

Life of the Mind According to Aimé Forest

Ovide Bastien



Life of the Mind

**According to Aimé
Forest**

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In memory of [Father Emmett 'Pops' Johns](#) – he passed away on January 13, 2018 – who reached out for decades to Montreal's homeless youth, adopting an attitude of non-judgmental and unconditional welcome, empathy and confidence

In memory of Father Benoît Garceau and all the other Oblates of Mary Immaculate who guided and trained me in my youth

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Other Books Published by Author

Chili: le coup divin, published by “Les Éditions du Jour” in September 1974, in Montreal, Canada. Republished on Amazon as an eBook in 2014 and in paperback in 2015.

Chile: el golpe divino, published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2017. It includes a new section, Epíloga 2017.

Chile: The Divine Coup, published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2017. It also includes a new section, Epilogue 2017.

CHILE: Underside of Economic Miracle, published as a class manual at Dawson College from 1995 to 2011. Updated and republished on Amazon as an eBook in 2014 and in paperback in 2015.

My 9/11 Awakening to America's Moral Crisis (Diary and Letters, Chile: 11 September 1973 Military Coup), published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2015.

Love or Money: What Makes the World Go Round? published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2015.

Cry of the Earth – Cry of the Poor, published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2015.

Globalization Under Attack, published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2017.

Carl R. Rogers' Crisis: Subjectivity vs. Objectivity, published on Amazon as an eBook and in paperback in 2018.

Conferences and Interview

To see the talk I gave on Chile during the Social Forum in Ottawa on 22 August 2014:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LJqi5bSLN0c>

Christ Dayo from the CHRY News Collective interviewed me in late September 2014. To listen to this half-hour radio interview on the Chilean Coup:

<https://www.mixcloud.com/discover/ovide-bastien/>

To see my 5-minute 2014 homage (mostly in French) to Sister Marie Denise Dubois, a woman who dedicated her life to the marginalized in Chile and Honduras:

Marie Denise Dubois ou l'autre visage de l'Église

To see the talk I gave on Chile – I was invited by the Egyptian Canadian Coalition for Democracy – during the World Social Forum in Montreal on 10 August 2016:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D2YsYG0lzVU> (The talk is in French)

Foreword

When I was preparing to become a priest and missionary fifty-two years ago – I was then 23 years old and living in Ottawa – I wrote two memoirs in view of my master's degree in philosophy. The first memoir was on the American psychotherapist Carl Rogers and the second one was on the French philosopher Aimé Forest.

To avoid the solitude often experienced by those writing theses, my fellow seminarian Léo Boudreau and I had agreed to study the same two authors for our memoirs. Each one of us would of course focus on a different aspect, but the fact of researching the same two authors would allow us the opportunity, we felt, to always have someone, besides our thesis director, with whom we could share what we were learning, including our doubts, our questions, etc. And someone who really had considerable knowledge about and interest in the subject of our thesis.

While writing our memoirs from September 1965 to May 1966, Leo and I lived with the Oblate priests and brothers who were managing the Résidence Sacré Cœur – a residence for high school students who were contemplating the priesthood – and also taking care of the Sacred Heart Parish Church located across the street.

Leo loved playing the guitar and singing – and he excelled in both – and we would often accompany students from the University of Ottawa in various events, mainly weekend retreats. Leo and I would also accompany the Oblate pastor of the Sacred Heart Parish, doing everything we could to liven up and animate the daily masses.

Today, with the hindsight that more than half a century allows me to have, I am very impressed by the fact that the worldviews underlying Aimé Forest's philosophical

approach and Carl Rogers' person-centered therapy and which are strikingly similar in fundamental respects, remain not only very relevant in 2018, but also, in my opinion, *urgently so*.

I am also very impressed by the fact that these two worldviews have much in common with the indigenous worldview, which many environmentalists – such as Naomi Klein and David Suzuki for example – are presently arguing we must adopt in order to cope with ever-more threatening climate change. Much in common also with the worldview that the renowned and recently deceased Catholic theologian Gregory Baum, who was one of the experts for the Vatican II reforms, argues we must adopt to bridge the gap between people of different religious beliefs. Much in common, finally, with the worldview that the world's most renowned protagonist of non-violence Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi argues we should adopt to address social justice and other basic issues.

In what follows – Part I – I will briefly point out why I consider that the worldview underlying Aimé Forest's philosophy has much in common with that of Carl Rogers' person-centered therapy, that of the indigenous, that of Gregory Baum, and that of Gandhi; I will explain why I consider it extremely important to continue advocating these common worldviews in 2018; and I will argue that these worldviews, to which I was exposed in my youth, have proven to be a blessing for me as an educator.

Secondly – Part II – I will reproduce the memoir that I wrote in winter 1966 on Aimé Forest. In this memoir I first presented Forest's conception of the nature of being, and then his views on the meaning and spirit of idealism and realism. I also pointed out the reasons for which Forest, though very respectful of the fundamental insights and truths highlighted by idealism, prefers realism as a basic philosophical approach.

Thirdly – Part III – I will reproduce a long personal reflection that I wrote in less than one week in January 1966, a reflection that represents my effort to put down on paper and clarify what then appeared to me as some of the most fundamental issues in philosophy: what it means to know, the difference between sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge, and the contributions of some of the world's greatest philosophers to the search for the unity and meaning of being.

This latter reflection, which is meditative and thus contains considerable repetition, was part of my diary and was not written in order to be published. To most readers, especially those who are not familiar with the history of philosophy, it undoubtedly will appear somewhat taxing and sometimes too repetitive.

Its value and interest originate, I believe, from the fact that *it is very personal, very sincere and passionate*, and reflects the kind of education many of us were receiving as future priests back in the 1960s.

This reflection also sheds light on the philosophical implications of the worldviews referred to above – that of Carl Rogers, Aimé Forest, Gandhi, Gregory Baum, and the indigenous – and, more fundamentally, on what remains for each and every one of us a forever unfinished task: the quest for the meaning of life and the universe.

Finally, I will reproduce – Part IV – a short reflection I wrote in 1999 on man's quest for meaning, with a special emphasis on the role played by the social sciences in this quest.

I would invite those readers who are interested in psychology and psychotherapy and thus would like to further explore Carl Rogers' person-centered approach and my analysis of the crisis he experienced on subjective knowledge versus objective or scientific knowledge, to

consult my book *Carl Rogers' Crisis – Subjectivity vs. Objectivity*. In this book I reproduce the thesis I wrote on Rogers in fall 1965, and in Epilogue 2018 I present additional elements of my philosophical critique of the way he attempted to resolve this crisis.

Part I – Aimé Forest's worldview: one we urgently need to adopt

Aimé Forest's main passion as a philosopher – I read most of his books and articles and several of his book reviews – consists in examining the nature of being, but, also and more importantly, *in exploring the attitude that one must adopt in order to be able to connect in depth to being*, to be one with being and to discover its fundamental unity and meaning. This happens, he argues, when one is able to meditatively focus on that which is fundamental in one's encounter with individual beings, that which allows one to touch what is *at once absolutely unique and absolutely universal* in both things and persons. When one is able to consent to being... (le consentement à l'être). Welcoming being with open arms, with confidence and benevolence, and experiencing what he calls the intuition of being.

Two experiences par excellence according to Forest that allows one to experience the intuition of being: that of beauty, in which there exists a kind of mystical correspondence or harmony between beholder and beholden; a thing of beauty is a joy forever (John Keats)! And that of love, in which the person loving and the person loved experience each other's absolute uniqueness – the discovery of the other in depth coinciding with the discovery of oneself in depth – but, *in and through that very same uniqueness of the other, also experience universality and totality*. You mean the whole world to me!...

In his books and articles Carl Rogers presents the worldview underlying his client-centered approach in therapy. He argues that the therapist must be congruent and empathic, and adopt an attitude of unconditional positive regard towards his client (To express this attitude of

unconditional positive regard, Rogers sometimes uses the term 'care'; however, he avoids using the word 'love' because of the superficial connotation this expression has taken in our culture). That in the therapeutic relationship one must be *client*-centered and not *theory*-centered. That when all this happens, both therapist and client will often live a kind of mystical experience akin to ecstasy. That when all this happens the client will learn to open up, to reconnect to deep emotions, to allow previously blocked experiences to enter the field of awareness, to reinterpret experiences that had been allowed to awareness but only with a distorted meaning, and to start evaluating all such experiences from his or her own locus of evaluation. And also and very importantly, start discovering the root cause of his or her problems, start finding solutions, and choose positive and very promising orientations.

Impact of Aimé Forest and Carl Rogers on my life as an educator

Both Forest and Rogers have had a profound impact on my entire life. In my teaching of philosophy for four years after I abandoned the idea of becoming a priest and left the seminary, and later in my teaching of economics from 1978 to 2010.

In 1993 I co-founded North South Studies, a social science profile at Dawson College that involves a considerable amount of extracurricular activities, including a one-month annual student field trip to Nicaragua.

The talking circles, especially those that take place during the field trip, represent the heart and soul of North South Studies. Carl Rogers' influence, as well as the various experiences of group dynamics that I had on weekend retreats with the young during my training in the seminary, certainly contributed to the establishment of talking circles

as a North South Studies tradition, one that continues to this very day.¹ For years each field trip to Nicaragua was preceded by a pre-trip weekend at my cottage located next to a lake in Entrelacs, in the Laurentian Mountains.

Students and teachers often live, in these talking circles, a kind of mystical experience akin to ecstasy, similar to what happens, according to Rogers, in the relationship between therapist and client.

I remember when, a mere three weeks before we were departing for Nicaragua, one of our student field trip participants had tried to commit suicide. All the participants knew about this but they had generously accepted that she nevertheless come on the trip, however challenging that may be, given that the psychotherapist who treated her had made that recommendation. Needless to say, the talking circles and bonds created on that trip were particularly profound, intense, and unforgettable.

For the course *Economic Development*, which I taught to North South Studies students for several years, I wrote a class manual [CHILE: Underside of Economic Miracle](#) that included a case study of Chile. The manual also included numerous excerpts of the diary and letters I wrote when I experienced the coup of 11 September 1973 and the first year that followed it. Aimé Forest's influence, a philosopher who, as Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, insisted that

¹ One of our North South students was indigenous. He was from the Maniwaki Indian reserve of Maniwaki. He was very accustomed to talking circles in his community and taught us how to use a small object – a small stick, a pencil, an eraser – to facilitate our communication. The person talking would hold the object and pass it on to another person when she or he was done talking. The golden rule: only the person holding the object was allowed to talk. All others were to listen in depth. Not search to contradict or disagree with the person talking, but search to be caring and empathic.

Another one of our students, Kahlil Baker, taught us group hugs, especially as a way of harmoniously ending our talking circles. In North South Studies, teachers tend to be very close to students, especially during field trips. Hugs are part and parcel of the North South Studies' tradition.

one connects to being primarily by relating in depth to individuals and not through categories, however scientific these may be, stands out loud and clear in this manual. In explaining why I chose to use a case study approach, I write:

“If the course is about developing nations, then why concentrate so much on only one of these? Why focus on Chile? Does knowledge of the many not provide a lot more than knowledge of the particular? Antoine de Saint-Exupéry emphasizes the importance of knowledge of the particular: “*L’important, c’est la rose*”.² In other words, what matters the most is how I connect to the world. I cannot obtain a good understanding of the world simply by categorizing things. The businessperson may reduce reality to profit opportunities. The power-thirsty ruler may reduce reality to subjects to be dominated. The scientist may see numbers and abstract categories wherever he or she looks. However, *I can really connect to the world, argues Saint-Exupéry, only when I can develop a relationship with someone in such a way that I am receptive to that person’s uniqueness. I can discover more about flowers in the world by relating in depth, with an attitude of openness and receptivity, to one single flower, than by trying to study all the flowers in the world through some particular abstract category.*”

Similar worldviews: Aimé Forest, Carl Rogers, Gregory Baum, Indigenous, Gandhi

While writing [*Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor*](#) in February 2016, I read and systematically analyzed Naomi Klein’s very impressive book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. Climate*. I also read and analyzed Pope Francis’ remarkable encyclical on the environment [*Praise Be To*](#)

² In English: “What matters is the rose”. See his book, *Le Petit Prince*, Editions Gallimard, 1946.

[*You*](#). An encyclical that the Canadian internationally renowned environmentalist David Suzuki found so touching and profound that he broke into tears when reading it.

Both Klein and Pope Francis argue, as most environmentalists do, that we must radically alter our worldview.

This same point had also been forcefully made by the United Nation's Bruntland Report in 1987 and by the renowned American environmentalist Bruce Rich in his 1994 book *Mortgaging the Earth: The World Bank, Environmental Impoverishment, and the Crisis of Development*. In the latter Rich asserts that the patron saint of the extractivist mindset is Francis Bacon (1561-1626), who, in the spirit of the ongoing Scientific Revolution, viewed nature, and indeed also human nature, as an object that could eventually become completely knowable and controllable. In this worldview, nature appears as some kind of global machine that man, through ever greater knowledge and manipulation, can subordinate to his own purposes.

Both Klein and Pope Francis argue that we should abandon the Bacon mindset and adopt the worldview of the indigenous. In other words *stop viewing nature as a thing to dominate and exploit, and see it instead as the source of all life and as a mother or sister*. What can save us from climate change, they argue, is going back to the indigenous worldview according to which we are one with nature. We must welcome nature, accept our dependence on it, consent to its rhythms and rules.

It is because of their worldview, argues Klein, that the indigenous are at the forefront of the many ongoing battles throughout the world to preserve the environment. A worldview that they have kept alive "in the face of the bulldozers of colonialism and corporate globalization",

leading the struggle “for the reproductive rights of the planet as a whole – for the decapitated mountains, the drowned valleys, the clear-cut forests, the fracked water tables, the strip-mined hillsides, the poisoned rivers, the ‘cancer’ villages”.

And Pope Francis, at the very beginning of his encyclical, quotes Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226) whose name he adopted. Saint Francis related to the planet earth as a sister or mother and spoke to plants and animals, treating them with awe, love, and respect, asserts Pope Francis.

On October 29, 2017 I chatted on the phone with Lise Labarre, a friend of mine who is a member of the religious community [Daughters of St. Paul](#).

“Yesterday I attended the funeral of [Gregory Baum](#). It was an amazingly beautiful funeral. You should have seen all the people who attended and paid tribute to him. Virtually all of the Christian left of Montreal was present in the Church of Saint-Pierre-Apôtre. Beautiful singing and moments of long, profound and very meaningful silence,” Lise told me.

In the minutes that followed our conversation I purchased Gregory Baum’s spiritual autobiography [The Oil Has Not Run Dry: The Story of My Theological Pathway](#). I devoured this book, which Baum published one year ago – he was then 93 years old, and read it in less than 24 hours.

Baum was a well-known theologian, a man of the intellectual stamina of other renowned theologians such as Karl Rahner and Hans Küng. Like that of the latter, his influence on the Vatican II reforms initiated in the Catholic Church by Pope John XXIII in 1962 was substantial.

Baum was a staunch promoter of ecumenism. Someone who constantly prioritized broad thinking, mutual respect,

and dialogue; who welcomed the contribution of intellectuals of all schools of thought. At a time when most in the Catholic Church held that outside of Catholicism there was no salvation, Baum argued that Jews, Protestants, Muslims, Hindus, and the indigenous need not convert to Catholicism to save their souls. When people of various creeds and worldviews learn to respect one another, he said, when they abandon the attitude – I am all right and you are all wrong! – and enter into dialogue with an attitude of benevolence and confidence, change occurs. Bonds develop and with them new openings, new insights, and ever-growing mutual respect. People discover that deep down more things unite than separate them.

Not surprisingly, Baum welcomed the nomination of Pope Francis with joy and relief. Similarly to Baum, Pope Francis also promotes ecumenism and argues that what is important is not the imposition on someone of a bulk of dogmas and rules, but rather putting into practice the main evangelical values: love, welcoming, and compassion. Prioritizing dogmas and rules, asserts Pope Francis, may in fact stand as a wall, an obstacle, between the Christian and the non-Christian, between a priest and his parishioners. It may represent the very contrary of evangelical love.

A young Catholic once asked Pope Francis, “What should I tell a university friend to whom I am very close but who is atheist? What should I say in order to change him, to convert him?” And Pope Francis replied: “The last thing you should do is tell him anything. You should merely try to be faithful to the Gospel. Should he one day ask you why you are behaving the way you are, then you can reply and leave the rest up to the Holy Spirit. (...) We are witnesses of the Gospel. Proselytism is not evangelical”.³

³ Papa Francesco: "Ho pianto per i rohingya. Volevano cacciarli dal palco, ma mi sono arrabbiato", Paolo Rodari, La Repubblica, December 2, 2017. My translation from the Italian.

