



Of First and Last Things

Friedrich Nietzsche

1

Chemistry of the Notions and the Feelings.—Philosophical problems, in almost all their aspects, present themselves in the same interrogative formula now that they did two thousand years ago: how can a thing develop out of its antithesis? for example, the reasonable from the non-reasonable, the animate from the inanimate, the logical from the illogical, altruism from egoism, disinterestedness from greed, truth from error? The metaphysical philosophy formerly steered itself clear of this difficulty to such extent as to repudiate the evolution of one thing from another and to assign a miraculous origin to what it deemed highest and best, due to the very nature and being of the “thing-in-itself.” The historical philosophy, on the other hand, which can no longer be viewed apart from physical science, the youngest of all philosophical methods, discovered experimentally (and its results will probably always be the same) that there is no antithesis whatever, except in the usual exaggerations of popular or metaphysical comprehension,[20] and that an error of the reason is at the bottom of such contradiction. According to its explanation, there is, strictly speaking, neither unselfish conduct, nor a wholly disinterested point of view. Both are simply sublimations in which the basic element seems almost evaporated and betrays its presence only to the keenest observation. All that we need and that could possibly be given us in the present state of development of the sciences, is a chemistry of the moral, religious, aesthetic conceptions and feeling, as well as of those emotions which we experience in the affairs, great and small, of society and civilization, and which we are sensible of even in solitude. But what if this chemistry established the fact that, even in *its* domain, the most magnificent results were attained with the basest and most despised ingredients? Would many feel disposed to continue such investigations? Mankind loves to put by the questions of its origin and beginning: must one not be almost inhuman in order to follow the opposite course?

2

The Traditional Error of Philosophers.—All philosophers make the common mistake of taking contemporary man as their starting point and of trying, through an analysis of him, to[21] reach a conclusion. “Man” involuntarily presents himself to them as an aeterna veritas as a passive element in every hurly-burly, as a fixed standard of things. Yet everything uttered by the philosopher on the subject of man is, in the last resort, nothing more than a piece of testimony concerning man during a very limited period of time. Lack of the historical sense is the traditional defect in all philosophers. Many innocently take man in his most childish state as fashioned through the influence of certain religious and even of certain political developments,

as the permanent form under which man must be viewed. They will not learn that man has evolved, that the intellectual faculty itself is an evolution, whereas some philosophers make the whole cosmos out of this intellectual faculty. But everything essential in human evolution took place aeons ago, long before the four thousand years or so of which we know anything: during these man may not have changed very much. However, the philosopher ascribes “instinct” to contemporary man and assumes that this is one of the unalterable facts regarding man himself, and hence affords a clue to the understanding of the universe in general. The whole teleology is so planned that man during the last four thousand years shall be spoken of as a being existing [22] from all eternity, and with reference to whom everything in the cosmos from its very inception is naturally ordered. Yet everything evolved: there are no eternal facts as there are no absolute truths. Accordingly, historical philosophising is henceforth indispensable, and with it honesty of judgment.

3

Appreciation of Simple Truths.—It is the characteristic of an advanced civilization to set a higher value upon little, simple truths, ascertained by scientific method, than upon the pleasing and magnificent errors originating in metaphysical and æsthetical epochs and peoples. To begin with, the former are spoken of with contempt as if there could be no question of comparison respecting them, so rigid, homely, prosaic and even discouraging is the aspect of the first, while so beautiful, decorative, intoxicating and perhaps beatific appear the last named. Nevertheless, the hardwon, the certain, the lasting and, therefore, the fertile in new knowledge, is the higher; to hold fast to it is manly and evinces courage, directness, endurance. And not only individual men but all mankind will by degrees be uplifted to this manliness when they are finally habituated to the proper appreciation of tenable, [23] enduring knowledge and have lost all faith in inspiration and in the miraculous revelation of truth. The reverers of forms, indeed, with their standards of beauty and taste, may have good reason to laugh when the appreciation of little truths and the scientific spirit begin to prevail, but that will be only because their eyes are not yet opened to the charm of the utmost simplicity of form or because men though reared in the rightly appreciative spirit, will still not be fully permeated by it, so that they continue unwittingly imitating ancient forms (and that ill enough, as anybody does who no longer feels any interest in a thing). Formerly the mind was not brought into play through the medium of exact thought. Its serious business lay in the working out of forms and symbols. That has now changed. Any seriousness in symbolism is at present the indication of a deficient education. As our very acts become more intellectual, our tendencies more rational, and our judgment, for example, as to what seems reasonable, is very different from what it was a hundred years ago: so the forms of our lives grow ever more intellectual and, to the old fashioned eye, perhaps, uglier, but only because it cannot see that the richness of inner, rational beauty always spreads and deepens, and that the inner, rational aspect of all things should now be of more consequence [24] to us than the most beautiful externality and the most exquisite limning....

