows his love to be inadequate, mediocre. W.H. Auden:

Lay your sleeping head, my love,  
Human on my faithless arm;  
Time and fevers burn away  
Individual beauty from  
Thoughtful children, and the grave  
Proves the child ephemeral:  
But in my arms till break of day

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8 Plato, “Gorgias”, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A199.01.0178%3Atext%3DGorg,481c>.

Let the living creature lie,  
Mortal, guilty, but to me  
The entirely beautiful.

This is the sentiment of Berger's comment. His lover is entirely beautiful *because* she (or he, in Auden's case) is mortal and guilty. Phosphate of calcium is enough because it is (can be) a mark of our mortal and guilty condition. Simone Weil:

The vulnerability of precious things is beautiful because vulnerability is a mark of existence.

Destruction of Troy. Fall of the petals from fruit trees in blossom. To know that what is most precious is not rooted in existence — that is beautiful. Why? Projects the soul beyond time.<sup>9</sup>

Love of the phosphate of calcium of another, of one's own mixed with that of another, the capacity to love in this way, projects the soul beyond time, not into timelessness, not into another realm, but *back into* this realm, into the materiality of things, of their irreplaceability, the beyond time of their permanent presence, permanent present, which is utterly transient. That is the whole point of Weil's comment. This moment is timeless because transient; this person is perfect because guilty; there is hope because otherwise "hope would be hope for the wrong thing".

Alphonso Lingis, speaking of beauty and sexual lust:

The sacred is not separated from the here-below of generation and corruption, beckoning from beyond as the figure of holiness, wholeness and ideal integrity. From the beginning the sacred is in decomposition, is separated from the world of work, reason, and discontinuous beings fixed in their identity, by decomposition. The zone of the sacred is the zone of spilt blood, semen, discharges, excretions, which excite the transgressive and ruinous passions.<sup>10</sup>

We need not think that Lingis names the only kind of activity that is the sacred; it is enough if he has isolated one aspect of this concept. But Weil would have resisted Lingis's thought. Yet her own thinking drives her towards it, since it is implied by her idea that vulnerability is at the core of beauty and projects the soul beyond time. The sexual ecstasy of which Lingis speaks expresses the same idea. Religion knows this: Saint Catherine of Siena, drinking

9 Simone Weil, *La Pesanteur et la grâce* (Plon, 2004 [1947]), 181.

10 Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions* (Univ. of California Press, 2000), 149.

a cup of the pus issuing from her patient's sores to subdue her own flesh in an *imitatio christi*, knows it. Her ecstasy in this moment is of a piece with the ecstasy of the lover who delights in his or her lover's bodily secretions.

Auden's poem is entitled 'Lullaby'. Lullabies are for children and they help them go to sleep. Auden sees the tenderness of which he is capable as dependent upon the fact that his lover was once an infant. Would two adults ever be as tender to each other as Auden is to his lover and as Berger is to his if we had never been infants?

When we sleep, we are enclosed in our humanity. We are innocent. Our humanity, that is, shows up as innocent when we sleep. Sleep is therefore hope for us, the absence of sleep, a curse. Emil Cioran says that he became a philosopher as a result of insomnia. Man, he says, is the only animal that cannot sleep when it wants to. There is no hope in Cioran's philosophy, which is but an extended round of reflection on human folly and fanaticism.

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Michael McGhee:

Philosophy is also conversation, and what matters beyond all else here is demeanour, how we listen, how we speak or write, not seeking dominance, not indifferent to the well-being of the other, but encouraging inwardness, a friendly, even 'erotic' spirit, and we have to learn when thinking can be shared, when its communication can only be indirect, and when we have to stay silent.<sup>11</sup>

This is what I am trying to remember here.

(And I am trying to remember it even though I have hoped to learn, sought to learn, so much from voices shrill, nagging, violent: those of Nietzsche, Kierkegaard and others. I am not sure what to do with that thought, that fact, here.)