On November 23, 2017 I attended the book-launching event of an old friend of mine, Dominique Boisvert. The book launching was for two books, one representing Dominique's spiritual autobiography *En quoi je crois: petit essai d'autobiographie spirituelle* (*What I Believe: A Short Spiritual Autobiography*)⁴ and the other titled *La nonviolence: une arme urgente et efficace* (*Non-Violence: An Urgent and Efficient Weapon*).⁵ While commenting the latter book, Dominique explained that according to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, the world's most outstanding promoter of non-violence, the latter term refers not only to the absence of violence in one's struggle for justice, but also and more importantly, to a global worldview. To describe non-violence, Gandhi generally used either the Sanskrit word 'satyagraha' (*the power of truth*) or the Sanskrit word 'ahimsa' (*refusal to harm all that is living*), two expressions whose meaning goes far beyond that of 'abstention from violence'.⁶

What I find truly amazing, when I look back at my life now that I am 75 years old, *is to realize just how much the five attitudes or worldviews I just mentioned above have in common.*

Carl Rogers argues basically that the quality of therapy depends *on the quality of the relationship that the psychotherapist manages to establish with the client.* Unconditional positive regard or caring, empathy,

⁴ Published by Novalis, 2017. The word 'crois' in French means to believe. When, however, it is written with an accent on the i 'crois', it means to grow. Dominique intentionally used an accent to symbolize the fact that his faith is not static, but constantly evolving and growing.

⁵ Écosociété, Montreal, 2017.

⁶ *La nonviolence: une arme urgente et efficace*, Écosociété, Montreal, 2017, p. 16.

acceptance, congruence, and deep faith in the person, the center and very heart of therapy: such is Rogers' basic philosophy or worldview. And successful therapy, explains Rogers, will mean that the client will become more personal, closer to his emotions and deep self, will learn to love and appreciate himself, be able to perceive the uniqueness and "thisness" of persons and situations, be able to relate in depth, become more flexible, more nuanced, and more creative.

Aimé Forest adopts a similar worldview but regarding not only persons but also all beings, all that exists. He insists on the importance of adopting an attitude of *universal and very deep welcoming towards being*, which he coins "consentement à l'être". The philosopher, in order to discover the unity and meaning of being, must adopt a contemplative or meditative approach. *Only such an approach, full of benevolence, empathy, and faith, will allow one to establish a profound relationship with persons and nature.* A relationship that will reveal, through the intuition of being, both the absolute uniqueness of each person and, at the same time, the absolute or universal present in each person, in each situation. A relationship that will allow the philosopher to participate in the creativity present in the evolution of the universe.

Environmentalists blame climate change, undoubtedly the most urgent and ominous threat to all life on earth, on the type of relationship that humans have established with nature. And not just with nature but also among themselves: slavery, colonialism, etc. Addressing climate change, they argue, calls for a new narrative, a new type of relationship. It calls for a relationship in which nature – including human nature – is not reduced to a mere input in the production process. *It calls for a new kind of rapport with the world, one in which the pursuit of having ever more is replaced by the pursuit of being ever more.* In

which the pursuit of having ever more is replaced by the pursuit of *relating* ever more. It means rediscovering the profound wisdom of the indigenous way of life where nature is viewed not as a mere input, something to be used and then discarded, *but as something sacred*,⁷ something living and whose reproductive rights must be respected; where nature is viewed as a person one relates to with respect and awe and nurtures, like a mother or a sister.

The basic worldview of the Catholic theologian Gregory Baum also lies in a new type of relationship. Before the Vatican II reforms, as noted above, Catholics generally believed that outside of the Catholic Church one was living in error and could not save one's soul. "Ecumenical dialogue is not a purely humanistic engagement with new information. It is a spiritual process that changes the self-perception of the partners. *The starting point is an act of love prompting us to be silent, to listen to others, to try to understand their aspirations, and to look at reality from their perspective*," asserts Baum.⁸

And Baum quotes the Austrian-born Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, someone who was also an inspiration for Carl Rogers:

"In his book *I and Thou*, Martin Buber shows that listening with empathy to 'the other' makes us aware of the mystery in 'the other' and enables us to perceive what is deepest in him or her – a recognition that changes us, the listener, and

⁷ Jonathan Watts, '[For us, the land is sacred': on the road with the defenders of the world's forests](#)', The Guardian, 2 December 2017. "In Paris, the indigenous leaders met the French ecology minister Nicolas Hulot – who moved from journalism to activism to politics and played a key role in the Paris Accord of 2015. He said the role of indigenous leaders was important, and not just at the Bonn talks. "*They are perhaps the only people who can remind us how man has alienated himself from nature. They can bring a conscience and soul that modern society can aspire to*," he said."

⁸ Chapter 4 – The Discovery of Ecumenical Dialogue, in [The Oil Has Not Run Dry: The Story of My Theological Pathway](#), McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017.

liberates 'the other'. In ecumenical dialogue, listening to the others and putting oneself in their shoes is a gesture of love and humility. We discover that we have been prejudiced towards them but are now ready to open ourselves to the truth. We also discover how we are seen by others and thus gain a critical insight into ourselves.”⁹

And finally, as just mentioned above, the worldview that Gandhi claims one should adopt to address social justice issues involves much more than the mere abstention from violence. Also and more importantly it involves *a type of relationship with the world that expresses the most fundamental truth – the power of truth – that is, a universal welcoming and respect for all that is living.*

What I also find truly amazing *is to realize not only how much the five attitudes or worldviews I just mentioned have in common but, also and even more importantly, how much our world urgently needs to adopt these worldviews.*

Our world needs to adopt these worldviews in order to cope with ever more threatening climate change. Two recent examples, among many, of this growing threat: “Three-quarters of flying insects in nature reserves across Germany have vanished in 25 years, with serious implications for all life on Earth, scientists say”, reports The Guardian on 18 October 2017 – [Warning of 'ecological Armageddon' after dramatic plunge in insect numbers](#). And only two days later, the same paper reports, “Landmark study finds toxic air, water, soils and workplaces kill at least 9m people and cost trillions of dollars every year.” – [Global pollution kills 9m a year and threatens 'survival of human societies'](#).

⁹ Chapter 4 – The Discovery of Ecumenical Dialogue, in [The Oil Has Not Run Dry: The Story of My Theological Pathway](#), McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017.

Our world needs to adopt these worldviews in order to address the numerous ongoing conflicts, both on the national and international level, be they in Iraq, in Syria, in Yemen, in Venezuela, in Libya, North Korea, etc., and to address the immense and truly historical refugee crisis presently affecting the world.

Asserts Dominique Boisvert: “Those formerly known as *political* refugees (...) have been joined by those who have been called *economic* refugees, then by *security* refugees, and now by *climate* or *environmental* refugees. (...) We must also add to these tens of millions of refugees the 2.5 million people who are victims every year of human trafficking, which is of course completely illegal and considered by the international community as the new form of slavery. (...) It is precisely in the case of international migration that non-violence is the most relevant. *For the development of an attitude of openness towards and unconditional respect (a priori) of all that is perceived as ‘the other’ represents the most fundamental characteristic of nonviolence* (Latter italics are mine).

“The fear of ‘the other’, spontaneous in many, can only be overcome by a face to face encounter: as long as ‘the other’ is only a category, a fantasy or a sum of prejudices, he represents an object of fear. It is only by becoming a real person, with a face and a name, a smile and a handshake that ‘the other’ suddenly appears like a human being just like me.”¹⁰

Our world needs to adopt these worldviews in order to address the interior conflict being experienced by hundreds

¹⁰ [*La nonviolence: une arme urgente et efficace*](#), Écosociété, Montreal, 2017, p. 77-78. In its special Christmas December 2017 issue, The Economist awards its “country of the year award” to France under Emmanuel Macron. It asserts: “The struggle between the open and closed visions of society may well be the most important political contest in the world right now. France confronted the drawbridge-raisers head on and beat them. For that, it is our country of the year.”

of millions of individuals throughout the world. Individuals who are torn between alternative values. Individuals many of whom are increasingly drawn towards various forms of fundamentalism, not only Islamic fundamentalism but also Christian and other forms of fundamentalism. Individuals who are daily drawn into a way of life whose speed and demands seem to be ever increasing, a way of life that appears more and more as an irrational rat race.

Our world needs to adopt these worldviews in order to find equilibrium and wisdom in our rapidly moving technology, in a world of robots, artificial intelligence, smart phones, drones, instantaneous Internet communication. A world that according to some offers immense hope and progress, but according to others threatens to destroy that which is most human and most precious in life.

Testimonies from past students

As I was writing the above lines, I received an email from Alexandre Poupart, a student that I had at Dawson College back in 2001. As I had not heard from Alexandre since he graduated from Dawson in 2002 – he did attend my retirement party in 2011 – I found his email particularly moving and gratifying:

November 22, 2017

Hola Ovidio!¹¹

This afternoon, I came across the North South Studies journals that we wrote during the field trip to Nicaragua in December 2001. Through them I relived what we had experienced in Las Pozas. I reread my comments and some of them made me smile. Being so young and thinking that I knew/understood the subtleties of the complexity of the Third World (as it was then called).

¹¹ Alexandre sent me his email in French. I translated it into English. The students whose testimonies appear in this section granted me permission to publish them.

I remembered your extraordinary support.

At that time I did not master Spanish, but now I do, so I reread the story of Ena. She has now become a doctor (we are even friends on Facebook) and I know that you played a significant role in her success.

I also remember your haven of peace, in Entrelacs. It was so welcoming and the elements of nature in which you lived had a deep impact on me. The lake, cross-country skiing, the mountains, your production of maple syrup (Every year I tap a couple of maples at home so that my three children will realize that the maple syrup we eat every day does not come from the grocery store.) Besides the experience of Nicaragua, I believe that you taught me simplicity.

I would have liked to tell you all these things at your retirement party but I guess my thinking had not yet sufficiently matured. By your example, you have been a coach and a mentor for me and I remember telling myself that one day I would like to follow in your footsteps: accompany students on field trips, help others open up to the Other, help them understand that our world is interconnected and complex... What you did is very important! You have, in your own way, prepared citizens to become involved, open and critical.

In short, even if I followed my own path, I would like to share something with you:

In 2013, I flew back to Nicaragua accompanying a group of high school students. Thanks to the ONG Mer et Monde of Montreal our trip was well organized.

Right now I'm doing community work! For almost two years now, I have been working as a development officer for the Beauport Community Development Corporation (<https://www.cdcbeauport.ca>). My work consists in trying to bring together various community agents, in order to improve, one small step at a time, the quality of life of

people in need, whether through local community projects or by supporting one of our 44 member organizations that are directly involved with citizens.

I have also been recently reelected as town councilor in my hometown Lac-Delage.

I have not at all lost interest in international affairs. Last summer, for example, I went backpacking for a whole month in the Dominican Republic with my wife and our three children (2, 5, and 6 years old). We mainly stayed at our local contacts (my wife had done her master's field work there) in the mountains. It was an amazing experience and whenever anyone in our family refers to it, their eyes are literally glowing.

Well, enough news about me! The first purpose of this long email was to get news from you... How are you doing?

Abrazo y espero que un día nuestros caminos van a juntarse de nuevo, (Hugs and hoping that one day our paths will some day cross again)

Alexandre

Alexandre's email is very similar to many others that I have received over the years from former students. For example, Naomi Shrier, when leaving Dawson College in May 2008 sent me the following heartfelt email:

May 18, 2008

Hi Ovide!

I truly could not leave Dawson without saying a few words to you, which can essentially be minimized down to two: thank you. Thank you primarily for all of your hard work, your warm heart and your dedication. Thank you for providing me with a wealth of knowledge that will never escape me. Thank you for enabling me to embark on a trip

that greatly impacted my life. Thank you for being you (all cheesiness aside!).

My experience at Dawson would not have been the same had you not been a part of it. I appreciate all that you have done for our program and I truly admire your character. You have endured significant hardships and wonders, as do most in their lifetime, but you were generous enough to share them with us, which I recognize as both difficult and amazing. Having shared those experiences with us has most definitely enriched the learning experience and I feel I might never encounter another individual with such an incredible amount of knowledge and matching experiences such as you.

You have truly inspired me, in all honesty. I aspire that in my lifetime I am able to provide at least one, never mind 30, individual(s) with the same kind of opportunities and experiences that you have given me. You have positively impacted the lives of so many students and I don't doubt that you will continue to do so.

Ovide, I could go on forever but I'd prefer not to write as though this is the last time I'll ever see you! Hopefully we'll find a time when we're both available to catch up over a cup of coffee, my treat!

I hope my words have done my thoughts justice.

Thank you one last time for one of the best experiences of my life.

Have an incredible, relaxing summer and I wish you all the best for years to come.

Take care,

Naomi

And Valentina Solkin, who participated in a North South Studies field trip to Nicaragua with us in December 2006, sent me the following email on Christmas Day 2011:

Ovide!

Beautiful person that you are... Thank You!!!

Thank you for all that you've done, for all that you've shared.

Your kindest sentiments, caring intentions and loving actions for this world have inspired so many heads and hearts. You have truly given infinite gifts to the lives of others, simply by existing as you are and embodying your beautiful beliefs.

As a teacher, a friend, and a source of lasting wisdom, you have guided so many people towards betterment and beyond.

I will never forget Nicaragua, nor all the conversations I had with you throughout my Dawson years. You always felt like home to me. A welcoming, familiar place to be, where all is accepted and embraced.

I learned to feel proud of who I was through your influence, appreciating my own personal care and dedication to this world.

You taught me the ways of compassion and patience through your generosity and thoughtfulness for others...

And for this, I will forever be grateful for all that you are.

With all my love,

Valentina

Though it would be tempting to take all the credit for the compliments that former students bestow on me, I believe that these have a lot to do with the worldview that I

received in my youth. I believe that *I simply gave or passed on to others, and in particular to students such as Alexandre, Naomi, and Valentina, what I had received when I was young.*

The love and warmth of my mom and dad, who had very little formal education, and of my four brothers and four sisters on the farm near Windsor, Ontario.¹²

The ideal that I had during the eight years I spent in the seminary studying to become a priest in the religious community of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the training I received in philosophy in Ottawa and in theology in Rome.

The influence that the study of Carl Rogers and Aimé Forest had on me during this time period, and that of my many teachers; *teachers for whom communicating their subject matter in class represented only a part of what education was all about*; teachers whose main concern was developing students' values, forming their character, teaching them to become committed to others, and in particular to the marginalized and needy; teachers who also met students individually on a regular basis in what was then called spiritual direction.

I remember when Father Jacques Croteau, the Oblate priest who was then my spiritual director, suggested that I start writing a diary. My personal thoughts, and also, occasionally, my meditations. I followed his advice and diary writing became part of my life. So much so, that I

¹² It would be an exaggeration to argue that when I was young I had the ecumenical spirit of Gregory Baum. In the mid 1960s, my brother Leonard was in love with a young woman who was not Catholic. Virtually every member of our family – and that includes me! – put immense pressure on him until he finally abandoned this woman and started going out with a Catholic. Marrying someone outside of Catholicism was considered something awful and totally unacceptable in my family in those days!

later imparted to North South Studies students the love of diary writing during their trips to Nicaragua.

Father Jacques Croteau also taught us a course titled "Pluralism". The purpose of this course in philosophy was to explore those values to which one could adhere, but that would be so broad and profound as to allow people of various religions and beliefs, including those who do not believe in God, to live and work together in mutual respect, peace, and harmony.

I still remember with fondness the many hours that Léo Boudreau and I spent with Father Sylvio Ducharme, the Oblate priest who directed our memoir on Carl Rogers. Though he was in his late sixties, Father Ducharme, who had become a fan of Carl Rogers, was still absolutely passionate about intellectual pursuit. Conversing with him was a joy, and the hours we spent in his presence exchanging on Rogers' ideas went by like minutes, like seconds.

I also remember with fondness the many hours I spent with Father Benoit Garceau, the Oblate priest who directed our memoir on Aimé Forest. Father Garceau was also extremely passionate about intellectual pursuit, and he was a remarkable intellectual and a wonderful mentor and friend.

Just as I passed on to my students what I received when I was young, Alexandre, Naomi and Valentina are now passing on to others what they received from their experience in North South Studies at Dawson College.

Part II - Life of the mind according to Aimé Forest

What follows is the memoir that I submitted in August 1966 – just before leaving for Rome to undertake my studies in theology at the University of St. Thomas – to my thesis director Father Benoit Garceau of the Department of Philosophy of the University of Ottawa. I normally would have had to hand in the memoir in May. However, I was very passionate about my research and wanted to read more of Forest's works before writing; so Father Garceau had granted me an extension until August.

Introduction

At first one's spiritual experience – for Aimé Forest spiritual experience does not designate supernatural life as such but simply the ensemble of the activities of the human mind – always appears as that of the determined, the limited. There is something, both inside and outside of each one of us, which is constantly determining and limiting us.

If one keeps silence and meditates, one cannot but notice a kind of dispersion, a certain continual disorder or lack of unity. What one is now living is not identical to what one was living two days ago, or ten years ago. Every moment seems to exclude all others. Each one of our encounters is unique in the strong sense of the word.

