

7th July 2013

Parmeneides, Consciousness and the Sense in Common

There is art in Philosophy and philosophy in art. I will repeat the first poem for syncopation and the others can be my punctuation. My reading has a structure involving repetition and is perhaps not only about *understanding* - more about feeling. John Colbeck once asked what it is we stand under? Certainly when philosophy really was philosophy at its birth and for a short while afterwards men did not sit in circles debating things¹. The point was not a logical outcome and *episteme* already introduced its end with Socrates elenchos. Categories without the realization of existential peace expanding in the center were an engine for doom if ever there was one.

It is more a case of building a nest in the poetry or text. I didn't understand much in Parmeneides poem for at least 3 years but I kept on, walking about and sitting about, looking at it every day – building a nest. Art and perhaps the best in philosophy relates more to poetry and less to prose. The greatest philosophers wrote in verse.

I invite you to hear Ibn Arabi's (1165 – 1240) poem²

A white-blazed gazelle

is an amazing sight,

red-dye signaling,

eyelids hinting,

Pasture between breastbones

and innards.

Wonder,

A garden among the flames!

My heart can take on

any form:

a meadow for gazelles,

a cloister for monks.

You will feel more of how this fits in, as we proceed.

One hears that Consciousness is a big subject for philosophers and scientists but (I hazard) most of them look in the wrong direction. That is all those who seek consciousness in the working of the brain cannot ever know it. Another thing I would say is that there is no mystery about consciousness and at least in some quarters it has been, and still is, well realized.

Richard Feynman, who was a great physicist, said: “consciousness is a singular for which there is no plural.” This is a great way to put it but I’m not sure what he did about this in a practical sense. We need to go into the practicality more than wordy analysis. I heard that Richard Feynman played the bongo drums.

It is as nearly true as anything can be that to begin to know what to do about consciousness or real philosophy, and that’s not necessarily mixed up with the scientific agenda, then you will need to have a definite, practical sense that you, as a being, are not the same thing as your body, brain or even mind.

To identify one-self with the thing-in-itself as self can be a great help as long as this is accompanied with the knowledge that this ‘self’ can and needs to be experienced. This flies in the face of logic but as countless mystics down the ages attest – it can be done. The-thing-in-itself has no characteristics including space and time and even location itself, and without these characteristics it is as Feynman suggests, “a singular that has no plural.” This is to reach the same conclusion as Shopenhauer had, who realized there cannot be many things-in-themselves but rather that there can only be one thing-in-itself.

I had lunch, the other day, with Tom Phillips who is quite a famous artist and he told me that he had had several experiences of leaving his body and looking down on it from up near the ceiling. I said that I had never experienced this but that my sister reported having such experiences. Such experiences make it obvious in the most practical sense imaginable, that we are not our bodies. This is a real way people know they are not their bodies but however one has the realization: knowing one is not a body is the essential beginning and prerequisite for individual existential progress and, if you will – philosophy. At least, in the sense which adheres to Philosophy in its original definition as an encounter with Sophya. She is the silence of silence who is not, of course: episteme (thinking type of categorizing). Rather *she* really is the original logic that brought unity and not differentiation. We must know we are not our body or our brain, gender or even our mind. We are definitely not our story. Ibn Arabi’s poem perfectly describes this... my heart can take on *any* form.

Consciousness is the only ‘thing,’ ...though of course we must ‘unsay’³ the substance in this word *thing* to get its use here. But if we can *nest* near its pointing at a more distant meaning it is the only *thing* never to have evolved. It involves no process or time and yet it is the fundamental stuff of the universe out of which everything else is an alteration. The most basic things that consciousness alters into are viewpoints, time and space. It is consciousness that puts time and space there as the most fundamental form of looking. And yet objective seeing has no points-from-which-to-view, it is both seer and seen. There are layer upon layer upon layer of alterations. A point-from-which-to-

view appears relatively early in the procession which *in* present-time as opposed to evolution supports the growth of forms and bodies.

The past is not a characteristic of existence. All memory occurs in present-time.

As the procession develops consciousness itself pervades all the layers both as traces and clusterings with different intensities in some regions and in organisms within and without all spaces, and throughout space. There is surely consciousness far beyond humans who are but its food and parts of the universe, we know, are far less conscious beings. Even a stone is but consciousness altered over and over again and may, one day, at least theoretically, be resurrected.

This is the first practical thing I want to tell you. Zosimuth of Panopolis said:

Just sit at home in the knowledge that there is one god and one technique. Don't allow yourself to be pulled here and there searching for god. Once you have succeeded in doing this you will have carried out the genuine transformation.⁴

Consciousness is the most liberated version of self. It is the 'seat of our awareness.' To use Empedocles' phrase.

We have a great many more than 5 senses. Empedocles talks about the senses which he calls 'palms' – *palamai* - being poured throughout peoples limbs. Some people access a few senses and others a great many but for most the senses are divided up and their impressions mostly don't land so as to find themselves joined up on the single seat of our awareness which is consciousness itself. Awareness of awareness is native state. The seat of our awareness. It has been called self-remembering. The mixtures of being with a body and being without a body generate senses beyond the more ordinary ones. Some people make the mistake of thinking we are conscious in the normal waking state but this divided up consciousness is best described as a state of waking sleep. When we forget ourselves, which is constantly, things seem to change and we have bumped into another sense and attached to its awareness and become identified with its impressions. These *bumpings* from sense to sense appear as motion and change. If you time how long you can really focus on the motion of a second hand without any intervening thought you may get an indication of how brief is the length of time you can self-remember.