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"Sight is free and sight is irresponsible", wrote Gabriel Josipovici.<sup>12</sup> But to touch entangles, compromises us, makes things irrevocable. This is one rea-

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<sup>11</sup> McGhee, *Transformations of Mind*, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Gabriel Josipovici, *Touch* (Yale Univ. Press, 1996), 9.

son why Berger finds hope in his vision of a place where he is phosphate of calcium. He is able there to *touch* the woman he loves, and this offers consolation, hope. But it is also because it is in a particular place: “What reconciles me to my own death more than anything else is the image of a place”, he says. This place is sacred because it is where he touches his beloved. It is where he can touch his beloved because it is sacred. We move in such sacred places and think they are just spaces. All our movements are influenced, inflected, moulded, set in train, hampered by the material environment in which we exist, through which we pass and which offer the experience of the sacred to us. — As I sit here writing, I look out of the window. It is bitterly cold outside and snowing. Some boys are walking home from school. They break into a run, hide behind parked cars, collect snow, mould it into balls and throw them at each other, push each other into piles of snow on the pavement, drag their hands through the snow across car windows: released from the confines of self-control in the school, they are free, energy coursing through them, alive with the sense that it is Friday afternoon and tomorrow and the day after there is no school, they can laze about in bed, eat their fill at breakfast, go back to bed, lark around at the shops, chat endlessly with their girlfriends, create mischief, be cocky... These are sacred moments in a life, all the more so since not known as such, and they are as they are because these boys’ bodies are out there in the world, exposed, they flex their muscles in finding out who they are, feel life in their bones and hair... The snow, today, tomorrow, makes their world and who they are. This is their version, at this moment in life, of Berger’s holding his beloved’s breasts and listening to the piano. This is their hope. In their love of the world, at this time and place, they may one day find the roots of a religious hope for life, unnamed.

E.J. Carr’s novel *A Month in the Country* names this sacred moment. It does so with sunshine, rather than with the snow. Tom Birkin, badly damaged by the Great War, spends the summer in Oxgodby, removing the white-washed surface of a mediaeval wall painting to reveal a scene of the Last Judgement. It is a summer of bliss, fleeting, glorious, filled with longing for a woman who will never be his and for a life among these people of the village which can never be his life.

If I’d stayed there, would I always have been happy? No, I suppose not. People move away, grow older, die, and the bright belief that there will be

another marvellous thing around each corner fades. It is now or never; we must snatch at happiness as it flies.<sup>13</sup>

This is what he learns. And this:

We can ask and ask but we can't have again what once seemed ours for ever—the way things looked, that church alone in the fields, a bed on a belfry floor [where he slept], a remembered voice, the touch of a hand, a loved face. They've gone and you can only wait for the pain to pass.<sup>14</sup>

You can know this and still not have learnt it. When you have learnt it, you know that life will never be the same again. You can resent life because of this knowledge, hope that somehow it is all mistaken or that it can be made good in some continuation of this existence after death, or you can see the hope for yourself and others in the reverence, perhaps religious, that Birkin finds here. — Birkin hates institutional religion. There was no God in the trenches and there is no God beyond them. He has seen things no human being should see. Why call his attitude religious? Just this: 'religion' comes perhaps from the Latin *relegere* 'to go through again' from *legere* read, so 'to read again'; or perhaps from *religare*, 'to bind fast'. Birkin finds a way to re-read the world and be bound to it, he consecrates himself to the world and finds that it is worth living in. If anyone knows the limitlessness of evil and indifference it is Birkin. He has the right to find the possibility of the sacred in a world abandoned by God. He has a right to this hope.

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Pierre Bonnard painted many canvases of his wife, Marthe. Marthe suffered from mental afflictions that led her to an obsession with washing. Bonnard painted her washing on countless occasions: soaking herself in water, getting out of or into the bath, drying herself etc. He also painted numerous domestic interiors and views of his garden in the south of France. His main painterly interest was colour; the main interest of his life was Marthe.

Not that he would have recognised the distinction.

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13 E. J. Carr, *A Month in the Country* (Penguin, 2000 [1980]), 65.