If one pays attention to what is going on outside of oneself, one also discovers a certain dispersion or lack of unity. The beings one encounters seem to constantly exclude one another. Affirming one necessarily means negating another.

Diversity permeates every being considered in itself, and all beings taken as a whole. Paul's hands are not his arms or his legs. Paul is not Mary, nor Peter.

These remarks, which may appear simplistic, undoubtedly reveal the profound meaning of a proverb that one often hears: *To choose one thing is to sacrifice another.*

But the mind cannot satisfy itself with such a situation of dispersion and lack of unity. Something constantly pushes it towards recollection, towards unity; it is a quest for intelligibility; it wants to understand the meaning of what it knows, of what is going on both inside and outside of itself.

The history of thought brilliantly testifies to this search for meaning. When one looks beyond the various doctrines of philosophers, which are sometimes contradictory, one always finds, if one manages to ignore purely external and secondary aspects and to focus instead on the fundamental intention of each author, not only the same basic desire to understand but also similar explanations.

Explaining always requires surpassing or transcending that which is determined and diverse. This constitutes the very nature and life of the human mind.

One of the important tasks of philosophy is to discover the meaning and true nature of this act of transcending. Because of its numerous and very profound implications, this problem is primordial and fundamental.

In one respect it implies one's conception of the universal and the singular, and especially the nature of the link that one recognizes between the former and the latter. In another respect it implies one's conception of the fundamental relation between thought and reality, between mind and being. More generally it relates to one's way of conceiving knowledge, love, freedom, science, poetry and religious life.

According to Aimé Forest, the history of philosophy makes it clear that depending on the solution that one brings to this problem, one will be easily inclined to insist, in one's explanations, either on the general or the particular; either

on totality or singularity. Or one will tend to emphasize either subjectivity or objectivity.

Note that this inclination of each author is never completely erroneous. On the contrary, it often reflects, notes Forest, a particularly powerful and remarkable understanding of certain fundamental truths. If it is false, it is only insofar as it closes one to other important truths, and thus prevents one from recognizing and respecting them.

One could argue that the main thrust of Forest's entire intellectual pursuit consists in a long, patient, and very rigorous reflection on this central problem. In him I have discovered a deep and very penetrating mind, one endowed with remarkable broadmindedness, one very open and welcoming to authors with views different from his own.¹³

Forest does not simply refute those with whom he disagrees. On the contrary he goes out of his way to meet them, he constantly tries to understand them and to see the world the way they see it. He excels above all in the discernment of the principles underlying the various doctrines that he meditates, and in grasping the profound intention of each thinker.

It is also this same quality that he admires so much in St. Thomas Aquinas, to whom he devoted a long study at the beginning of his philosophical career.

Forest's great achievement, in my opinion, consists in showing that there are only two paths that the mind can follow in order to transcend and unify the multiplicity it encounters in being: on the one hand, that proposed by realism, which consists in consenting to and welcoming being, and, on the other hand, that proposed by idealism, which consists in turning its back on being and withdrawing into itself (*se convertir à soi-même*).

¹³ See Joseph L. Roche, s.j., *Aimé Forest and Liberty of Spirit*, in *Laval théologique et philosophique*, Vol. XXI, 1965, no. 2, p. 243.

However, this must not be taken to mean that arguing that there are only two possible paths – realism or idealism – faithfully renders the complexity of the matter! Forest repeatedly points out that realism and idealism are only tendencies. The examination of those one could classify as idealists shows that some in their thinking are very close to realism while others are very far from it. And the same is true of those one could classify as realists; some are very close to idealism and others are far from it. Besides, one can often recognize in one and the same thinker, notes Forest, elements of both idealism and realism.

That being said, it would be incorrect to believe that Forest himself is situated somewhere between realism and idealism; his option for realism is clear and radical. However, it would also be incorrect to attribute to Forest all forms of realism. On this point he is particularly sensitive. He repeatedly recalls that what many refer to as realism only represents a form of empiricism. For this reason he makes a point of specifying exactly what the realism he favors stands for, and insists that the attitude adopted by realists is not at all something simple, easy, and quasi automatic but, on the contrary, requires considerable time and effort.

In order to fully understand Forest's thinking, I studied all of his major works, including *La vocation de l'esprit* (The Vocation of the Mind, 1953), which, to my knowledge, represents his latest book, as well as all the articles he has written in two academic journals, *Revue thomiste* and *Revue philosophique de Louvain*. My intention was to grasp, as far as possible, his basic intuition, this point in his doctrine where everything seems to come together.

As my research progressed, the point that appeared to stand out more and more was his conception of concrete being. Thus, in the first chapter of this memoir I will attempt to

present, as clearly as possible, Forest's views on the nature of concrete being.

However, I do not believe that understanding Forest's conception of concrete being, central and decisive as this may be in all his work, provides one with his basic intuition. In my opinion, one grasps Forest's basic intuition when one understands *the specific attitude Forest argues the mind must adopt in order to experience the intuition of being*.

Herein lies the leitmotiv of Forest's philosophy: the life of the mind. He has spent his life reflecting on the life of the mind and on the deep meaning of its processes. His great intellectual passion consists in exploring, in close collaboration with many of his contemporaries, what attitude the mind must adopt in order to be faithful both to concrete being and to itself.

In chapter two I will attempt to describe this attitude.

Chapter 1 - How Forest views concrete being

Meditating on existence – I realize this ever more – is not something easy and simple. On the contrary it calls for a considerable effort of recollection. In order to become really attentive to what exists one must try to create in oneself a disposition of profound silence.

What such meditation first reveals is the determined aspect of one's experience of being. One discovers a dimension where the beings one encounters – things and people – seem to be opposing, excluding one another. One discovers considerable multiplicity and diversity. One discovers an ocean of otherness. Or, to present the matter in another light, there seems to exist a radical distance between beings, and also a certain distance between oneself and other beings. In other words, other beings appear as distant or foreign.

The task of the mind consists in overcoming this diversity, in transcending multiplicity, in attempting to grasp the intelligibility and unity of being.

As this act of transcendence will always find its deepest meaning from one's prior conception of being, I will now try to discern the nature of being according to Forest.

First, it is important to note that as what one expresses about being always flows from one's perception of being, reflecting on the nature of being will always automatically imply reflecting on one's *knowledge* of being.

It must also be remembered that one is not dealing here with *any* kind of knowledge. The knowledge of being one is considering here is specifically metaphysical. In other words, one is not trying to know everything about being, but only that in being *which is primary and fundamental*.

The metaphysician seeks to discover the principle of all being. He would like to know the foundation of all that exists; he seeks to penetrate the very meaning of being.

There is a vision, an approach to the world, which is properly metaphysical, as there is one that is properly biological, physical, medical, etc. The metaphysician, not any more than doctors, biologists, or chemists, does not try to penetrate all of reality. He does not attempt to know everything that exists but rather to discover *the ultimate foundation* of everything that exists.

The biologist and other scientists are also looking for fundamentals, but not for the foundation of all that exists. They only want to explain specific ways of being. None of them attempts to explain the very fact of being, being in its very foundation.

To seek the foundation of being is the task of the metaphysician.

What must first be said of being, as Forest understands it, is that it always represents the singular. Being for him never means being in general; this kind of being simply does not exist. To perceive being is always to perceive the individual, the particular.¹⁴

Forests insists above all on the fact that it is not easy for one to perceive being in all that its singularity implies, and that if one does not succeed in doing so, one does not really comprehend being. According to him, one must absolutely avoid the pitfall of trying to comprehend being in the realm of the abstract; it can only be grasped, he insists, in the realm of the concrete.¹⁵

¹⁴ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, p. 20.

¹⁵ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 84-86.

In what follows I will thus attempt to follow Forest's advice. I will try to meditate on the philosophical implications of a concrete being, one that I will call Paul.

How can one comprehend Paul as a being? What in Paul seems primary and fundamental?

One might be inclined to believe that it is his essence. By knowing that Paul is a human being, does one not thereby attain the heart of his being?

No, because what one is trying to comprehend far surpasses what is expressed by the term 'human being'. Paul is a human being, of course, but he is infinitely more than that. In other words, when one affirms that Paul is a human being, one is expressing only one aspect of his total reality. One is attempting to reach the very heart, or the totality, of what Paul is, and not merely the fact that he is a human being. Saying that he is a human being is indeed true, but this fails to render all that Paul represents. In other words, *the attribution 'human being' fails to render Paul in his totality*; one's knowledge, as it is expressed, does not equal all the wealth of what is known.¹⁶

Instead of focusing on his essence as a human being, one could attempt to grasp the heart of Paul's being by concentrating one's attention on certain of his characteristics, such as his weight, his height, the color of his skin, etc.

But again one would soon realize that such characteristics are always inadequate and very partial. Whenever one focuses on a specific characteristic of Paul, one immediately realizes that such a characteristic is never sufficiently broad and encompassing to express the heart of Paul's being. Concentrating on Paul's weight means ignoring everything else that he is that does not fit into the

¹⁶ Aimé Forest, *La réalité concrète chez Bergson et chez saint Thomas*, dans *Revue thomiste*, pp. 388-389.

category weight. And the same is true of his height, the color of his skin, etc.

Thus, whenever one considers Paul from a particular viewpoint – his essence (human being) or any of his characteristics (height, weight, etc.) – one necessarily leaves out everything else that he is that does not fit into these categories. One even ignores the very heart of his being.

So one is left with the following dilemma: is it possible to consider something about Paul that would be so fundamental and so encompassing that, when focusing on it, one would not automatically be cut off from anything that Paul represents? In other words, is it possible to consider something that would allow one to comprehend Paul holistically, that is, in the very heart of his being?

According to Forest one can achieve such a metaphysical vision by focusing one's attention on the specifically *existential* dimension of the individual concrete being.

Difficult as this may be, I will attempt to illustrate what Forest means. I will zoom in on Paul and attempt to discern the very heart of his being.

Though in some respects such an undertaking may appear very natural and simple, one cannot overstate just how delicate and challenging it really is. When one tries to consider Paul in his specifically *existential* dimension, it is as if one were suddenly plunging into the void, into the unreal. This stems from the fact that, as one is accustomed to focus one's attention on determinations as such – Paul's height, the color of his skin, etc. – one is automatically inclined to consider existence itself as just one more determination among many others. One is inclined to

consider existence itself in the same way that one considers determinations.¹⁷

Considering Paul in his existential dimension as such implies attempting to limit one's attention to that alone that relates to existence. Since one wants to grasp Paul's existence as such, one tries to purify it, to isolate it, to abstract it, following the same process one would follow to grasp his height, or his weight, or the color of his skin, etc. However as soon as one turns away from all other concrete determinations of Paul in order to consider and attain only his existence as such, what one is searching for seems to disappear in thin air and slip from one's hands. For at the very moment one believes to have grasped Paul's existence in itself and independently of what it is not, one no longer feels in touch with Paul and his concrete individual existence escapes us.

One has tried doing what is simply undoable, asserts Forest: abstracting Paul's existence as one would abstract his humanity, or his height, or his weight, etc.

Forest points out that the great temptation of the mind is to consider existence only as one perfection among many, to approach concrete being, not in the realm of the concrete, as it should be, but rather in the realm of the abstract. The great truth that he tirelessly sets forth in all his writings is the following: *existence can never be abstracted; one never encounters existence in general but only in singular beings*. It is impossible to grasp existence outside of individual beings and apart from their determinations.

¹⁷ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 87-88. I see a striking similarity between the attitude Aimé Forest claims one needs to adopt in order to encounter Paul in the heart of his being, and the attitude that the American psychotherapist Carl R. Rogers argues the therapist needs to adopt in order to establish a profound relationship with his client.

Of course the mind has a natural tendency to define, to circumscribe, to situate. One says of beings that they are this and not that.

However, if one tries doing this when it comes to existence, one will always invariably fail. And this for one very simple but amazingly profound reason: existence constitutes the very ground of all being. Thus it is impossible to say of existence that it is this and not that.

Paul exists, of course, but one can never identify him with existence as such. That Paul is not identifiable to existence is obvious from the mere fact that other beings also exist, not just Paul.

Existence never identifies with that in which it reveals itself to us; however one can never isolate or separate it from that in which it reveals itself to us.

In other words, existence at once *transcends* the singular beings one encounters and is *immanent* in them.

In this sense, existence is both that which is closest and most intimate to us, and also that which is farthest and most distant to us.

The closest and most intimate, because one never finds it outside of ordinary singular beings; it never resides outside of individual concrete beings. On the contrary, it lies at the very heart of reality and constitutes the very ground of all being.

The farthest and most distant, because one never fully comprehends the meaning of existence. All individual beings one encounters in life partake of existence, but always in a determined and limited way.

Grasping what Paul's weight means, or what his height means is a relatively simple task. Grasping, however, what existing means for Paul is an altogether different and daunting challenge!

Although one can never understand what to exist in an unrestricted manner means, one does nevertheless know that to exist does not necessarily mean to exist in the manner of a man or a tree, in the manner of an African, or in the manner of Paul or Mary.

Meditating on concrete individual being leads one, according to Forest, to the intuition of being. Such an intuition represents a kind of revelation.¹⁸ That which was initially hidden from one is suddenly revealed. One does not add something to the individual being one encounters; what happens instead is that thanks to the profound and universal attitude of welcoming one adopts, one can now see something new. What was hidden is revealed.

The precise moment of intuition is when one experiences, at the very heart of the singular, universality and totality. As one encounters singular being one simultaneously encounters universality, both calling and implying one another. That which is truly unique is revealed in the same act and moment as that which is truly total and universal.¹⁹ It has become impossible to separate them, everything appearing interconnected.

One achieves what Forest describes as the vision of unity in multiplicity.

The heart of this intuition flows from one's *properly existential attention to singular being*. When one focuses on the individual being's *existential* dimension as such, one encompasses all points of view, all aspects, and all determinations.

If one considers things inasmuch as they are white, one is obliged to exclude from one's regard all those that are not white, and whatever in each thing escapes whiteness. If one

¹⁸ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 32.

¹⁹ Aimé Forest, *La recherche philosophique*, dans *Revue thomiste*, I (1937), pp. 64-65.

considers Paul specifically as a human being, one is still obliged to exclude from one's regard everything that escapes this category.

However, the properly existential regard is all encompassing and cannot exclude anything. There is nothing that existence is not but existence is not reducible to anything or anyone.

One suddenly realizes that multiplicity, of which being is overflowing, is not an obstacle to its uniqueness, and that on the contrary it is multiplicity itself that bespeaks, from all that it is, profound unity.²⁰ *One perceives existence as the source of both the multiplicity of being and its unity.*

Being now appearing as a source of intelligibility,²¹ one experiences the joy of he who attains, within the very heart of the singular, the common ground of all things. One comprehends that what constitutes the very essence and the very foundation of singular being is identical to that which constitutes the ground of all being. Each individual being thus appears radically attached and related to all that exists.²²

At the beginning of my meditation I was struck especially by this aspect where beings seem to exclude and oppose each other. Now it is no longer the distance and isolation between beings that stand out, for I can perceive the profound accord or harmony present in all that exists.

The unity I discern does not, however, eliminate diversity; it is the latter, on the contrary, that bespeaks it. Or rather, as just noted, it is precisely that which renders each being unique and irreplaceable, that displays the profound and intimate rapport between all beings.

²⁰ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 31.

²¹ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 22.

²² Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 24.

The universal attained by the metaphysical approach is not, therefore, this univocal universal that would always leave aside the uniqueness of each being and that would thus prevent one from grasping its very heart. It is an approach that allows one to maintain, in one and the same regard, both the unity and the multiplicity of being.

Understood in this sense the intuition of being does not completely satisfy the mind, notes Forest. Though it has in a way allowed the mind to overcome diversity, it has nevertheless not completely quenched its search for meaning. For it has left unanswered the question of that which could explain such profound unity that one finds at the very heart of the diversity of being.²³

One of the thinkers whom Forest has studied a great deal, Jules Lachelier, reaches this point in his meditation on being. He acknowledges that the intuition of being allows the mind to grasp profound universal unity within concrete being itself; however, no longer feeling able to explain why, he leaves this task to a more powerful metaphysics than his own or simply to faith.²⁴ And because the experience of beauty so wonderfully reflects the unity one finds in multiplicity, Lachelier asserts that beauty in his opinion constitutes the only solid truth worthy of the name.

Unlike Lachelier, Forest believes it is possible for the mind to go beyond this point and to grasp the underpinnings of the intuition of being. According to him pursuing and deepening one's meditation allows one to discover the underlying principle accounting for the unity of being. *Concrete being, though basically diverse, contains within its very heart a principle of transcendence*, a requirement of the Absolute, asserts Forest. Though this Absolute is not immediately evident, it would nevertheless be necessary to

²³ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 135.

²⁴ Aimé Forest, *La recherche philosophique*, dans *Revue thomiste*, I (1937), p. 71.

recognize its existence in order to account for the very possibility of concrete being as one finds it in one's daily experience of the world.