4

Astrology and the Like.—It is presumable that the objects of the religious, moral, aesthetic and logical notions pertain simply to the superficialities of things, although man flatters himself with the thought that here at least he is getting to the heart of the cosmos. He deceives himself because these things have power to make him so happy and so wretched, and so he evinces,

in this respect, the same conceit that characterises astrology. Astrology presupposes that the heavenly bodies are regulated in their movements in harmony with the destiny of mortals: the moral man presupposes that that which concerns himself most nearly must also be the heart and soul of things.

5

Misconception of Dreams.—In the dream, mankind, in epochs of crude primitive civilization, thought they were introduced to a second, substantial world: here we have the source of all metaphysic. Without the dream, men would never have been incited to an analysis of the[25] world. Even the distinction between soul and body is wholly due to the primitive conception of the dream, as also the hypothesis of the embodied soul, whence the development of all superstition, and also, probably, the belief in god. “The dead still live: for they appear to the living in dreams.” So reasoned mankind at one time, and through many thousands of years.

6

The Scientific Spirit Prevails only Partially, not Wholly.—The specialized, minutest departments of science are dealt with purely objectively. But the general universal sciences, considered as a great, basic unity, posit the question—truly a very living question—: to what purpose? what is the use? Because of this reference to utility they are, as a whole, less impersonal than when looked at in their specialized aspects. Now in the case of philosophy, as forming the apex of the scientific pyramid, this question of the utility of knowledge is necessarily brought very conspicuously forward, so that every philosophy has, unconsciously, the air of ascribing the highest utility to itself. It is for this reason that all philosophies contain such a great amount of high flying metaphysic, and such a shrinking from the seeming insignificance of[26] the deliverances of physical science: for the significance of knowledge in relation to life must be made to appear as great as possible. This constitutes the antagonism between the specialties of science and philosophy. The latter aims, as art aims, at imparting to life and conduct the utmost depth and significance: in the former mere knowledge is sought and nothing else—whatever else be incidentally obtained. Heretofore there has never been a philosophical system in which philosophy itself was not made the apologist of knowledge [in the abstract]. On this point, at least, each is optimistic and insists that to knowledge the highest utility must be ascribed. They are all under the tyranny of logic, which is, from its very nature, optimism.

7

The Discordant Element in Science.—Philosophy severed itself from science when it put the question: what is that knowledge of the world and of life through which mankind may be made happiest? This happened when the Socratic school arose: with the standpoint of *happiness* the arteries of investigating science were compressed too tightly to permit of any circulation of the blood—and are so compressed to-day.

8

Pneumatic Explanation of Nature.—Metaphysic reads the message of nature as if it were written purely pneumatically, as the church and its learned ones formerly did where the bible

was concerned. It requires a great deal of expertness to apply to nature the same strict science of interpretation that the philologists have devised for all literature, and to apply it for the purpose of a simple, direct interpretation of the message, and at the same time, not bring out a double meaning. But, as in the case of books and literature, errors of exposition are far from being completely eliminated, and vestiges of allegorical and mystical interpretations are still to be met with in the most cultivated circles, so where nature is concerned the case is—actually much worse.

9

Metaphysical World.—It is true, there may be a metaphysical world; the absolute possibility of it can scarcely be disputed. We see all things through the medium of the human head and we cannot well cut off this head: although there remains the question what part of the world would be left after it had been cut off. But that is a purely abstract scientific problem and one not much calculated to give men uneasiness: yet everything that has heretofore made metaphysical assumptions valuable, fearful or delightful to men, all that gave rise to them is passion, error and self deception: the worst systems of knowledge, not the best, pin their tenets of belief thereto. When such methods are once brought to view as the basis of all existing religions and metaphysics, they are already discredited. There always remains, however, the possibility already conceded: but nothing at all can be made out of that, to say not a word about letting happiness, salvation and life hang upon the threads spun from such a possibility. Accordingly, nothing could be predicated of the metaphysical world beyond the fact that it is an elsewhere, another sphere, inaccessible and incomprehensible to us: it would become a thing of negative properties. Even were the existence of such a world absolutely established, it would nevertheless remain incontrovertible that of all kinds of knowledge, knowledge of such a world would be of least consequence—of even less consequence than knowledge of the chemical analysis of water would be to a storm tossed mariner.