14 Carr, *A Month in the Country*, 85.



Bonnard is my favourite painter. He is not the greatest painter, not by a long way, not least because his vision of life is in some ways narrow. But his sense of colour and of the absolute importance of colour in life is of the first order.

I trace, perhaps erroneously, but certainly ineluctably, the intense ecstasy I feel in front of his canvases to their being everything that the interiors of my childhood were not. In Bonnard, rooms are filled with light and open onto gardens and landscapes of plants, trees, flowers, lawns, and everywhere there is colour, green, red, purple, blue, white, yellow, ochre, azure, colours which vibrate in these paintings with the possibility of release, of freedom, of fulfilment. His wife, Marthe, is often there in these rooms, frequently nude, usually washing herself, lying in the bath, utterly absorbed in herself and yet at one with the space, overflowing into it, absorbed by it.

When I look at Bonnard's canvases I feel hope. You will have something like this in your life, something that will convince you that the world is not simply a random collection of disjointed objects, most of them ugly, dirty or squalid. You may not have noticed your need of such things because the world does not strike you as being as shabby as it does me. But that just means that there are more things in the face of which you find hope. For no one could deny the utterly second-rate features of large parts of the world.

If you do not have something like that which I have in Bonnard your life will be correspondingly deprived of hope. Look for it if you do not have it. "The natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure, but from hope to hope", said Samuel Johnson in one of his *Rambler* essays. To live without hope is to die.

I am following Camus. Yet Camus says one must live without hope. What he means by hope is hope in a life after this. I am saying that the religious attitude does not need the hope of life after death. Indeed, it is better off without it (Simone Weil). Camus' attitude, in his early essays written in the mid-1930s, is that of one of the most lyrical absorption in the material world, a sense of the body, his body, as being at one with the sky, sun, wind, water, and there are gods everywhere. It is of a sacral world, enchanted (as Max Weber thought the world *entzaubert*, de-magicked, disenchanting), to be grasped and loved. How could *loving* the world not be religious when virtually everything in it invites one, goads one, to the opposite? Hence, says Camus: "There

is no love of life without despair about life.”<sup>15</sup> There are very few who *love* the world, and institutional religion cuts entirely crosswise over those who do.

In the spring, Tipasa is inhabited by the gods and the gods speak in the sun and the scent of absinthe leaves, in the sea with its silver armour, in the raw blue sky, the ruins covered with flowers, and the great bubbles of light among the piles of stone.<sup>16</sup>

This is from Camus’ essay *Noces à Tipasa*: Camus consecrates himself to the world, here, as one might to the man or woman one loves. Philosophy has not understood well enough that the manner in which one expresses one’s love is central to the constituting it. The lyricism of Camus’ expression is not extraneous to what he feels.

It has been said that Camus’ thoughts here are ‘subjective.’ John Weightman:

Sometimes Camus expresses this solar paganism in impressionistic or rhetorical prose. At other times, he handles it more intellectually and ironically. In either case, his treatment is very subjective. It may be enjoyed, but can hardly be fully accepted, by readers who have had to live their lives many hundreds of miles away from the Mediterranean.<sup>17</sup>

This is unhelpful. It does not matter if his view about the sun cannot be fully accepted. The point is to see what he means and find something in your life that can play the role there that the sun played in his life. Camus invites us to find the gods in our own life. One must never forget that some lead lives of misery in which the gods will never find a place, let alone a home. It would be thoughtless and complacent to forget that. But it hardly follows that one should not speak as Camus does.

Nietzsche, perhaps an influence on Camus here, as elsewhere, says this:

Hope.—Pandora brought the box containing evils and opened it. It was the gift of the gods to human beings, on the outside a beautiful, seductive gift, and called the ‘box of happiness.’ From it flew out all the evils, living, lively beings: from that time they roam around and do ill to human beings by day and night. One single evil did not slip out of the box...[in accord with] the will of Zeus....Human beings now have this box always in the house and are delighted at the treasure they have inside it...For they do not know that the box that Pandora brought is the box of evils and suppose the remaining evil to be greatest source of happiness: hope. Zeus did not want human beings,

15 Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, ed. Philip Thody (Vintage, 1970 [1958]), 13.