In other words, God, according to Forest, would be the condition of possibility of concrete being.²⁵ There exists a relation of necessity, a relation of radical dependence of concrete being on God.

However, if concrete being depends on God, there cannot be such a relationship of dependence of God in relation to concrete being.

The only possible explanation for creation, according to Forest, would be the pure goodness of God, philosophy thus allowing one to name the first love.²⁶

My purpose is not to examine Forest's doctrine of creation as such. I am only referring to it here because it is necessary to understand Forest's conception of being. The important thing is to understand what this doctrine of creation implies.

According to Forest being appears to the mind as a pure gift. It is gratuitous and represents grace.²⁷

When the mind manages to follow concrete being in its ultimate implications it will come to this vision.

The doctrine of creation does not precede the meaning of being, according to Forest. It is one's meditation on the meaning of being that leads one to this doctrine.²⁸

It is now possible for one to grasp the very heart of being according to Forest. Being is never found in withdrawing from and turning away from what renders being singular and determined. It is never found in distancing oneself from

²⁵ Aimé Forest, *Consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 102-103, 104.

²⁶ Aimé Forest, *Consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 153, 157.

²⁷ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 66.

²⁸ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, pp. 26-27.

concrete multiplicity. The wealth of being does not come from its degree of indeterminacy but rather from its degree of determination.²⁹

In other words, one must not try to approach being by moving away from the sensitive and the limited but rather by moving ever closer to the sensitive and the limited. Concrete being is in itself a source of intelligibility; it is the light of the mind.

Emphasizing that being and oneness are inseparably linked represents, asserts Forest, one of the great merits of medieval thinkers.³⁰

²⁹ Aimé Forest, *Sur la méthode en métaphysique*, dans *Revue thomiste*, no. 45, pp. 336-338.

³⁰ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, pp. 31-32, 165.

Chapter II - Meaning of spiritual life

Forest's great passion has always consisted in exploring not so much the nature of being as such but rather the *approach one must adopt in order to grasp the true nature of concrete being*. In other words, he is concerned above all with man's spiritual experience; that is, with the meaning of the life of the mind and the ensemble of its activities.

I believe that this concern has become central to Forest because of his constant communion with modern and contemporary thought.

At the beginning of his philosophical career, Forest devotes a long study to the philosophical thought of St. Thomas Aquinas.³¹ This study, both philosophical and historical, allows him to become familiar with most important thinkers of the Middle Ages and to become aware of the issues that were central in their thinking. Although this study purports to expose the thought of St. Thomas and not his own, Forest's option for realism stands out loud and clear, especially in pages 324 to 330.

Subsequently Forest becomes increasingly interested in modern and contemporary thought and especially French philosophers. He studies the doctrines of Jules Lachelier, Octave Hamelin, Leon Brunschvicg, Henri Bergson, and many others. Quite obviously his knowledge of these French philosophers is particularly profound and thorough.

In my opinion, it is thanks to these meditations on modern and contemporary thought that Forest becomes aware of the task that befalls realism in the current context of philosophical thought (I will not justify this last statement in this analysis).

³¹ Aimé Forest, *La structure métaphysique du concret selon saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 1931.

Realism, according to Forest, must refine and deepen its approach to being.³² Realism is not primarily a doctrine about the nature of being but rather an attitude of the mind, a spirit.³³

It is necessary to do away with the idea according to which experiencing the intuition of being would be something simple, easy, and automatic. Discovering the meaning of being is not something that happens rapidly and effortlessly. It requires considerable time and effort, insists Forest.³⁴

Although Forest recognizes, as I have just noted above, the important contribution of medieval thinkers in showing that concrete being is a source of intelligibility, he nevertheless criticizes them for suggesting that the mind could, quasi automatically and effortlessly, discover the profound unity present in the diversity of concrete being.³⁵

Modern and contemporary thought – Descartes, Kant, Hegel, etc. – bears testimony to the fact that things are much more complicated and that discovering the meaning of being is not simple.

It is undoubtedly for this precise reason that Forest shows such a keen and constant interest in what he refers to as “introduction to metaphysics”. Through his ever broader and deeper meditation on various philosophical doctrines, he tries to identify the true meaning of the various processes that the mind undergoes in attempting to make sense of the world. Forest never tires of showing the deep

³² Aimé Forest, *Le congrès de Marseille*, (Chronique), dans *Revue thomiste*, 44, (1938), p. 591.

³³ Aimé Forest, *Le congrès de Marseille*, (Chronique), dans *Revue thomiste*, 44, (1938), p. 108.

³⁴ Aimé Forest, *La recherche philosophique*, dans *Revue thomiste*, I, (1937), p. 73.

³⁵ Aimé Forest, *La recherche philosophique*, dans *Revue thomiste*, I, (1937), p. 68.

meaning of the idealist tendency inherent in modern and contemporary thought; to bring out the great truths that idealism attempts to emphasize. At the same time, however, he constantly argues that, in his opinion, realism, when properly understood in its truly spiritual and complex dimension, succeeds in founding the values put forward by the idealists, and this better than they manage to do so themselves. Furthermore, he also argues that realism succeeds in avoiding the dead-ends and pitfalls to which idealism inevitably leads.

In this second chapter, I will attempt to explain the meaning of Forest's meditation on various philosophical doctrines and outline the lessons that, in his opinion, emerge from them. In a work as limited as this one, it is clear that I must limit myself to the main lines of Forest's thought.

First, I will examine Forest's reflections on idealism, and highlight what, in his opinion, represents its meaning and spirit. Second, I will examine Forest's reflections on realism, highlight its meaning and spirit and explain why Forest opts for this philosophical school of thought.

Meaning and spirit of idealism

Idealism is characterized by its emphasis on the mind as freedom, creativity, and dominance. To understand why, one must return to what was stated at the beginning of this memoir about the process of transcending diversity.

I affirmed that when one meditates on being one is always first struck by multiplicity, determinateness, diversity. Things thus appear in their aspect of isolation, and, for the same reason, they seem foreign to the mind. In order to be fulfilled in its search for meaning, the mind must overcome or transcend the determinations and diversity it encounters; it must do away with the distance between beings and also between itself and beings.

Not managing to achieve this act of transcendence would mean failing to understand. It would amount to the mind not being able to achieve that for which it is intended or renouncing to itself.

This is undoubtedly what Forest means when he often repeats that the essence of the mind consists in its impulse towards unity, towards totality, towards universality.³⁶

The act of transcendence accomplished by the mind always proceeds, as I mentioned at the beginning of this memoir, from one's conception of being. I will now examine in what sense this statement is confirmed in the case of idealism.

Univocal conception of being. According to Forest the idealist has a univocal conception of being; he thinks of being not in the realm of the concrete but in that of the abstract.³⁷ In other words he reduces being to its determinations. He considers concepts, which are basically only notes taken on the whole of a reality, as real and actual elements,³⁸ and that is why he inevitably falls into the trap that Forest calls "realized abstraction" (abstraction réalisée).³⁹

One says of a being that he is white, that he is tall, etc. If one takes whiteness and height for real elements, actual realities, the concrete being from which these originate then appears to be devoid of intrinsic unity and affected by pure diversity.

To reach concreteness the idealist will thus have to *construct* the unity of determinations.

³⁶ Aimé Forest, *Sur la méthode en métaphysique*, dans *Revue thomiste*, 45 (1939), p. 332.

³⁷ Aimé Forest, *La réalité concrète et la dialectique*, 1931, p. 124.

³⁸ Aimé Forest, *Commentaire sur M-D Roland Gosselin*, o.p., *Essai d'une étude critique de la connaissance*, p. 2.

³⁹ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, p. 78.

It is peculiar to idealism, according to Forest, to have to reconnect to concrete being since its point of departure always consists in determinations taken in their abstract state.⁴⁰ One understands why being, in this case, is reduced to pure determinations.

It is important to understand all that such reduction implies. It means that concrete being can in no way be a source of intelligibility. Being no longer appears as a light for the mind but rather as an obstacle. Being appears as object, as that which is opposed to the mind, as that which is cut off from the mind.

The mind then experiences solitude, and solitude in a rather dramatic sense. For it fails to recognize itself in that towards which it is naturally and spontaneously inclined. It fails to recognize itself in being, which represents its object.

In spite of this factual situation, the mind cannot accept to remain in mere multiplicity, in finitude. Idealism is precisely characterized, notes Forest, by the great confidence it shows towards the mind in its ability to make sense of reality, of finding unity in multiplicity.

Idealist conversion. In order to transcend the determined and finite it encounters, the mind turns away from concrete being and withdraws into itself.⁴¹ This is what Forest calls “idealist conversion”.

As in any truly metaphysical effort, here too the mind seeks to justify concrete being; it seeks to discover unity and meaning.⁴² However, discerning in concrete being only determination and therefore multiplicity, it is thus incapable of seeking intelligibility within concrete being itself.

⁴⁰ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 43-44.

⁴¹ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 43-44.

⁴² Aimé Forest, *La réalité concrète et la dialectique*, 1931, p. 113.

It is important to understand why the idealist mind, in its quest for meaning, would find within itself what it failed to discern within being, its natural object. Understanding this single point, according to Forest, allows one to identify the very spirit and meaning of idealism.

If the mind withdraws into itself it is because it recognizes within its own activity the very characteristics of infinity and universality that were found wanting in the given, that is in concrete being.

Whereas on the one hand the given of the mind – concrete being – is always this or that, is always nature, is always determined, limited, and finite, the mind, on the other hand, when it becomes aware of itself in its own activity, never appears determined and fixed.⁴³ On the contrary, it appears essentially, in its very activity and processes, progressive and dynamic.

One cannot identify the activity of the mind with anything, with any given thing. It consists in constant and ever forward moving energy. It is never this or that; it does not have the character of an essence, of a specific and determined nature.

In this precise sense, therefore, the activity of the mind somehow seems to suggest and even imply the infinite, the universal. And it is precisely for this reason, according to Forest, that one sees idealism place the Absolute within the very heart of the mind.⁴⁴ The mind becomes aware of itself as the very capacity to endlessly transcend what is limited and finite. And this capacity, according to idealism, implies as a condition of possibility the active presence of the Absolute in the mind.

⁴³ Aimé Forest, *La méthode idéaliste*, dans *Revue néoscholastique de philosophie*, Tome 37, mai, août, novembre 1934, p. 178.

⁴⁴ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 88.

Forest points out that for a certain kind of idealism, such as that of Léon Brunschvicg, the mind is content with this withdrawal into its own activity; it is happy to view itself as pure creativity, as pure generosity.⁴⁵ However, this is not the case for most idealists who view the withdrawal of the mind within itself as a purely temporary phenomenon,⁴⁶ the mind eventually reorienting itself towards being.⁴⁷

By coming into contact with what is essential in its own life, the idealist mind discovers at the same time what is most profound in being. As noted above, when idealists experience concrete being, the latter initially appears to them as unintelligible and opaque. However, when they consider concrete being by *starting with the very act by which the mind presents being*, the diversity of being melts into unity; the beings one encounters cease to oppose one another and the mind perceives them in their profound and intimate unity.

This unity originates from the fact that the given of the mind, being, is never external to the act that makes it present; it is always internal to it by the very fact that it is the act that makes it present.

Thus, if one can assert that, in a sense, the mind is never this or that, that it is never determined, one can also assert that, in another sense, the mind constitutes the sole source of every this and every that; it is the source of all determinations. The mind is the source of every this and every that for the simple reason that it is the mind that *makes present* (brings to awareness) every this and every that.

⁴⁵ Aimé Forest, *Science et philosophie selon L. Brunschvicg*, dans *Revue thomiste*, 1929, pp. 54, 86, et 88.

⁴⁶ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, pp. 15-16.

⁴⁷ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 126 à 144, mais surtout pp. 137, 138.

Such is the manner in which the idealist mind, when confronted with the multiplicity and diversity of being, transcends the latter multiplicity and achieves profound unity. Such is the manner in which it achieves the intuition of being described previously. It does so by withdrawing within itself, by viewing concrete being as originating from itself, its sole source.

If one returns for a moment to the nature of the intuition of being that was described in the first chapter, one cannot fail to perceive the striking similarity that exists between this intuition and that which the idealist conversion – the mind withdrawing into itself – achieves, in the manner just described.⁴⁸ Here and there, the initial situation of the mind is one of determination, of multiplicity and therefore of unintelligibility and opacity. Here and there, the mind manages to overcome this situation by revealing the fundamental unity connecting all beings in their multiplicity and diversity. Here and there the mind achieves the intuition of being.

This striking similarity being acknowledged, Forest immediately goes on to emphasize the difference between these two intuitions, that of realism in one case, and that of idealism in the other.

Whereas the idealists, in their intuition of being, give primacy to the one (unity) instead of concrete being,⁴⁹ the realists, in their intuition of being, do not grant primacy to the one or to concrete being.

The originality of the realists, points out Forest, consists precisely in that according to them *the one cries out for*

⁴⁸ Aimé Forest, *Thomisme et idéalisme*, dans *Revue néoscholastique de philosophie*, no. 37, 1934, pp. 317-336. Dans cet article, Forest fait ressortir à la fois les ressemblances étonnantes entre thomisme et idéalisme et leurs différences.

⁴⁹ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, p. 134.

being and being cries out for the one (l'un appelle l'être et l'être appelle l'un).⁵⁰

As was mentioned above, it is the merit of medieval thinkers, according to Forest, to have grasped this implication, to have understood that the one calls for being and being, in its very diversity, reveals profound unity.

Priority to the will. To deepen one's understanding of the idealist conversion, one can explore the reasons for which idealists tend to prioritize the will over intelligence. This will allow one to understand why idealists find within the activity of the mind itself the universal that they are looking for. It will also allow one to understand why, as Forest often mentions, idealism inevitably ends up as a kind of voluntarism.⁵¹

If one looks closely at the activity of the mind in its ethical dimension, one discovers the following: when the mind is in presence of some particular being it perceives as good – concrete goods are always finite and limited – it is indifferent to that particular being. Indeed, it is characteristic of freedom and in a sense also of love, on the one hand to be indifferent to any particular good, and on the other hand, because of this overriding indifference, to be able to freely choose a particular good.⁵²

Thus the activity of the mind, in that it is voluntary and free, represents both indeterminateness and determinedness. Indeterminateness because it is basically indifferent to specific goods, and determinedness because it represents the power to determine itself (choose) to a specific good.

Descartes once asserted that freedom consists in one's power to remain indifferent and indeterminate in the face of

⁵⁰ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 129-130.

⁵¹ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, pp. 39-40. Forest nous permet ici de comprendre l'esprit profond de ce volontarisme.

⁵² Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, pp. 126-144

a particular good to be done. And Forest notes that this assertion, which represents only one aspect of Descartes' philosophical thought, has gradually become in other authors the very essence of their doctrine. According to the spirit of idealism indifference to the finite and determined reveals the active presence of the Absolute at the very center of the mind.⁵³

In the light of what has just been said one can easily understand why idealism always represents a kind of voluntarism. For idealists the mind – intelligence – is incapable of accounting for its own impulse towards infinity. When the mind encounters concrete being it reduces the latter to its purely finite and determined dimension. In other words, it fails to discern within being itself a seed of infinity. It only sees opaqueness and unintelligibility.

Given that being for the idealist is not indicative of universality, he tends to interpret his moral experience in a very negative way. What reveals above all to the mind the presence of the infinite or the Absolute is not the concrete being (good) it encounters but rather *the resistance and dissatisfaction it feels regarding what it encounters*.

Hence the insistence, in contemporary thought, on the negative experiences of the mind, especially those of rejection, conflict, and absence.⁵⁴

For idealists the mind is above all that which dominates the finite, that which forever tries to escape the prison of the finite and determinate, that which constantly and tirelessly attempts to break away from the trap of concrete being and to maintain itself in complete purity.

⁵³ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, pp. 150-151.

⁵⁴ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 21.

In this sense, the founding and overriding truth of idealism is that the mind is essentially freedom, indeterminacy, and creativity. Its dynamism rests on nothing but itself.

According to Forest the father of idealism is primarily Immanuel Kant.⁵⁵ Having eliminated intellectual intuition from knowledge and only retained that of the senses, Kant was quite logically led to prioritize the will over the mind and to place the will at the very heart of his philosophy. For Kant the will “cannot be, as a moral activity, determined by an object; it must draw from itself alone, as from a form without matter, the idea of a moral value, that of a submission to the pure law of duty, independently of any property of the desired objects”.⁵⁶

It stands to reason that idealism would therefore always tend to give priority to the will and not the mind, to value and not to concrete being.⁵⁷

Option for negation. According to Forest every philosophy will have to base its doctrine either on negation or affirmation; it is impossible to keep the two on an equal footing. One will necessarily be subordinated to the other.⁵⁸ And he argues that idealism clearly favors negation instead of affirmation.

That idealism favors negation flows directly, asserts Forest, from the fact that it has a univocal conception of being. It is obvious that if one reduces the affirmative role of the mind to presenting being only in so far as it is finite and determined, then affirmation cannot be what characterizes the mind. For affirmation understood in this sense would

⁵⁵ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 149.