Having sensed the terrain I want to juxtapose some other chunks. The best approach is to try to build a nest within these texts, rather than to invest too much, too soon, in understanding them. I live with Parmeneides poem for years. Philosophy of the kind Parmeneides, Empedocles or Pythagoras taught had nothing to do with men sitting in circles endlessly debating things. They may have *breathed* along with their teacher. It was Socrates who a few years later brought in the weaker elenchos of episteme to reduce the ego through argument, to zero. But the original way was through a direct encounter with *Sophya* and this was to take everything away in an engagement with the power in silence and a stilling of the mind. *Hezychia* in Greek was the method of *stilling* just as in Zosimus's advice to sit at home.

I am trying to make things practical. I quoted that fragment from Panopolis (modern Achmin) in southern Egypt, a place where the poetry of Empedocles was still cultivated as an active religion at least until 300CE. But Empedocles was also transported much further across the Middle East. He was known as the Shaikh of Shaikhs to Shiite Sufis in 13th Century Persia. But remember this practical advice from Zosimus of Panopolis in Southern Egypt.

Just sit at home in the knowledge that there is one god and one technique. Don't allow yourself to be pulled here and there searching for god. Once you have succeeded in doing this you will have carried out the genuine transformation.

I recognize two kinds of stillness. There is the stilling of the mind and the stilling of the body. The stilling of the mind requires the effort of the stilling of the body but the successful stilling of the body is fulfilled after stilling the mind. First the mind is brought into present-time and this is partial self-remembering then the body is brought into present-time.

To still the body requires sitting in iron. That is stillness in the battle with all of the bodies physical tensions, torpour and inherent sickness.

Ibn Arabi's poem again:

A white-blazed gazelle
is an amazing sight,
red-dye signaling,
eyelids hinting,

Pasture between breastbones
and innards.
Wonder,
A garden among the flames!

My heart can take on
any form:
a meadow for gazelles,

a cloister for monks,

I was surprised, just the other day, to link Michael Craig-Martin's Oak Tree with Ibn Arabi's heart poem but of course it's obvious. The Oak Tree piece is not currently on show at Tate Modern but it often is.

(An Oak Tree, Michael Craig-Martin)

Next to the glass of water on a little shelf is the following text:

Q. To begin with, could you describe this work?

A. Yes, of course. What I've done is change a glass of water into a full-grown oak tree without altering the accidents of the glass of water.

Q. The accidents?

A. Yes. The colour, feel, weight, size ...

Q. Do you mean that the glass of water is a symbol of an oak tree?

A. No. It's not a symbol. I've changed the physical substance of the glass of water into that of an oak tree.

Q. It looks like a glass of water.

A. Of course it does. I didn't change its appearance. But it's not a glass of water, it's an oak tree.

Q. Can you prove what you've claimed to have done?

A. Well, yes and no. I claim to have maintained the physical form of the glass of water and, as you can see, I have. However, as one normally looks for evidence of physical change in terms of altered form, no such proof exists.

Q. Haven't you simply called this glass of water an oak tree?

A. Absolutely not. It is not a glass of water anymore. I have changed its actual substance. It would no longer be accurate to call it a glass of water. One could call it anything one wished but that would not alter the fact that it is an oak tree.

Q. Isn't this just a case of the emperor's new clothes?

A. No. With the emperor's new clothes people claimed to see something that wasn't there because they felt they should. I would be very surprised if anyone told me they saw an oak tree.

Q. Was it difficult to effect the change?

A. No effort at all. But it took me years of work before I realized I could do it.

Q. When precisely did the glass of water become an oak tree?

A. When I put the water in the glass.

Q. Does this happen every time you fill a glass with water?

A. No, of course not. Only when I intend to change it into an oak tree.

Q. Then intention causes the change?

A. I would say it precipitates the change.

Q. You don't know how you do it?

A. It contradicts what I feel I know about cause and effect.

Michael says he felt around for quite some time before this piece took form and it has become, in a sense, the vehicle through which he most appreciates the surprise and even awe with which he finds himself in new circumstances or having done new things. But it seems to me that he is more concerned to depict the clutter in front of the silence than inhabit the source. I do not think we see the 'seat of our awareness' in his other paintings. Even in Parmeneides and Empedocles it is hard to find a straight description of arrival at the seat of our awareness but there is nothing indirect with Han Shan:

This comes from from: PARABOLA No. 24 p. 27

Han Shan (called Cold Mountain) was an 8th century Zen Buddhist who wrote⁵:

As one coming suddenly out of darkness, I perceived the full meaning of the doctrine of immutability and said: "Now I can believe that fundamentally all things neither come nor go." I got up from my meditation bed, prostrated myself before the Buddha shrine and did not have the perception of anything in motion. I lifted the blind and stood in front of the stone steps. Suddenly the wind blew through the trees in the courtyard and the air was filled with flying leaves which, however, looked motionless. I said to myself:

"This is the whirlwind which will destroy Mount Sumeru and which is permanently still." When I went to the back yard to make water, the urine seemed not to be running. I said: "That is why the river pours but does not flow." Thereafter all my doubts about life and death vanished.

So much for Heraclitus if we believe, which of course we should not, the out of context quotes philosophers love to repeatedly make about what he had to say about stepping into a river.

And so to complete the cycle with a poem by Ryonen:

Ryonen (1797 – 1853)

Sixty-six times have these eyes beheld the changing
scene of autumn

I have said enough about moonlight,

Ask no more.

Only listen to the voice of pines and cedars when no

wind stirs.

I will now read from Peter Kingsley's book Reality. These texts are all from the first part of his book, which is a commentary upon Parmeneides of Velia's Poem 'On Nature.'

¹ See In The Dark Places of Wisdom, Peter Kingsley

² See Michael Sells book Mystical Languages of Unsayings

³'Unsay' in Michael Sells sense

⁴ From a recording by Peter Kingsley

⁵ Via Peter Kingsley