16 Albert Camus, *Noces, (suivi de) L'été* (Gallimard, 2007 [1959]), 11.

17 John Weightman, “Lyrical and Critical Essays”, *New York Times*, December 15, 1968.

however tormented by other evils, to throw their life away but to carry on in order to face fresh torments. For this purpose he gives human beings hope, in truth the greatest of the evils for it prolongs human beings' wretchedness.<sup>18</sup>

Hope here is an evil. It is what binds us to the world. Life does not bind us to life. Without hope, life gives us nothing — or not enough — to carry on. Hope just guarantees the continuation of our misery. Nietzsche suffered from terrible ill health and certainly could not experience the joy of physical life as Camus did. Much of his philosophy, perhaps most of it, was an attempt to reconcile himself to the poverty of his experience in this way. He certainly sought something that could play for him the role that the sun played for Camus. He never found it, although he spent a lot of time trying to persuade himself he had.

Everything in Nietzsche speaks of a search for rapture. The *Übermensch*, the so-called higher types, the masters, Napoleon, Goethe...these speak of a longing for excess, for abandon, for the Dionysiac. The rest is secondary. Those who write on Nietzsche, especially those who write on him as if he were an analytic philosopher *manqué* — which is largely a way of domesticating Nietzsche —, often fail to see this, or fail to write about it if they see it, and, in missing this, they fail to see that it contains a critique of philosophy, a style of thinking from which Nietzsche sought to escape: it was, for him, too deeply imbued with the spirit of moderation and timidity. Philosophy held out little hope for him, for, despite his protestations, he sought hope everywhere, in default of which his whole idea of life affirmation would have come to nothing.

In this sense, there is no hope in philosophy. It finds rapture and excess dangerous in the face of its deep desire to subdue the world morally. This is what Nietzsche meant by saying that philosophers *came to a halt before morality*. It operates as a turnpike or sorting house for moral seriousness. Yet no philosopher has been more morally serious than Nietzsche. Morality for him meant: I stake everything I am on finding out who I am, refusing to suppress the recalcitrant self — the fascination with violence, the horror of mediocrity, the contempt and disgust, the endless waves of disturbing emotion, passion, affect — without giving these their due, owning them, letting them speak or find their voice. The moral seriousness he condemned is that form of it that

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18 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Menschliches, Allzumenschliches I". In *Kritische Studienausgabe Band 2*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzini Montinari, 2nd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1988 [1878]), §71.

wishes, not to *place* these excesses of life, since they *must* be placed, but to *rush past* such things and to get elsewhere, before they are understood, before they can teach us who we are.

Religion, as Nietzsche knew, sees things differently. How could Christianity not, with its image of Jesus on the cross? The saints and mystics with their rapture, their dark night of the soul, their self-flagellation and self-discipline, their subduing of the flesh, their limitless love of life so close to, feeding from, a limitless scorn for life, all the blood, all the tears: none of this can be contained in philosophy. Nietzsche found it all contrary to his taste, as did Hume in a different way, it was all too hysterical and frenetic. Moreover, it will not love things in their particularity. Weil's sense that the eternal is so because transient shows up the hysteria of the saints, their incapacity to accept that this life is all we have. Berger's ecstasy is a lesson, so much more delicate, subtle.

I am saying this: the *energy* for life, the energy that binds us to life, is the energy of rapture; and the rapture can be that of Dionysus or of art or of the sunshine or holding one's beloved. And much else. In all cases, it is fleeting, transient. It is folded into, enclosed in, loss and vulnerability. Were it not, it could not be the rapture it is. This rapture is always religious because it expresses the sacred. It consecrates itself to particularity. This consecration is hope.

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Those philosophers who do not scorn this idea — probably most of them, these days — think that philosophy can provide a kind of therapy; that is, hope. This is Pierre Hadot's view and he seeks to connect some modern philosophy — Nietzsche in particular — with the ancient schools that offered an education of the soul to help us make better sense of our anger or fear of death and the like, and reduce these.