⁵⁶ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 149.

⁵⁷ Aimé Forest, *L'expérience de la valeur*, dans *Revue néoscholastique de philosophie*, no. 43, 1940, pp. 5 à 20. Cet article traite du problème de la relation entre la valeur et l'être et montre en quel sens l'idéalisme accorde toujours le primat à la valeur.

⁵⁸ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 15.

only increase, instead of decreasing, the dispersion and multiplicity in which the mind finds itself when first encountering concrete being. Affirmation would become for the mind a source of estrangement; it would lead to its alienation. Being would appear to the mind as something more and more absurd and incomprehensible.

It is for this reason that idealism will tend to privilege the mind's negative experiences. In such experiences the mind can be itself. Here it manages to find fulfillment. Here it manages to constantly rise towards the infinite that lies within itself.⁵⁹

Primacy of reflection. One can still describe the spirit of idealism by considering the primacy it gives to reflection as a method of knowledge.⁶⁰ The mind seeks to find itself, to coincide with itself; it tries, so to speak, to reconnect in depth to what is most primitive within its basic structure.

This withdrawal of the idealist mind into itself originates from the deep mistrust it instinctively feels towards everything that is somewhat external and 'other'; towards everything also within itself that appears as given, finite, and determined.

By withdrawing into itself the mind finds considerable comfort and security; it experiences self-awareness, and with it sureness and joy. It also finds purity and unity. Through a kind of temporary withdrawal from objectivity the mind enters an area where discord, opposition, and estrangement no longer exist.⁶¹ It discovers the perfect purity of the act by which it constantly brings objects into awareness. It discovers this unity and purity precisely by *isolating* this act from its various objects.

⁵⁹ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, pp. 15 à 41. C'est surtout dans le chapitre intitulé *L'expérience de la négation* que Forest discute de l'affirmation et de la négation.

⁶⁰ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, pp. 77-78.

⁶¹ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 106.

However, the withdrawal of the mind into itself can take on another character. Instead of viewing its own activity as an experience of perfect purity and unity, the mind can view itself as a sort of ongoing and perpetual activity. It can concentrate on itself as that which constantly creates, as that which constantly makes things come into being.

In this latter perspective the great truth that stands out for the mind is that it is essentially movement, becoming, living dialectic. The mind is not what it is, and the mind is what it is not.

The mind *is not what it is* because it never reduces itself, never identifies itself with any actual moment, with any actual object that it brings into awareness.

And the mind *is what it is not* because it is ongoing movement, it is always going beyond itself by its perpetual activity.

In a way one can say that the category proper to the mind is not actuality but rather becoming, existential possibility.⁶² Truth is not something “already there, ready to take”. The mind constitutes, so to speak, its own truth. The voluntary act is not only intimately linked to the discovery of truth, it itself constitutes the experience of truth.⁶³

Meaning and spirit of realism

I have just examined one kind of path the mind can follow – that of idealism – in its attempt to fulfill itself, to complete its mission. Perceiving little more in being than its determinations, the idealist mind turns away from being and withdraws into itself.

Now I will turn to the analysis of a very different path that the mind can follow, that of realism. Instead of turning

⁶² Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 35.

⁶³ Aimé Forest, *La recherche philosophique*, dans *Revue thomiste*, I, 1937, p. 55. Forest montre ici que cette attitude existe chez Jules Lagneau.

away from being to which it spontaneously and naturally feels inclined, the mind, in order to complete its mission, will seek to draw ever closer to being.

As previously mentioned, Forest notes that however opposite the paths followed by idealism and realism may appear, one should not forget all that these two philosophical schools of thought have in common. In both one finds an effort to go beyond the determinate and finite as such; in both one finds the recognition that the mind is really capable of carrying out its mission of transcendence; in both one finds strikingly similar truths.⁶⁴

This being said one should nevertheless not ignore or minimize the opposition that exists between them.

Before exposing Forest's philosophical option for realism, I would like to qualify a statement that I have made above. I asserted that the meaning of the act of transcendence accomplished by the mind depends on its prior conception of being. Now I would like to add that *the mind's conception of being itself depends on its prior way of conceiving the transcendence that it accomplishes*.

If the two preceding statements, taken as such, may seem somewhat contradictory, I will try to show that this is not the case and that on the contrary, respecting the true relationship existing between mind and being demands their recognition.

Forest insists that realism is not primarily a doctrine about the nature of being but above all a method of philosophizing, an attitude of the mind.⁶⁵ In other words, *one will never be able to conceive of being as the realist*

⁶⁴ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 113-116, mais surtout p. 116.

⁶⁵ Aimé Forest, *Nature et rôle de la réflexion*, dans *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 108.

conceives it unless one adopts his way of thinking, unless one adopts his fundamental attitude towards being.

The realist conception of being is not a matter of spontaneous combustion. It does not, as many seem to believe, come about easily and automatically. On the contrary it requires, as Forest repeatedly recalls, considerable time and effort, and can even be considered a kind of conquest.⁶⁶ This conception results strictly, in a very real sense, from the attitude one adopts towards being.

However, this does not mean that the attitude that one adopts towards being *creates* that which will be perceived in being. It does not mean that the mind first adds something to being and then discovers in it what has been added. What it means instead is that thanks to one's attitude a fundamental dimension of being, previously hidden, is now *revealed*, says Forest.⁶⁷ That which in one's experience of being appeared ordinary suddenly takes on a new and very profound meaning, thanks to the intuition of being rendered possible by one's attitude.⁶⁸

If the revelation that constitutes the intuition of being requires a certain attitude of the mind, how can one affirm at the same time that the meaning of the act of transcendence carried out by the mind flows from one's prior conception of being? Is this not downright contradictory?

The answer given by Forest reflects the wisdom of the English proverb, "Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder". If the mind is directed, in its realism, towards being itself, and

⁶⁶ Aimé Forest, *La recherche philosophique*, dans *Revue thomiste* (1937). C'est le sens général de l'article. Voir surtout pp. 62, 76-77.

⁶⁷ Aimé Forest, *Connaissance et révélation*, dans *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, pp. 166 et 179.

⁶⁸ Aimé Forest, *L'attention et la philosophie réflexive*, dans *Consentement et création*, 1943, pp. 120 et 123. Forest excelle ici dans sa description de l'attitude nécessaire à l'intuition de l'être.

if it consents to this orientation that is spontaneous and natural to its structure, *it is because it senses that it will find in being what it is searching for and it already possesses to some extent that for which it is searching.*⁶⁹

Note added in 2018

What Forest notes in the philosophical realm, the neuroscientist Peggy Gérardin of the Institut national de la santé et de la recherche médicale (INSERM) and of the Université de Lyon in France also notes in the realm of her specialty. She asserts:

It is often said that to see is to believe, but in fact it is rather the opposite that happens. We tend to see what we believe, what our brain has deduced, that is, we anticipate to some extent what we are going to see.

Le regard des peintres, Pauline Gravel, Le Devoir, 30 December 2017 (My translation from French)

In this precise sense the affirmation – the meaning of the act of transcendence carried out by the mind flows from one's prior conception of being – is true. For if the mind agrees to consent to concrete being, according to Forest, it is only because it anticipates that it will find in being what it is searching for.

One must not hide the fact that in consenting to being the mind is basically placing its confidence and trust in being. But a confidence and trust, notes Forest, which can be verified and justified.

It is in the very truth that it enables it to attain that the mind feels the incontestable value of the attitude that was its necessary condition. The attitude of the realist towards

⁶⁹ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 142-144.

being finds its full value in the truths that it allows him to attain, in the joy of the possession that it renders possible.⁷⁰

But in what exactly does this attitude of the realist consist? What exactly is the spirit of this realism to which Forest adheres?

In a sense, I have already given the answer to these two questions. I have done so when I specified that the realist directs his mind *towards* being, and not as the idealist *away* from it. In another sense, however, I feel that these questions are still unanswered and that everything still needs to be explained. So I will now attempt to clarify and explore in greater depth the meaning of Forest's realism.

Realism for Forest is characterized by its emphasis *on a mind that welcomes being with open arms, a mind that places its confidence in being and accepts it.*

The experience of being initially reveals to the mind, as previously mentioned several times above, a very great multiplicity that cannot satisfy it, for it seeks, spontaneously and by its very nature, meaning, unity, and totality. However, the mind of the realist seeks to go beyond what is determined in being, not by withdrawing into itself as in idealism, but rather by moving ever closer to being. Instead of finding in itself the universal and the infinite, it discerns these in the very heart of being, not in an instantaneous and complete way of course, but at least in a germinal and progressive way. In the very heart of the determinate and finite it discerns more than determination and finitude; it discerns what surpasses these; it understands that the determinate and finite imply in themselves a principle that allows one to transcend them. And that is why it recognizes that it will be able to accomplish this act of transcendence, not by moving away

⁷⁰ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 80.

from the concrete, but rather by adhering more completely to it, by embracing it wholeheartedly and accepting it.⁷¹

It is therefore from the very strength of its adherence to concrete being that the mind in realism discovers the profound unity underlying the diversity present in the universe, and thus manages to overcome and transcend this diversity.

It is undoubtedly in this powerful adherence to being that lies the great originality of realism, notes Forest.

Perceiving universality within the very heart of being, in finite and diverse being, realism tends to highlight the positive experiences of the mind. Understanding the world for realism consists in *affirming* being, not negating it.⁷² Or put another way, the foundational act of understanding for realism consists in asserting and accepting concrete individual being, not negating and turning away from it. Here the mind understands that its full blossoming lies in the act by which it affirms metaphysical being. If this act of assertion does not suffocate the mind, does not lock it into a prison far inferior to its universal amplitude, it is because it sees in being that it is affirming and accepting the *beyond* that it implies.

However, the affirmation that frees the mind from the narrowness it so much fears is not just any kind of affirmation. It is not the kind of affirmation that makes reality stand out in its aspect of exclusion and isolation. It is an affirmation that is properly metaphysical, in other words one that assumes the character of what Forest calls mediation.⁷³

⁷¹ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 61.

⁷² Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, pp. 39-41. Forest montre néanmoins que même dans le réalisme, la négation joue un rôle important.

⁷³ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 43.

Mediation. To understand the meaning Forest attributes to the term mediation, one must go back to the one who put this notion at the very heart of his system, the German philosopher Friedrich Hegel. Mediation for the latter is first of all an act of transcendence. Mediation represents the act by which the mind transcends its experience in its immediacy. However, this act of transcendence does not exclude, according to Hegel, what it transcends; on the contrary, it is the characteristic of mediation to integrate in its act of transcendence what is being transcended.⁷⁴

If Forest refers to mediation, it is not, however, in the Hegelian sense of the word. Not only does he remove from this Hegelian term what he finds to be too narrow and rationalistic, but he also explicitly rejects the Hegelian interpretation of mediation.⁷⁵

Forest then shows how mediation, as he understands it, is accomplished in a more flexible and successful manner in realism than in idealism, and this especially via the experiences of beauty and love.⁷⁶

Throughout his writings Forest establishes close links between the experience of the intuition of being on the one hand, and the experience of beauty and love on the other hand.

To better understand the meaning of these links, let me return for a moment to what I said in the first chapter about the intuition of being as understood by Forest. This intuition occurs, I explained, at that very moment when one manages to discern the universal through and within the singular, unique being one is encountering. It comes from one's effort to see individual concrete beings in a properly existential way. From one's effort to pay a kind of attention

⁷⁴ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 46.

⁷⁵ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 54.

⁷⁶ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, pp. 55-57.

that is very special, an attention that one is not accustomed to in everyday life. One discovers, so to speak, that at the very moment when one manages to grasp holistically the very heart of the singular being one is encountering, one at the same time attains the very heart and foundation of everything that exists in the world. And this discovery makes one understand that one's experience of presence will be all the more profound and intense that one manages to be entirely and wholeheartedly present to one singular being, *and this in all that its uniqueness implies*.

One thus discovers the very powerful intuition of Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher who insisted so much in his writings on the concrete individual.⁷⁷

If one returns now to the experiences of beauty and love, one will be able to appreciate their metaphysical wealth and see why, according to Forest, these experiences are so closely related to the intuition of being.

The experience of beauty is always both *presence and a form of absence, a kind of calling to go beyond*.

The secret harmony that one discerns in the landscape or the sunset that one is contemplating allows one to discover in a raw and direct way the profound unity and spirituality of which concrete being is impregnated.⁷⁸ One understands what Forest calls the law of correspondence. One experiences the presence of this landscape or sunset, a presence that is harmony, a presence that expresses both unity and diversity.

Beauty, Forest emphasizes, seems to bring one back to what matters most in life; and that is probably why one holds it in such high esteem. Beauty attracts one's mind, beauty captures one's attention. Beauty represents a home

⁷⁷ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, pp. 51-53. Forest nous explique pourquoi Kierkegaard rejeta Hegel.

⁷⁸ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 55.

where one's mind finds itself and wants to settle. In beauty one's mind recognizes the image of that for which it is profoundly yearning and searching for.

However, if beauty is *presence*, and, in this sense, something that one possesses so to speak in this very existential moment, it is also a kind of absence, *a calling to go beyond*. That is to say, beauty reveals itself to one but never completely, never fully. There is always something in beauty that constantly escapes one, that flees one's hands.

One's interest in beauty, notes Forest, is a disinterested one; it is marked by detachment. One considers beauty not for what it would bring to one's rather limited desires, but especially for what it represents in and of itself.⁷⁹

If the experience of beauty is remarkably meaningful metaphysically speaking, that of love is perhaps even more so, notes Forest. Like beauty, love is both presence and a kind of calling to go beyond. However, in the experience of love it is not so much the joy of possession that predominates, it is not so much the deep presence that one feels that matters, but rather the *promotion* of the loved one.⁸⁰

In other words, in the experience of love the mind perceives the being loved as a good in itself and is happy in its presence; however, *what matters and predominates is that the mind wants the good of the beloved*; it wants its fulfillment, its promotion.

And it is truly remarkable, pursues Forest, that that which represents the true and veritable good of the beloved is identical, in a sense, to that which represents the good of all beings. Also very remarkable is the fact that the person who loves seeks to discover the beloved ever more in depth and

⁷⁹ Aimé Forest, *Le sentiment de la nature dans l'expérience philosophique*, dans *Revue thomiste*, janvier-mars 1946, pp. 101-102.

⁸⁰ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 57.

also discerns in the beloved totality and universality: “You mean the whole world to me,” one sometimes hears people in love saying to one another.

In the experience of love, the mind grasps the close correspondence existing between itself and the beloved. The person loving discovers herself or himself in depth at the same time that she or he discovers the beloved in depth. In the very affirmation of the other as ‘other’ one discovers the deep impulse of one’s own self.⁸¹

Freedom according to realism. In the light of what has just been said about the metaphysical affirmation of the mind that assumes the character of mediation, it is possible to understand the meaning that realism recognizes in the experience of freedom.

For idealism, as noted above, freedom consists first and foremost in the indeterminism shown by the life of the mind. Freedom consists basically in freeing oneself from determinations, from that which is concrete and finite. Freedom means turning away from these and in a way denying them. The idealist mind, in this sense, rests on nothing but itself; it has full responsibility for the creation of values.

For realism, however, freedom has an altogether different meaning. Realism recognizes the will as nature, as determination. *It recognizes the will as being determined in the order of specification, but undetermined in the order of exercise.*⁸²

That the will is determined in the order of specification means that it is naturally attracted – determined – to the good it perceives in concrete being. That the will is

⁸¹ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 69 ; voir aussi *Connaissance et amour*, dans *Revue thomiste*, 48 (1948), p. 121.

⁸² Aimé Forest, *Le réalisme de la volonté*, dans *La vocation de l’esprit*, 1953, p. 198.

undetermined in the order of exercise means that it can choose to yield to the attraction exercised by concrete being without automatically losing, in so doing, its freedom. If it can maintain its freedom when yielding to concrete being, it is because it never reduces the latter to its determinations, to the aspect in which it is limited and defined; it is because it understands that the good incarnated in concrete being is both presence and a calling to go beyond; it is because it understands that the good to which it is attracted in being is never reducible to that which in itself is limited and particular.

It is for the above reason that the will in realism can, contrary to the spirit of Kantianism, give way to the attraction exercised by concrete being, and this without risking losing its freedom.

Not only can the will yield to the attraction exercised on it by concrete being, but it is precisely in its complacency in the good it perceives in being, whenever and wherever it encounters being, that the will accomplishes its liberation.⁸³ Thus, ever-greater adherence to the very heart of being is precisely what gradually allows the mind to find itself and blossom.

If the will becomes enslaved to objects by yielding to the attraction that they exert on it, the slavery, insists Forest, does not come from the fact that it yields to such attraction but rather from the fact that it does so in a *disorderly* manner.⁸⁴ If the will errs, it does so not in yielding too much to the object to which it is attracted, but rather in not yielding to it enough and in sufficient depth. It errs because

⁸³ Aimé Forest, *Le réalisme de la volonté*, dans *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, p. 201.