10

The Harmlessness of Metaphysic in the Future.—As soon as religion, art and ethics are so understood that a full comprehension of them can be gained without taking refuge in the postulates of metaphysical claptrap at any point in the line of reasoning, there will be a complete cessation of interest in the purely theoretical problem of the “thing in itself” and the “phenomenon.” For here, too, the same truth applies: in religion, art and ethics we are not concerned with the “essence of the cosmos” We are in the sphere of pure conception. No presentiment [or intuition] can carry us any further. With perfect tranquility the question of how our conception of the world could differ so sharply from the actual world as it is manifest to us, will be relegated to the physiological sciences and to the history of the evolution of ideas and organisms....

16

Phenomenon and Thing-in-Itself.—The philosophers are in the habit of placing themselves in front of life and experience—that which they call the world of phenomena—as if they were standing before a picture that is unrolled before them in its final completeness. This panorama, they think, must be studied in every detail in order to reach some conclusion regarding

the object represented by the picture. From effect, accordingly is deduced cause and from cause is deduced the unconditioned. This process is generally looked upon as affording the all sufficient explanation of the world of phenomena. On the other hand one must, (while putting the conception of the metaphysical distinctly forward as that of the unconditioned, and consequently of the unconditioning) absolutely deny any connection between the unconditioned (of the metaphysical world) and the world known to us: so that throughout phenomena there is no manifestation of the thing-in-itself, and getting from one to the other is out of the question. Thus is left quite ignored the circumstance that the picture—that which we now call life and experience—is a gradual evolution, is, indeed, still in process of evolution and for that reason should not be regarded as an enduring whole from which any conclusion as to its author (the all-sufficient reason) could be arrived at, or even pronounced out of the question. It is because we have for thousands of years looked into the world with moral, aesthetic, religious predispositions, with blind prejudice, passion or fear, and surfeited ourselves with indulgence in the follies of illogical thought, that the world has gradually become so wondrously motley, frightful, significant, soulful: it has taken on tints, but we have been the colorists: the human intellect, upon the foundation of human needs, of human passions, has reared all these “phenomena” and injected its own erroneous fundamental conceptions into things. Late, very late, the human intellect checks itself: and now the world of experience and the thing-in-itself seem to it so severed and so antithetical that it denies the possibility of one’s hinging upon the other—or else summons us to surrender our intellect, our personal will, to the secret and the awe-inspiring in order that thereby we may attain certainty of certainty hereafter. Again, there are those who have combined all the characteristic features of our world of phenomena—that is, the conception of the world which has been formed and inherited through a series of intellectual vagaries—and instead of holding the intellect responsible for it all, have pronounced the very nature of things accountable for the present very sinister aspect of the world, and preached annihilation of existence. Through all these views and opinions the toilsome, steady process of science (which now for the first time begins to celebrate its greatest triumph in the genesis of thought) will definitely work itself out, the result, being, perhaps, to the following effect: That which we now call the world is the result of a crowd of errors and fancies which gradually developed in the general evolution of organic nature, have grown together and been transmitted to us as the accumulated treasure of all the past—as the *treasure*, for whatever is worth anything in our humanity rests upon it. From this world of conception it is in the power of science to release us only to a slight extent—and this is all that could be wished—inasmuch as it cannot eradicate the influence of hereditary habits of feeling, but it can light up by degrees the stages of the development of that world of conception, and lift us, at least for a time, above the whole spectacle. Perhaps we may then perceive that the thing-in-itself is a meet subject for Homeric laughter: that it seemed so much, everything,^[41] indeed, and is really a void—void, that is to say, of meaning.

17

Metaphysical Explanation.—Man, when he is young, prizes metaphysical explanations, because they make him see matters of the highest import in things he found disagreeable or contemptible: and if he is not satisfied with himself, this feeling of dissatisfaction is soothed when he sees the most hidden world-problem or world-pain in that which he finds so displeasing in himself. To feel himself more irresponsible and at the same time to find things (Dinge) more interesting—that is to him the double benefit he owes to metaphysics. Later, indeed, he acquires

distrust of the whole metaphysical method of explaining things: he then perceives, perhaps, that those effects could have been attained just as well and more scientifically by another method: that physical and historical explanations would, at least, have given that feeling of freedom from personal responsibility just as well, while interest in life and its problems would be stimulated, perhaps, even more.

Friedrich Nietzsche. *Human, All Too Human*. Trans. Alexander Harvey. Chicago: Charles H. Kerr and Co., 1908.

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