Can philosophy offer such hope? I have said that it refuses rapture. But might its capacity to dissect and analyse be its strength? Is it not able to bring our emotional life into better order and *teach* us? Can it not help us with our pathologies of emotion?

“Philosophy triumphs easily over evils past and evils to come. But present evils triumph over philosophy.”<sup>19</sup> Who, thinking about these things, could fail to be haunted by La Rochefoucauld’s *aperçu*?

If you spend years reading philosophy and seek to think honestly about your life and try to bring philosophy into connection with it — it is hard to think there is no help, no hope, to be had from philosophy. But La Rochefoucauld does not say there is no hope. He says there is no hope in the moment when you really need it, that is, when you are suffering, suffering from the world, or from yourself, or from both. The only help concerns the aftermath and with what will come.

Perhaps this is what La Rochefoucauld wants to say: if you think philosophy can help you with present ills this is because you suppose it has given you something *powerful*. But to think that is to fail to understand human vulnerability and weakness. You cannot know how you will cope with suffering until you are faced with it. And, if you face it well, then you will know this to be utterly unexpected, given our fragility, a matter of *luck* — and thus not of your having been taught anything by philosophy. La Rochefoucauld says: philosophy has only human weakness to teach. If you think it teaches strength, you have betrayed philosophy. The depth philosophy has to offer is its own weakness and its own knowledge of weakness.

Philosophy is in this way *placed* by life. Those who are suspicious of philosophy, of philosophers, are right, if their suspicion is as I have tried to describe it. From this point of view, philosophy must leave itself open to repudiation. It rarely does so, indeed, is often hostile to those who would repudiate it in this way. Its gesture of aggression is not worthy of it, but has accompanied it from its beginnings, despite its better possibilities.

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Berger said that in the eighteenth century questions opened idly like doors into gardens. Now they do not. What does this mean?

It means Auschwitz. It is always said that nothing is the same after Auschwitz as before. It is always said that moral thinking and experience has been irrevocably changed by Auschwitz. But no one believes it. As always in

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19 La Rochefoucauld, *Maximes* (Garnier-Flammarion, 1977 [1659]), no.22

human life, when we say that everything has changed we find that it goes on as normal. Man is the complacent animal.

Berger says: after Auschwitz, we do not have the right to think in terms of gardens with doors that open *idly* onto them: gardens are enclosed spaces and doors that open idly onto them gives a sense of *ease*. Our questions are no longer enclosed and they cannot evoke ease.

We have to be careful about the questions we ask. The hope of philosophy is that it will help us ask better questions or know when to desist from questioning. Usually it betrays this hope. It does this because it forgets its own connection with poetry. ("True philosophy is written in the language of poetry."<sup>20</sup> McGhee, discussing Wittgenstein. I have always felt this. But I know that there are plenty of philosophers, and many I admire and respect, who do not so much disagree with this as express a total bafflement at what it could mean. This is one place where one sees that philosophers are less in disagreement about what philosophy is than they are *confused*, do not understand what they do.) Poetry, as Berger says, finds its origin in prayer. Philosophy can be prayer and then it must speak of suffering (though not only of suffering) in the hope that its words will be heard. Philosophy as prayer and philosophy in the subjunctive: these are two sides of the same coin, as Kierkegaard understood so well, because they put into question the speaker and deliver his or her subjectivity over to the hope of a hearing, the hope that this suffering can be heard.

A question philosophy does not ask often enough: How is it possible to be at home in a world where Auschwitz has taken place? One can have this sense: I do not want to exist in a world where such things happen, do not want to be part of such a world. It is not that such things *ought* not to happen. It is that they *cannot* happen. They are impossible. But they happen nonetheless.

In one of his essays, Alphonso Lingis speaks of awakenings: suddenly I see something, hear something, and am stopped in my tracks. I am shaken out of my complacent absorption.