⁸⁴ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, pp. 90-93. Forest revient souvent sur l'idée d'ordre qui doit découler de notre attachement à l'être. Dans ces trois pages, il explicite cette idée.

it fails to yield to concrete being in that which represents its very heart and soul, a call to the universal good.

In other words, for realism one never finds the universal good outside of singular, individual, and unique beings.

Such is the realism of the will, and such must be, too, the meaning of one's attachment to being.

Reflexive realism. In closing this section, I would like to highlight one aspect of Forest's realism that he considers extremely important. Forest, in his writings, repeatedly reminds the reader that the realism to which he adheres is reflexive.⁸⁵ By this he means that the philosophy of realism, and more precisely the attitude of the mind that he argues one must adopt in order to discover the meaning of being, is not a naive and spontaneous attitude, but one that results from considerable thought and requires time and patience.

If Forest adopts realism, it is because he considers it is highly spiritual and respectful of the mind. The attitude advocated by realism, according to Forest, not only does not alienate the mind, but on the contrary it frees it, it allows it to fulfill its calling. And it does so, in his opinion, even better than idealism. It allows the mind to discern the profound accord that exists between the ideal order and the real order, between mind and being.⁸⁶

Forest asserts, not without a certain irony, that realism is perhaps more idealistic than idealism itself.

⁸⁵ Aimé Forest, *Nature et rôle de la réflexion*, dans *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 113.

⁸⁶ Aimé Forest, *La structure métaphysique du concret selon saint Thomas d'Aquin*, 1931, p. 328. Il est très frappant de noter que Forest considère que le grand apport du thomisme fut de nous permettre de mieux saisir l'accord du réel et de l'esprit.

Conclusion

In concluding I will attempt to set forth what, in my opinion, represents Forest's global intuition.

What is always difficult in such a task is first *to really grasp* this intuition and then *to communicate it effectively*. I am fully aware that in both aspects of this task what follows is merely tentative.

The point where everything coalesces and comes together in Forest's thought manifests itself, in my opinion, *in the meaning that Forest attributes to the life of the mind*.

Thanks to a patient study over the last decades of various past and present philosophical doctrines, Forest comes to understand that there are two philosophical schools of thought that emerge in varying degrees from these: idealism on the one hand, and realism on the other.

Opting soon enough for realism, Forest quickly realizes that it befalls him, in the situation of modern and contemporary thought, to reflect on and refine realism's approach to being, and more precisely to show how realism manages both to save the fundamental values and truths dear to idealism while avoiding the dead-ends and pitfalls to which the latter invariably leads.

And it is to this task that Forest devotes himself above all throughout his career.

In his reflection Forest is led to reject this form of naïve realism according to which the meaning of being would be revealed in an easy and quasi-automatic way. His genius consists chiefly in highlighting how difficult and challenging it is to discover the meaning of being.

According to Forest the meaning of being manifests itself only to the person who is capable of adopting a profound and universal attitude of welcome. The mind, he insists,

must welcome being with confidence and with open arms; *it must consent to being*. In other words the mind must on the one hand assume and accept the momentum that inclines it towards concrete being, and, on the other hand, also assume and welcome concrete being in all that it fundamentally implies.

In one respect consenting to being means refusing to fall into the trap of what Forest calls “the realized abstraction”; that is, viewing existence as if it represented a mere determination, one among many others.⁸⁷ In another respect and more fundamentally, consenting to being means paying a special attention – one that is not customary in daily life – to the properly existential dimension of concrete being.

In one article Forest states that this attention to existence represents the act proper to the mind as mind.⁸⁸ According to Forest, consenting to being is not a particular act of the mind but rather its fundamental act, the act underlying all the various processes of the mind.

Through this act of consent, the mind, though plunged into the depths of multiplicity, maintains itself in a deep recollection. In other words, it is an act that, while remaining the same, accords with the diversity of being.⁸⁹

In this sense, consenting to being solves the problem that I mentioned at the very beginning of this memoir, namely that when first experiencing concrete being, the mind is confronted with diversity, opposition, distance, and opaqueness. Consenting to being allows the mind to enter what Forest calls “the spirit of creation”.⁹⁰ For one’s intelligence, it takes the form of welcome and acceptance, and for one’s will, it takes the form of complacency.

⁸⁷ Aimé Forest, *Du consentement à l'être*, 1936, pp. 84-85.

⁸⁸ Aimé Forest, *L'attention et la philosophie réflexive*, dans *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 120.

⁸⁹ Aimé Forest, *La vocation de l'esprit*, 1953, pp. 99-106.

⁹⁰ Aimé Forest, *Consentement et création*, 1943, p. 67.

Conclusion

The mind is thus able to discern what is true and to desire what is good whenever and wherever it encounters being. And it is by staying in this attitude that the mind communes to the Absolute, that it participates in some way in both the intelligence and love of God.

One's experience then becomes one of continual peace and joy, and the mind acquires both stability and flexibility.

Chronological bibliography – publications of Aimé Forest

I have tried to make this bibliography as complete as possible according to the means at my disposal. I will mark with an asterisk the books, articles, and book reviews that I studied while preparing this memoir.

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Book on Aimé Forest

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Part III - Personal reflection on sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge, idealism vs. realism

Résidence du Sacré Cœur, Ottawa, January 1966

I have just finished a first reading of [William James](#)' book Pragmatism. To my surprise pragmatism is not as crass and as base as I had first imagined. During my three and a half years at Sedes Sapientiae, I had learned to see pragmatism in a light that I now realize was very negative. First of all, pragmatism is not the same as logical positivism, or empiricism or nominalism. Secondly, pragmatism, like existentialism, seeks to surpass transcendental idealism as well as radical empiricism (materialism). Finally—and this to some may appear strange—pragmatists are not evil creatures trying to spread false and shortsighted ideas. On the contrary they are at the heart of an epistemological revolution and are merely attempting to save all the values that they can by eliminating all unnecessary either/or points of view.

Should I ever teach philosophy or theology I hope that I will not fall into the rut of categorizing authors too rapidly and of insisting, in my discussion of them, only on those points with which I disagree. I hope that I will have the courage and intelligence necessary to discover each author's global intuition; to perceive what problems they were trying to address; to understand why they felt that what they were thinking and writing represented progress; to plunge myself as much as possible into the atmosphere and general context of their time, something absolutely necessary if I am to understand them.

As I was telling Léo (Boudreau)⁹¹ last night, it is really striking to see how each philosopher tries to surpass certain conceptions of the universe. Each philosopher starts from the experience of both partly agreeing and partly disagreeing with his predecessors.

Socrates and Plato agreed with certain of their predecessors but disagreed with the sophists of their time. Aristotle agreed with his master Plato but departed from the latter on key issues. Aristotle's greatness originated from the depth and amazing quality of his reflection. He saw what was true in the doctrine of Parmenides, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras and Plato. But he also saw what was false in their doctrines. He managed to retain all the elements of truth he found in his predecessors and contemporaries and to present these in an intelligent synthesis. He shed light on the paradoxical aspect of human knowledge not by doing away with the paradox but by confronting it head on, and by rendering it intelligible and meaningful.

If Copleston's interpretation is correct⁹², the early Greek philosophers insisted on the objective aspects of human

⁹¹ Léo, a francophone and talented composer and guitar player from New Brunswick, was my fellow seminarian. We had chosen to spend our fourth year, during which we would be writing our Master thesis in philosophy, together in what was then known as the Juniorat du Sacré Cœur, located in Ottawa, Ontario. Owned and managed by our then religious community, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, the Junioriat, located right next to the University of Ottawa, was a residence for teenage boys who felt they had a calling to become priests. Léo and I had both chosen the option of writing two theses instead of one, and, in order to avoid the isolation associated with typical thesis writing, to study the same authors: the American psychotherapist Carl R. Rogers in the first semester, and the French philosopher Aimé Forest in the second semester.

⁹² *A History of Philosophy* is an eleven-volume [history of Western philosophy](#) written by English [Jesuit priest Frederick Charles Copleston](#). Copleston's History provides extensive coverage of Western philosophy from the [Pre-Socratics](#) through [Dewey](#), [Russell](#), [Moore](#), [Sartre](#) and [Merleau-Ponty](#). The first nine volumes, originally published between 1946 and 1974, were written for [Catholic seminary](#) students with the goal "of supplying Catholic [ecclesiastical](#) seminaries with a work that should be somewhat more

knowledge. They were looking at nature, being, and its first principle. They were desperately trying to make sense of their experience of the universe. With the advent of the Sophists, attention moved away from nature itself and to human nature. The latter became what was most important in knowledge; in fact rhetoric, persuasion and teaching became more important than truth itself. Everything became a matter of pure opinion and there resulted an atmosphere of intellectual insecurity and chaos. Emphasis was placed on the subjective aspects of human knowledge.

Aristotle took what appeared to be contradictory truths and showed how, as a matter of fact, they were not at all contradictory but both necessary and complimentary. Plato had distinguished very well between sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge: he had understood that the most important values in life cannot be seen by the eyes, heard by the ears, touched by the hands, and smelled with the nose.

It is very difficult to overestimate how so remarkable such an intuition was. Antoine de St-Exupéry discovered the same truth not so long ago but in a very different context. In his *Le Petit Prince* he keeps repeating that “l’essentiel est invisible”, that one cannot see with one’s eyes that which really matters in life. In his *Lettre à un otage*, he explains how being in the desert really allows one to discover that which is truly important. When one is stranded in the Sahara desert, one is cut off from the world of sense knowledge. There is nothing for the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the nose to smell and the hands to touch.

detailed and of wider scope than the textbooks, commonly in use, and which at the same time should endeavor to exhibit the logical development and interconnection of philosophical systems.” A tenth volume was added in 1986, and the eleventh is actually a collection of essays which appeared in 1956 as *Contemporary Philosophy*. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_History_of_Philosophy_\(Copleston\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_History_of_Philosophy_(Copleston)) consulted on October 13th 2015.

This sudden and very radical separation forces one to become aware of what really matters in everyday life, in one's experience of knowledge and love. Thanks to the power of one's mind, it is possible to wander, in one's yearning for the real world, from the desert to France.

I cannot help but see a very striking resemblance between what Plato calls the really real world (in other words, that which escapes the senses) and what St-Exupéry refers to as that which truly matters in life, which is invisible.

Plato, it seems to me, was right when he interpreted his experience of human knowledge. He was right regarding the dimension emphasized above. However, he was also wrong, not so much in what he affirmed, but in what was necessarily denied or negated by what he affirmed. He affirmed the primacy of intellectual knowledge. However, as he was not aware of the doctrine of analogy and abstraction, he negated or at least greatly reduced sense knowledge. For him, the really real world is in no way attained or reached through sense knowledge. Sense knowledge is not pregnant with intelligibility, with being, with beauty, with goodness, with truth. No, not even in potency. These are not present at all in sense knowledge. The latter's role is purely instrumental, in that it serves to stimulate the human being, to awaken him or her from the deep sleep of forgetfulness and oblivion, to remind him or her of the really real world. Thus sense knowledge is not so much a mediator between the spiritual and the material, the visible and the invisible, the intelligible and the unintelligible, but rather an obstacle. It prevents one from seeing the good, the true, and the beautiful. One must turn away from sense knowledge. One must attain the Absolute by denying the finite, by negating the world of sense knowledge.

Unless one gaps the bridge between sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge, one will be forced to choose either

intellectual knowledge or sense knowledge. Choosing one will necessarily mean excluding the other. Affirming the reality of one will mean denying the reality of the other. Affirming necessity will imply denying contingency. Affirming contingency will imply denying necessity. Affirming movement will imply denying stability and sameness and affirming stability and sameness will imply denying movement. Affirming accidents (color, odor, shape, etc.) will result in denying substance and affirming substance will result in denying accidents. Affirming unity will be denying multiplicity and affirming multiplicity will be denying unity. Affirming principles will be denying facts and affirming facts will be denying principles. Affirming being will be denying becoming and affirming becoming will be denying being. One will have to choose life as a process, as a becoming, or life as something fixed. Choosing eternal values will mean denying temporal ones. Looking after God will mean neglecting people and looking after people will mean neglecting God. Looking after your neighbor will mean neglecting yourself and looking after yourself will mean neglecting your neighbor. Being a saint will mean being unreal and being real will mean not being a saint. Looking after one's soul will mean neglecting one's body and looking after one's body will mean neglecting one's soul. Being ecumenical will mean being willing to change one's whole conception and adhering to transcendental truth will mean not being ecumenical. Being for Quebec will mean being against Canada and being for Canada will mean being against Quebec. Being for freedom (which requires contingency) will mean being against all determinism whatsoever, all lawfulness, all order. Being for order, for determinateness, will mean being against freedom.

Albert Camus affirms contingency. He deals with facts, one after the other. He describes man's everyday life. He emphasizes multiplicity. Is this to say that he does not

search for life, for truth, and for beauty? No, not at all. He does search for these. But he arrives at absurdity, at paradox, at unintelligibility. Life as it appears to him is devoid of meaning, of order, of orientation, of necessity. Things happen and they just happen: that's all there is to it. The world as he sees it is stale. No hierarchy. No meaning. No finality.

Antoine de St-Exupéry is also struck by life's contingency. For him life does have meaning though. But what place does he leave for geology, for biology, for chemistry, etc., in the life of man? Does he not devalue science and technology by emphasizing and prioritizing mystical or spiritual knowledge? I say this without in the least wanting to diminish the timeliness and depth of his message, for it is a well-known fact that we are inclined, nowadays, to overemphasize the importance of science and technology.

Carl R. Rogers sees life as a process, as a becoming. This is an undeniable fact. But in so doing he rejects the same, the unchanging, the eternal, in the field of values. Affirming the unchanging, for him, would be equivalent to becoming dogmatic, unreal, for life as it is does change. He fails to see the unchanging present in the changing. Or better still, he does see this unchanging, this orderliness, but the most that can be said about it is that it is probable and approximate. To say, 'what is, is, what is not, is not', for him, would be devoid of meaning. For he takes being for granted, his search for order and meaning does not start here but only at a more distant point. He takes presence for granted. Presence itself, he does not try to understand. He merely tries to understand man in his personality conflicts.

Emmanuel Kant lived an experience of scientific knowledge (physics) somewhat like Plato had lived an experience of truth, beauty, oneness, goodness, etc. Like Plato, Kant tried to explain his experience. He was struck by the arbitrariness of metaphysical answers and the

solidity of scientific answers. He thus tried to understand why the latter answers were solid, like Plato had also done. Seeing that, on the one hand, sense knowledge could not and could never represent the basis of scientific knowledge, eternally associated as it is to the contingent, the changing, the unnecessary, he merely turned his back on sense knowledge.

Unlike Plato, though, Kant did not turn to the platonic 'really real world'. He concluded that, intelligibility, necessity, meaning, and order, must, of necessity, proceed from my intellectual knowledge. But whenever someone explains a scientific judgment by reducing it to a human being who is always changing, who is heading for death, he must account for the universal validity of a scientific judgment. The validity, as we have seen, does not come from our sense knowledge; therefore it comes from our intellectual knowledge. But if it comes from my intellect, how is it that it holds true for your intellect and that of others?

To overcome this obstacle, Kant was obliged to go beyond each individual human being and to postulate what he called the transcendental One. I do not recall the details but this, I believe, is the gist of his thought. The categories that he discusses are attributes of the human mind and they are supposed to fit, or correspond to, all the judgments that one could possibly make on reality.

Those who came after Kant and relied on his doctrine of human knowing *had to place the source, the heart of intelligibility in man, and no longer in the universe itself*. Human freedom would then have to be explained from man himself. And no doubt creativity would be given a volcanic boost unknown to previous historical periods.

As I'm trying to understand a little of what Hegel said, as I'm continually wondering what in the world could have taken hold of a man like Hegel, a man like you and me, but

not like you and me in his incredible intellectual enthusiasm, I'm beginning, once I see that he unquestioningly accepted the Kantian postulates, to understand.

How come Hegel was so sure that he could sum up the history of the entire world just sitting in his room and thinking? How come he thought he could bring unity to all of the world's problems, and this up to the minutest detail? How could he be so bold as to make the Holy Trinity fit so well with the rest of his theory, and how could he be so ingenuous in doing so?

Hegel knew that intelligibility did not come from sense knowledge—so he thought! When he would walk into his classroom he felt that he could leave the everyday world at the door.

Effort to develop authentic personal reflection

As I am pursuing my everyday studies in philosophy I am constantly asking myself, "But what do *I personally* think of all this?" And this question often leaves me very ill at ease and plunges me into considerable obscurity. True enough, I no longer feel frightened when I realize that a Descartes or a Montaigne doubted of just about everything under the sun. There was a time when I was not so sure if their conception was not just as logical and valid as the one that I was being taught at Sedes Sapientiae. But slowly I have been able to regain security in my own insights.

As I am writing these very words, I no longer feel insecure and doubtful about the validity of human knowledge, and of *my own* knowledge. *I realize that there are a great number of truths to which I adhere absolutely and without a doubt whatsoever.*

That I exist, that my parents exist, that there is an ongoing war in Vietnam, that I suffer every day, that I feel a void in my life every day, that I laugh, that I want to be good, that

other people want to be good, etc.: all these things I could never doubt of.

However, Father Garceau⁹³ has gradually made me realize that it does not suffice to say that I am a realist: I must know what I mean when I affirm this. Father Garceau is convinced that human knowledge pivots around two poles, inseparably linked to one another. In general terms I suppose that one could call these poles subjectivity and objectivity, immanence and transcendence. The minute one starts reflecting by isolating one of these two poles or dimensions, cutting it off from the other, then one falls into either a naïve realism or a refined idealism.

If one emphasizes reality or the real world by saying that human knowledge depends essentially on reality for its life, then one takes the risk of assuming that knowing reality consists in simply recording it, copying it passively, or taking a good look (naïve realism).

If one emphasizes the fact that the human mind is active in the process of knowledge, is creative, then one takes the risk of saying that to know reality is to project meaning and order into it, thus reducing the world to man himself. Man becomes the center of attraction (idealism).

It is evident that when Father Garceau affirms that the human mind loses itself if it fails to consent to reality, to consent to depend on reality, his affirmation has a great deal more meaning for him than it does for me or for anyone else in the classroom. But I feel that I must attempt to explore this question on my own.

Sure I am amazed by Father Garceau's depth of analysis, by his astounding intellectual integrity, by his profound sense of history, etc. However, must I not learn to go beyond the confidence that I have in him by rendering the

⁹³ Father Benoit Garceau, an Oblate priest, was my thesis director for the paper I wrote on the French philosopher, Aimé Forest.

latter unnecessary, at least regarding this dimension of human knowing?

So here goes...

It is not the first time that I've reflected on the nature of knowledge. I have spent countless hours trying to understand what it means, what it is.

I have spent countless hours with my fellow seminarians Jean-Paul Ross and René Fernet trying to help them become sensitive to and discover all the wealth and mysteriousness embedded in their most ordinary daily experience of knowing! I remember how much I insisted once on the importance of having a sense of wonder or awe. If one catches the disease of analysis and is no longer capable of expressing wonder before the object being considered, then it would be preferable for one not to even bother undertaking the task of knowing, I had commented!

The first important point seems to be the following one: in my reflection on the nature of knowing, I can never arrive at a valid answer unless I reflect on my own experience of knowing.

Such a remark may at first appear superfluous and unnecessary. Who in their right mind would ever think of doing otherwise? But from the little experience that I have I realize that it often happens to us and to me in particular.

During the first semester our fourth year philosophy group was in a meeting one day discussing the method that, in each person's opinion, was proper to philosophizing. Some were saying: it is this; some were saying: it is that. The discussion was evolving in a manner that made it clear that *we* were the ones who could decide what the method was. "It must be precise. It must be scientific, etc."

I suddenly came to the realization that the greatest obstacle we were facing in our discussion was our lack of closeness

to being. Our thinking was loose, not meditative. It was not going anywhere because it was not starting from anywhere.

To return to the question of human knowing. Each one of us has an experience of knowledge. Each and every day our life is nothing but a search for meaning and for plenitude.

We have not chosen the experience, not any more than we have chosen our own life, our own family, our own country, and our own parents. I have not chosen to have the face that I have, the hands that I have, the smile that I have. Similarly, I have not chosen my experience of knowing and I am not free, either, to give it the meaning that I would like to give it. I must accept it the way it is, that is all there is to it. Reflecting on it does not mean rendering that which is chaotic intelligible. It does not mean creating it in that which it has that is most precious. It means welcoming it. Reflecting on it means listening to it. Being attentive. Listening to the note it strikes and the sound it produces.

What it means to know

What happened a few minutes ago when I went downstairs to have a snack with the students? I met Jérôme, Jacques, Jean-Guy and Alain. We wondered whether or not the devil really exists as a person, whether it is wrong and sinful to have intercourse with someone you are about to marry.

What does this precise experience of knowing represent for me?

It is very important to understand the meaning of the question. I am not asking myself to attempt to describe Jérôme or Jacques or to describe our discussion or to pass a judgment on it. I am asking myself what went on, in myself and in them, when we had this experience of knowing. Had I chosen not to go downstairs, I would not have had the same experience as I did. Neither would they. But what precisely took place?

It is very hard to find the right words but I would say that I am less alone. They are too. They have become part of me and I part of them. I was affected by the sadness that was written all over Jean-Guy's face. Perhaps they were affected by my deep peace and joy. Beyond their bodies I met their persons. We do not see persons, we MEET them! We do not smell persons, we meet them! We do not hear persons, we meet them! What I heard were words, but I met THEM.

Somehow we were together. We were gathered.

Darn it all! It seems to me I am not rendering my experience adequately. What I am trying to express is so simple that it can lend itself to laughter. It is so common as not to appear extraordinary.

Why is it that when I first came to Ottawa at the age of seventeen I felt as if I had stopped living, as if I had ceased to exist? I felt empty and lifeless? I felt like a corpse?

My heart was not in Ottawa but at home in River Canard. The things that I knew, the people that I knew were not in Ottawa. I was a stranger. Strange the walls of my room. Strange the fellows I ate with. Strange the streets, the sounds.

When I know I become what I know. It becomes part of me.

Philosophizing is asserting what knowing should be (de jure), not what it is (de facto)

Now in reflecting on my experience of knowing, it is okay for me to say that I know this, I know that. But the minute I say that to know means to be, then I have to be careful. Some have said that to know means to do. They were probably struck by one aspect of their experience of knowledge.

St-Exupéry had an experience of knowledge and it brought him to assert that, 'On ne connaît bien qu'avec le coeur'.
One only knows well through the heart.

Descartes lived an experience of knowing that made him say that *to know something is to see it clearly, to be able to distinguish it from everything else.*

Carl Rogers lived an experience of knowledge that brought him to the conclusion that *to know is to hypothesize*; he was struck by the fact that human knowledge is forever checking itself, changing, adapting itself to new situations, going ahead of itself and verifying itself.

Joseph Maréchal – and after him, Charles de Moré-Pontgibaud – found that to judge or knowing something intellectually means *to unify, to render necessary*. He was struck on the one hand by the fact that all human judgment implies unity and necessity, and, on the other, by the fact that all that we know and experience in our human condition – our ideas and ourselves – is contingent and ephemeral.

What impressed Plato in his experience of knowledge is the following: *real knowledge is not sense knowledge but only intellectual knowledge*. And for Plato when I know something intellectually, all I am doing is recalling the knowledge that I already have (but have forgotten) of the essences which are pure, eternal, really real, and in which the world of senses participates.

As I said before, it is okay when people say, I know this, I know that. I have had such and such an experience of knowledge. What impressed me was goodness, unity, beauty. What impressed me was how everything is always becoming, changing (Heraclitus). What impressed me was how everything is the same, is stable, predictable: what is, is and what is not, is not (Parmenides). What impressed me was the freedom involved in knowing, the fact that through

knowing I am constantly creating meaning and values in my life (Sartre).

In describing their experience, they are true, they are the masters, they are the ones who know best. The most we can do is try to participate in their experience, try to see it the way they saw and lived it.

But describing an experience is never philosophical in nature. One starts philosophizing when one asserts what an experience should be, when one asserts not what an experience is de facto but what it is de jure.

But when one makes such an assertion, one exposes oneself. Each one of us has an experience. This is an indubitable fact. And we know, up to a certain extent, what this experience is. So when we are confronted with Descartes's assertion concerning what true and authentic knowledge is, for example, we can see for ourselves up to what extent his affirmation is valid. We can compare what our experience actually *is* to what, according to Descartes, it *should* be (de jure). And we can also ascertain up to what extent *it preserves or takes into account of our experience in all of its integrity*.

Descartes says knowledge is true and certain when it is clear and distinct. So I take a look at my own experience. What about the truth and certitude that flows from my relationships of love and confidence with another person or group of persons? What about my artistic experience? What about my experience of prayer? What about my ethical experience, my experience of the good and the bad?

In all these instances, I feel Descartes' affirmation leaves to be desired. It is too narrow. It does not really render or do justice to my global experience. It does not respect and take into account my primary experience of knowing, that which Carl Rogers refers to as 'organismic sensing'.

Of course Descartes does explain something. I do see what he means. In mathematics, when I add two and two I know this knowledge is true because it is clear and distinct, because it does not allow for approximation and vagueness. However, when my brother tells me, "I'm going to the drugstore to buy some aspirins", I do not adhere to what he says because of its clearness and distinctness but because of the *confidence* that I have in him.

And when I become aware that I am alive and that I am living in a very complex and mysterious world, one of constant change like that of a river, *the truth and certitude of my awareness do not proceed from the clarity and distinctness of my knowledge but rather from the relationship that I have with the world of persons and things and from the relationship that I have with myself.*

So when one reflects on the nature of one's cognitive activity, one must above all be careful not to reduce it to what may only represent an authentic, but in the end only very PARTIAL and LIMITED aspect of this activity.

We are all greatly exposed to this temptation because we all view the world and its realities from our own perspective.

Plato, in a very different context of course, warns us against this danger. A person, he says, who places a lot of confidence in other people is greatly disillusioned when he or she finds out these people are the contrary of what he or she thought they were. And if this experience repeats itself often enough, and especially with his most intimate friends, then he is liable to conclude that *all* persons are evil, and none of them worthy of confidence. His experience is authentic, says Plato, but he errs inasmuch as he sees all of reality through his prejudice, his preconceived ideology.

Psychologists tell us that reality is, for newborn children, their mother. They are not even aware of themselves as a separate entity. When they breastfeed, they do not know

that this breast belongs to someone distinct from themselves. When they move their hands and hit the side of the bed, they do not know that the bed is separate from their own entity. Because reality is so greatly reduced, the question of how reality appears to them in the first moments of life is very important; it is vital for their psychological health. If what they encounter in this experience is harshness, coldness, rigidity, and hatred, then reality is, for them, an object of fear. If what they experience is tenderness, care, love and warmth, then, the whole world appears in that light. They will be confident persons.

It seems to me that many of our contemporary philosophers have not surpassed the stage just described. They interpret reality starting from their experience but reduce it to what it appears to be *for them*. From what appears striking in their experience they conclude to what reality should be. They decide by themselves why man is alienated, why he is unhappy. They decide by themselves what philosophy should be. What art should be, what politics should be, what is right and what is wrong.

What should characterize the philosopher if not one's capacity to go beyond appearances to the heart of things? Should one be reduced to merely making explicit that which the world phenomenally appears to be *for oneself*? Should one be reduced to saying only what has value for oneself, for oneself as an individual free person? Or rather should one not affirm to all what reality is, what the order of the world is, what is the real nature of human beings, what authentic happiness is, what is the real nature of freedom?

And should one be accused of dogmatism if one adheres to certain absolute truths?

**Being (or presence) is essential to knowing
whenever and wherever it occurs**

Let us now return to our reflection on the nature of knowledge. What does it mean to know?

The question is not, "What does it mean to know mathematically, physically, in a relation of love, in chemistry, in art, in religion, etc.?" The question is more radical than that. What is essential to knowledge whenever and wherever it occurs or happens?

Clarity and distinctness? Identity? Mobility? Freedom? Necessity? Universality? Individuality? It seems to me it is none of these. Yes, these dimensions are all present in knowledge but are not essential to all experiences of knowing.

The only answer that I can come up with is: *being*.

When I know, I am; I become what I know.

Unless one has reflected a great deal on the matter, this answer can appear vague and meaningless.

To be is so simple and yet it means so much.

When I know someone, I do not purchase him or her like I would purchase a car. Neither does someone become part of me in the sense of becoming lost in me somewhat like the apple that I am eating.

When I know someone a relationship is created between that person and me. I become richer but he or she does not become poorer. This relationship is not something visible; it escapes the eye.

If we were to try to represent visibly the process of knowledge between two persons or between a person and a thing, we could say this: their first encounter could be represented by one chain or rope linking them together. Each act of knowledge represents a new relationship. Or

rather each act of knowledge is a deepening, an enriching of the initial encounter or relationship.

One becomes what one listens to, what one looks at, what one touches, what one smells, what one reflects upon, what one meditates.

A great oriental philosopher Lao Tzu once said, “The way to do is to be”.

And I would add, “The way to be is to know and the way to know is to love”.

I am inasmuch as I know. The only problem in life is learning to know. That is what Aristotle meant when he asserted that the human soul has the capacity to become all things. For Saint Thomas Aquinas this same assertion acquires even more meaning and depth.

But when I said that to know is to be the other, this statement must be properly understood. Intelligibility starts with presence and always dwells in presence.

However, presence implies identity. When I realize that Tom exists I never realize that he exists in general. No, Tom exists, he takes up a portion of presence in all the other presences I know.

Tom is what he is. Tom does not exhaust being. He is not the only being in the universe. Helen also exists. So do I. So do my car, my toothbrush, the atom bomb, the sun, rain, etc. Tom is not Helen, nor Helen Tom. Tom is not rain. Rain is not snow. Tom is not his foot, nor his hair, nor his color, nor his weight, nor his muscular strength. Yet, when I step on his foot he says, “Quit stepping on my foot!” Somehow the relation between Tom and his foot is very different from the relation between his foot and me.

Being does not appear to us as an indistinct mass of being. Certain things have more importance than others. They are

related to each other. They are related to each other always in certain respects.

For example, if you come from Windsor and I also come from that city, we are related to each other in that respect. If we come from the same parish in Windsor then the relation is stronger. If you are my brother, then it is stronger, and if you are about the same age as me it is yet stronger. If two persons have the same color of skin they are related to each other in that respect. If they are at the same place at the same time, they are related in that respect.

To have certain qualities, then, to be in certain places at certain times; to do the same things in the same way and aiming at the same goal: all these are relations.

But some relations are stronger than others. What is the most profound relationship in the whole world? In what does everything find itself related to everything else?

Are we all related to each other in that we are white? Some are black. In that we are all tall? Some are short. In that we are all Africans? Some are Canadians. In that we eat? Some do not eat. In that we have life? Some do not have life. In that we are free? Some are not free. In that we know? Some do not know. In that we have bodies? Some beings, at least one, does not have a body.⁹⁴

We are related in what? In that we are what we are? Yes. In that we are? Yes. We are all alike in that we are and we are all different in that we are what we are and only what we are. Tom is different from Helen in that he is not Helen but Tom. Tom then refers to another reality than Helen does. When I speak of Tom I am referring to Tom, not Helen. Tom is similar to Helen in that they both are. Both exist. Therefore neither one of them is existence. If one were

⁹⁴ Note added in 2017: When philosophizing, I occasionally, as in this precise case, considered God as if God was immediately evident to the human mind, and not a matter of faith.

existence then the other would not exist; but the other does exist.

Are all beings related in that they are human beings? No, because many beings are not human beings. Therefore the fact of being human cannot as such be the uniting principle of the universe. But what is it that we mean to say when we assert that a human being is a human being? Is one a human being in that one has a body? No, other beings have a body. In that one exists? No, other beings have existence. In that one lives? No, other beings live and are not human beings. In that one is an animal? No, there are many other beings that are animals. In that one talks? At first it would seem to be yes but after giving it some thought one must say no. For a human being cannot be a human being only inasmuch as one speaks. If that were the case, then one would cease to be a human being when one stops talking. Is a human being a human being, then, inasmuch as one has the capacity to talk? But what about the newborn infant who cannot talk, is he or she not a human being? Therefore it would seem that being a human being usually means being able to talk but talk ability is not his or her essence. Those who cannot talk (dumb) would no longer be human beings. Is a human being a human being in that he or she is what he or she is? No, other beings are what they are but are not human beings. Is he not a human being in that he knows? No, animals know and are not human beings. In that he loves? No, other beings are said to love and are not human. In that he knows being, what is? In that he is able to understand, to know the relative value of beings? These last aspects seem to characterize human beings. In that he or she is able to love intelligently. If I did not know I could not love. I love what I know. I am only capable of loving the way I know. If my look could not penetrate beyond particulars, could not escape both time and place, if I could only see what is pleasant to me then I would only be able to do what is pleasant to me. But if I can go beyond

pleasantness and see what is good for the other regardless of his pleasantness or unpleasantness for me, then I can love the other for himself or herself. I can do what is good for him or her.

Is Peter a man in that he is Peter? If it were so, then Peter would be the only man on earth. But Helen is a human being and Peter is also a human being. They both exist and are different. They are not different in that they exist, in that they are what they are, in that they are human beings. Therefore there must be another principle besides existence and being human that explains the fact that one is not the other.