While reading on the porch, to wake up to a hummingbird sizzling in the sheets of sunlight. To wake up to the grain of the old wood of the porch railing, enigmatic as a fossil of some long-extinct reptile...Awakening is proud and hopeful. The interruption of continuity makes possible the leap,

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20 McGhee, *Transformations of Mind*, 83.

with all the forces of the present, into what is ahead. It makes possible hope, the awaiting what cannot reasonably be expected.<sup>21</sup>

The world is filled with such possibilities. We usually pay insufficient attention to them. They give hope: the hope that one can be at home in the world. But if that hope is not to be mere indifference, it has to remember how surprising it is. No one can reasonably expect to be at home in the world after Auschwitz. Only our bluntness tells us otherwise.

Richard Swinburne, considering the unspeakable quantity of evil in the world, wonders whether God could possibly “have allowed Hiroshima, the Holocaust, the Lisbon earthquake, or the Black Death...With the objection that, if there is a God, he has overdone it, I feel *considerable initial sympathy*”.<sup>22</sup> But Swinburne goes on to argue that there are good reasons why God would have allowed these things anyway. His reasons are of little interest compared to his unease with what he is doing. Does he wish to reassure the reader that he is, after all, not so blunt on account of his considerable initial sympathy? If so, one might wonder whether offering a reply that makes bluntness into an argument really does reassure. It might be thought to make things worse. More importantly, Swinburne’s refusal to stay with his initial sympathy, to linger over it, is likely to give one a sense of desperation, to strip one of hope. He wants us to *forget* how surprising it is that we can feel at home in the world, by turning hope into conviction, conviction supplied by philosophical argument. The argument betrays hope, it betrays the victims and it betrays those who thought that philosophy could offer something to us in the confusions of life. Swinburne mistakes where to find strength in philosophy: it will come only if philosophy is able to find its own limits and learn when it has nothing to say. Swinburne’s is, contrary to what he thinks, a counsel of despair, not hope.

“Be not too hasty...to trust or to admire the teachers of morality: they discourse like angels, but live like men,”<sup>23</sup> wrote Samuel Johnson.

How do you know when you are speaking like an angel? In truth, neither Swinburne’s considerable initial sympathy nor his argument is spoken with the voice of a man. Initial sympathy, however considerable, is fatuous in the face of the Holocaust and the rest, and that it is so is shown by Swinburne’s ease

21 Alphonso Lingis, *Dangerous Emotions*, 105–6.

22 Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Clarendon Press, 2004), 263.

23 Samuel Johnson, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (Penguin, 1985 [1759]), 179.

in wanting to set it aside, even if the argument to do so means he has to go through some twists and turns. There is no such thing as initial sympathy with the victims of the Holocaust. If that is what you think you have, you have no understanding of the issue at all. You might be haunted or horrified, but not possessed of some initial sympathy, however considerable.

Am I being unfair? Swinburne said he had sympathy with a certain objection. How can he be accused of misunderstanding the nature of sympathy with the victims? But my point is that sympathy with the objection cannot be sealed off from sympathy with the victims. Swinburne could not, would not, italicise his initial sympathy unless this were so. The objection that God has 'overdone it' is a call to seriousness about sympathy with the victims, not simply a point about a some kind of mistake in reasoning. Otherwise, Swinburne would simply not be uncomfortable in the way he clearly is.

It is easy to forget, when writing and thinking about such things, McGhee's comment. How could one encourage inwardness in Swinburne or in those many other philosophers who speak about such things in a similar tone? I do not know. I feel it to be an intense failure on my part that I do not know. That is a failure of my inwardness, which unfits me, on my own understanding, for philosophy. The only hope is that the inadequacy is not total.

Or is my anger part of the inwardness I seek? I do not know.

How do you know, I asked, when you are speaking as an angel? Do angels get angry? Or is that a mark of a man, a woman, a human being? Perhaps speaking as a man, rather than an angel, means one runs a special risk of anger. But, so far as I can see, judging by his book, McGhee is able to avoid it, except such anger as directed to himself.

My feeling that philosophy contains so little hope is expressed by my sense that this question is not taken seriously, is not raised, by nearly enough philosophers. Sometimes philosophy appears as a massive conspiracy for the denial of the human. The appeal of that stance has not been adequately measured in the subject because the question is not considered a real or live one from the first.



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Christianity is a system, a *whole* view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole: nothing necessary remains in one's hands.<sup>24</sup>

This is Nietzsche's verdict. It would be foolish to claim that one cannot see why he says this. It would also be foolish to deny that there are still those who find hope in this whole system. But I have been suggesting that there are those for whom religion — that is, Christianity — is more what Philip Larkin suggested it was: a 'vast moth-eaten musical brocade'. Larkin's line captures the sense of there being something still of value in Christianity, as Nietzsche's thought does not. But Christianity has always been a divided religion, torn between the affirmation of the world as something good and a rejection of materiality as a distraction from God.

In the same poem, Larkin speaks of 'all the uncaring/Intricate rented world'. The hope of religion, for religion, is that be capable, as Berger was, of loving such a world. That is not something that any system can provide; it is something it is easy to think one is doing when one is not. And the only place one can see it will be, in the end, in a life that is testimony to that possibility.

What is crucial here is the *spirit* that animates a life. Seeing that spirit in another provides hope, because it shows it to be a genuine human possibility. I have met many who call themselves Christians in whom there is no such spirit; and others who would reject any claim that they are Christians, or in any sense religious, and in whom such a spirit is alive.

The key here, I have been trying to say, is, as Auden has it, to '[f]ind the mortal world enough'. There is a spirit in some people which manifests their capacity to acknowledge that this is a rented world and that that is enough. 'Rented' means not simply that we are here temporarily and that all by which we are surrounded is not ours. 'Rented' evokes 'to rend' and this world is rent. To find it enough is to know what it can give and not to ask more.

Robert Nozick said<sup>25</sup> once that Auschwitz was the second fall of man and that we human beings had now lost the right to exist — it would not be a

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24 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Götzen-Dämmerung". In *Kritische Studienausgabe Band 6*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzini Montinari, (De Gruyter, 1988 [1889]), §5.

25 Robert Nozick, *The Examined Life* (Simon & Schuster, 1990), 239.

tragedy if there were no longer human beings. Whether or not Auschwitz was unprecedented in its barbarity, it *seals* our knowledge of what we are.

Nozick's thought makes us wonder whether we have the *right* to find the world enough. When Pascal said that '*Jésus sera en agonie jusqu'à la fin du monde. Il ne faut pas dormir pendant ce temps-là*',<sup>26</sup> ['Jesus will be in the throes of death until the end of the world. We must not sleep during this whole time.'] we see him stripping Jesus of his redemptive work and making of him nothing more than an image of human misery. For Pascal, in that moment at least, we have no right to find the world enough. Here, and elsewhere, Pascal expresses that side of Christianity that can only repudiate the world in its totality. His vision here is one of perfect hopelessness.

But if Christianity is, however moth-eaten, still something that, in its *interstices*, offers hope, as I have been suggesting it can, then it can only be by turning towards the world. Anyone who genuinely felt he or she had no right to find the world enough would be in such a state of wretchedness that his or her mind would blank at the glare, to borrow again from Larkin. This, indeed, was what happened to Pascal. There would be a price to pay for such an attitude, a price that Pascal was willing to pay, but, if one does not pay, the attitude becomes an affectation. Virtually all of us close ourselves to the issue to which Pascal was so alive, and it is no doubt better that we do. We cannot open ourselves to it with our whole being — assuming one can know what one's whole being is — but to ignore it totally would be simply to reflect the complacency of our world.

McGhee said that "we have to learn when thinking can be shared, when its communication can only be indirect, and when we have to stay silent". But how can you know whether thinking can be shared unless you hazard the sharing? I have shared some thoughts here that are — or shared them in a way, in a tone, that is — uncharacteristic of much philosophical conversation in the English-speaking world. I have tried not to give in to the anxiety that would act as a form of self-censure and forbid the hazard. If I have a hope for philosophy it is that it could find space for such a working out of anxiety.

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26 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Gérard Ferreyrolles (Librairie Générale Française, 2011 [1670]), 575.

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