At this point in my reflection I am up against a brick wall. I do not see clearly what this individuating principle could be. I at least know with certitude that this principle must not be a perfection or attribute that they both share. For example, they both share being, goodness and beauty. Inasmuch as they share, they are one. It is only in that which they do not share that they can be distinct, that they can be two. The more attributes they have in common the more they are one, and the more they are mutually related the more they form a community. The fewer attributes they share or have in common, the less they are one and the more they are two.

The individuating principle cannot be nothingness. Nothingness can explain absolutely nothing. It therefore must be something positive. Thus it must be, in a certain way, a perfection or attribute, but a passive one. (The following commentary, written in red, appeared in the margins of my manuscript: "Here I am taking potency as a certain act, and therefore am yielding to the temptation of naïve realism!")

The individuality is not absolute. It can never be absolute. If a thing does not exist, then there is no use talking about it. But if it does, then, *by the mere fact that it exists*, it has

something in common with everything else that exists. And furthermore, whatever we are trying to explain has existence, or exists, otherwise we would have nothing to explain.

If two beings share existence, and they in fact do, then something must account for this. Existence itself cannot be a principle of individuality. Therefore this principle must be distinct from existence. But while being distinct, this principle must be united to the perfection of existence, it must not be separate from it, otherwise it could never explain the fact of sharing. When we say that Tom is not existence itself we imply necessarily that he has only part of existence and is deprived of the rest. And the same holds true for Helen.

Now if each one of them only has a *part* of existence there must be something to account for this partedness. This something must be real, it must really be part of the constitution of Helen and that of Tom. This something must limit the perfection of existence. It must be a limiting factor.

Granted that Tom and Helen are distinct in their existence, by the presence in each of them, of a limiting factor (essence) this does not solve the problem discussed above. We were trying to find the reason why Tom and Helen, while both being human beings, are not the *same* human being. The principle we are searching for must not limit them in their existence but rather in their manhood or human hood. Now human hood, like existence, is a uniting factor. Tom and Helen have human hood in common, they share this trait. Therefore...

Before going any further, I would like to clarify a point that has been very obscure, I believe, so far. When I say that Tom is a man am I saying the same thing as when I say that Tom is humanity? Humanity is that which explains the essence of man. If I say the essence of a pail is to contain

liquid and then turn around and say ‘what you hold in your hand is a pail’ am I making the same assertion here and there? Are not all pails visible? Are they not all of a material nature, having a certain weight, height, color, etc.? Therefore when I say, ‘what you hold in your hand is a pail’ I not only signify that it can contain a liquid but also that it is of material nature, etc. Similarly, when I say, ‘Tom is a man’ I thereby signify much more than mere rationality. I signify animality, life, being, etc. I mean to say that he has a body, etc. I cannot say that he is humanity because humanity is an abstraction from all animality, from all flesh and bones. A human being is not reducible to that perfection that makes him or her be a human being. A human being is also an animal. He or she is also material. He or she has quantity, color, etc.

To return to our problem. Tom and Helen share in human hood but are individuated by what? Being a human being always implies being corporeal, being animal, being alive, etc. But it does not imply being *this* body, *this* animal, *this* being, *this* life. Therefore the individuating principle cannot be corporeality nor animality nor materiality. Saint Thomas uses the expression “material assignate quantitat” – a quantity assigned to a matter or a matter assigned to a quantity.

I am really amazed at the depth of Saint Thomas Aquinas’s thought. He is a very great realist when he boldly asserts *this* body, *this* flesh, *these* bones. Can we accuse him of not taking into account the concrete facts of life, the unique, the indefinable, the existential? On the other hand, he is a very great intellectualist too. The mind is not there standing before reality, merely copying or taking a picture of it. Human beings think, they think profoundly. Human beings search to unify reality, to unify the multiplicity they find in reality. Saint Thomas clarifies the meaning and limits of abstraction.

Once we know the essence of the human being we do not know everything about human beings. Our knowledge is still very poor *for we still have to know each one individually. This man, that woman, etc.:* Peter and Mary. This kind of rationalism or intellectualism does not turn its back on facts; it knows and acknowledges the limits and scope of the human intellect. To know the nature of being white, or whiteness, does not mean to know everything that is white. *Reality infinitely surpasses what our human mind, in its effort to define, can express or say about it.*

The tragedy of philosophy is to have cut human reflection from being. The minute you do that your philosophy becomes a system, and in fact a closed system. The mind can now pretend to explain everything about everything. Evil is not much of a problem and can be elucidated quite easily. You can explain the history of the whole world sitting in your office and just thinking about it.

The genius of Saint Thomas lies in his doctrine of analogy.

When it comes to reducing the multiplicity of human individuals to the unity of humanity the task is possible. When it comes to reducing all white objects to unity, inasmuch as they are white, it is still not very hard. When it comes to understanding the cause of bad teeth or weak bones, a common cause can be arrived at.

However, when it comes to reducing all of reality, all human beings in the world, to unity, then the task is arduous. I cannot abstract beingness from beings the way I abstract white from white objects and humanity from human beings. When I abstract whiteness I am concentrating only on that specific quality and leaving aside everything else: quantity, height, etc. When I abstract humanity I am concentrating on that specific quality that renders a being human, but am leaving aside everything else. Including what makes Peter unique and what makes

Helen unique. I am leaving aside all their unique qualities, I am leaving aside their “*thisness*”.

I can quite easily understand what it means for Mary to be fat. When I try to grasp her fatness I do not have to spend my whole life doing it. However, when I try to understand what it means *for her to be*, then it is quite another story. Then I could spend my whole life doing it and each day would bring newness. It is a mystery not in the sense of something I cannot understand but in the sense that it means so much that I can never fully understand it: meaning continually overflows and infinitely surpasses me.

My mind can quite easily embrace fatness; being, never. *When one concentrates on a being's beingness one is concentrating on the heart of reality.* One is in touch with what Thales de Milet, Anaximène, etc. were looking for. When one tries to put into words what one understands, all one can say is “what is, is; what is not, is not”. Whiteness means to be this way instead of that way. Fatness means being this way instead of that way. Life means being this ways instead of that way.

My mind is essentially related to what is, to presence

But being means what? I am stuck, I cannot reduce it to anything else. To be means to be. All that is, is. Once I have stated or rather grasped this principle, I have not said very much. I have not exhausted the meaning of “to be”. All I have actually said is, “*My mind is essentially related to what is. It is openness to what is. It depends on it. It can never part with it or else it parts with itself*”.

Our knowledge is intentional and so are our concepts. A concept never points to itself. It points to another than itself. But the most intentional of all concepts is the concept of being. It is a relation to being. A living relation.

Being is not definable because to define means to situate something in an ensemble. To define means to delimit. A thing is this and this and not that and that. But being is never this and this. It is not measurable by anything else because it is the ultimate measure. It does not rest on anything other than itself because outside of it there is nothing.

I cannot understand being because it is the very stuff that makes me understand. When I understand a situation it means that I can reduce all the new elements of the situation to elements that I already know. The first thing you do when you are trying to explain to someone how a motor works is to find out just what the person listening already knows. Starting from what that person knows, you proceed to the unknown, showing how the unknown is linked to the known and included in the known. (The following commentary, written in French and in red, appeared in the margins of my handwritten diary: “Lorsque Heidegger affirme que la non vérité est la source de la vérité, n’est-ce-pas ceci qu’il veut dire? Pour bien comprendre il faut savoir le sens du mot vérité pour Heidegger. Pour lui, vérité = révélation.” – When Heidegger states that non-truth is the source of truth, is not this what he means? To understand properly, one must know the meaning of the word ‘truth’ for Heidegger. For him, truth = revelation)

Authentic philosophical reflection is not so much learning something new. Rather it is learning to deepen what one already knows.

Philosophy should not render us aloof and far removed from reality. It should make us become ever more familiar with it. It should not make us become self-sufficient.

Sometimes you meet people, especially students, who have developed what they refer to as, “my philosophy”. They like to discuss God, evil, love, etc. However, when you

start conversing with them you rapidly discover that they are in love with their own ideas. They just love to watch themselves think. It feels so good to be able to decide whether or not God exists, whether or not such and such a thing is right or wrong.

What I feel like doing then is merely listening to them. I tell myself, "More experience will do them wonders." Reality appears ultra malleable to them. Soon they will realize that reality does not adjust itself to them but that they are the ones who must adjust to reality.

Reality will not simply fit and adjust itself to my idea of freedom, of love, of life, etc. My ideas must fit reality. My ideas must signify reality and they will, as points out Aimé Forest, only inasmuch as I consent to reality, inasmuch as I welcome it.

There is a time in life when we try to assert ourselves by turning our backs on our parents and on all those on whom we have thus far depended. With maturity we become less independent. More precisely: we no longer have to simply refuse or deny what preceded us in order to affirm what we would like to do and to be.

Tuesday night as I was listening to Father Leahy discuss Jean-Paul Sartre's atheism, I was struck by the simplicity of Sartre's philosophy. "Existence precedes essence, he says. At first I am not such and such. I am, period. I become such and such because I choose to become so. I am what I make myself become. I have not chosen existence but I can choose whatever *mode* of existence I like".

When Sartre describes his experience, one can hardly disagree with him. When he says that he is walking in a garden, etc., all we can do is listen to him and try to penetrate into his experience. His experience is real. It is a fact. It is a *de facto* truth. But the minute he starts interpreting his experience then we must become very alert

for it is so easy to set one's own experience of reality as a de jure truth. Reality is such and such. To know is to have clear and distinct ideas. To be a man is to be creator of one's own values and meanings in life.

But once you have affirmed that to be a man means to create your own values and meanings then you are in trouble. Whatever you meet in reality that has meaning, that has ontological weight, that has value, but that originates elsewhere than from yourself, you must reject. Whatever meaning, value, or being that does not come from you appears as a threat, something preventing you from being yourself. The earth you stand on is an obstacle to your freedom. A God that would give you something would be an obstacle to your freedom. "L'enfer, c'est les autres". ('The others are hell')

I do not feel like being harsh with Sartre. I think we should try to understand what he is experiencing and what he is going through. It is quite easy to say, "He experienced the Second World War", and to take this lightly and then go on to something else. But we must at least have the courage and humility to acknowledge our ignorance. We have not seen what he has seen. We have not experienced the chaos, the meaningless and absurdity that he witnessed. People become what they see.

Someone may object, and rightly so, "Whenever you consider the position of a philosopher you always bring to our attention the fact that he has interpreted his experience and has thus changed a de facto truth into a de jure one. This is where the mistake is usually made, you say. However, whenever you refer to St. Thomas Aquinas you seem to turn a blind eye to the fact that he does exactly the same thing. He experienced things in such a way that it led him to assert, "To be is to be: what is, is, what is not, is not".

My answer is the following: going from a de facto truth to a de jure truth is something positive; it is not a bad thing. As I said before, one only becomes a philosopher when one goes from a de facto situation to a de jure one; when one goes beyond what one is living and starts affirming.

Secondly, when one makes such a de jure affirmation, one generally never errs absolutely. Whatever one affirms usually expresses something about reality.

The error lies not in what is truly affirmed but in what is insufficiently affirmed. Descartes reduced knowledge to mathematical knowledge. And in so doing he basically closed the door to all other ways of knowing. Carl Rogers reduced knowing to hypothesizing, and in so doing he basically ignored the knowledge involved in proving or disproving various hypotheses.

The whole problem is to find the proper affirmation. The one that best reflects one's experience of knowing in its full breath and depth.

Herein lies the genius of Saint Thomas. When he asserted, "Scio aliquid esse", he seemed to say nothing at all. I know, he said, that something exists. In this simple assertion lies the foundation of our entire experience of human knowing. It is the heart of the matter. Its soul. Leave this out and the human mind is cut from its very oxygen; it starts choking, it loses contact with everything including itself.

"Ens est, non ens non est". (What is, is, what is not, is not)

The whole question is to reflect personally on one's own global experience of knowledge and to see for oneself whether or not this assertion corresponds to one's global experience, and respects it.

Is there any instance when human knowing does not deal with what exists? There are instances when human knowing is not clear and distinct but are there any when it

is cut from what is? Does this assertion respect Kant's experience of reality? Descartes's? Parmenides's? Heraclitus's? Plato's? Aristotle's? Carl R. Rogers's? Hegel's? Ovide Bastien's?

I am not asking whether or not it is in accordance with their *interpretation* of their experience but with their experience of knowledge as such. Does this assertion force us to reject what each one of these asserts, or does it not instead allow us to save it? Does it avoid closing its doors to truths they have lived but not noticed? Does it stay open to science? Does it avoid devaluating science as Saint Exupéry and Sartre have done? Does it stay open to contingency, to that in our lives that is absolutely unique, to facts, to the concrete? Or does it close itself from freedom, from contingency as do Hegel, Fichte and Schelling? Does it stay open to the simple realities of everyday life or does it close itself to this world by taking refuge in the reduced vision offered by the purely scientific view of the world?

It respects Parmenides's experience: what is, is; what is not, is not. However, it avoids the narrowness of his interpretation of this experience. Parmenides was so impressed by the stable aspect of his experience of knowing that he disregarded its instability, its movement, its ongoing process. By asserting the identity involved in knowing he denied its constant evolution and change. By asserting its identity he denied its change, its plurality, its evolution. Instead of reconciling two evidences he emphasized one thus throwing the other out of the window.

Aristotle had the genius of respecting his experience of knowing to a greater extent. He worked out a solution that respected both evidences; that originating from his senses, and that originating from his mind. That originating from sense knowledge and that originating from intellectual knowledge.

Parmenides thought there was no intermediary whatsoever between being and nonbeing. In a sense he was right: it is true that a thing is, and that if it is, it is, and that it is absolutely different, to use Shakespeare's word, 'to be' or 'not to be'. But in a sense he was wrong: *there is a difference between what exists and existence itself*. Socrates is not existence even though he exists. If Socrates did not exist, then the difference would be radical. Socrates is and what is, is. But Socrates has not always existed, he was born, he came into existence. Furthermore, Socrates is not the only one to exist: Plato exists also and so does Parmenides. Therefore it is not true to say that Socrates exists in an absolute way, and that if he exists, he must exist.

Socrates exists but while existing he changes. He becomes what he is not. From bad he becomes good. From vicious, he becomes virtuous. Young, old. Short, tall, etc. But it is impossible for a being to become what he already is. If Socrates is good, he cannot become good. He can become better but when he becomes better something in him that still was not good became good.

If Socrates CAN be more than he is now it is true to say that he can be what he is not. But is not "being able" a way of existence? Being able to be good is not the same as being good but it is not the same, also, as not being able to be good. The chair cannot talk but Socrates can. When one observes a chair and Socrates both in total silence, it remains true that Socrates *is*, with respect to the capacity of speaking, more than the chair.

Therefore it would seem that Parmenides left something out of his affirmation. If Socrates is, he is. No one could ever affirm that he is not. Here the difference is radical. But he is not existence itself, since others exist also and since he has not always existed and since he is able to become. Therefore he does not exhaust existence. He can acquire

more existence. Therefore *in some respects* Socrates is not. Socrates is not as good as he could be, he does not know all that he could know, etc. Thus one can assert that Socrates also is not.

Existence itself has an altogether radical meaning. Alone it does not allow for hierarchy. As Plato would say, “Existence is never non existence, justice is never injustice, and goodness is never evil, etc.” But, as pointed out Etienne Gilson, “existence does not exist”. Our world is one of multiplicity, plurality, individuality and hierarchy. I have never come across Mr. Existence on Rideau Avenue in Ottawa. Nor Mr. Non-Existence. I have come across John, Tom and Helen. I see stores, restaurants, Parliament buildings, etc. They all exist but they are distinct from one another.

One of the most difficult things I have found during my three and one half years of philosophy has been to reflect on my own experience of knowing. I think it is quite unfortunate that we start out by teaching students all kinds of distinctions before they even start thinking. The course is well prepared. “We shall examine human knowledge, the prof says. First we shall consider what it is and then analyze those conditions that render it possible”. And then he goes on distinguishing between sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge, and discussing concepts, judgments, simple apprehension, the first act of knowing versus the second act of knowing, etc. He asserts that we can attain the individual and accidental through our senses, but that only through intelligence or intellectual knowledge can we attain being as such. Being is the proper object of the intelligence, of the human mind.

It is sad when one knows all the distinctions and is acquainted with tons of technical vocabulary but without really being aware of what underlies these distinctions and vocabulary. If one asks the teacher, “Why can the senses

not attain being itself?” he will answer, “Because what appears to the senses is only intelligible in potency, not in act”. And he will refer to the passage in which Saint Thomas asserts this. But deep down, does the teacher really understand what makes Saint Thomas assert that sense knowledge only attains beings that are intelligible in potency? Then one can ask the teacher another question: “Are you sure that human knowing is made up of two distinct faculties?” When one is really honest and takes the trouble to undergo an authentic personal reflection on one’s own experience of knowing, the whole matter becomes quite obscure. The minute one no longer adheres to the distinction being made simply because the prof is asserting it or because it has been asserted in the past by Saint Thomas and many others, then one can become quite confused and puzzled. One can feel terribly ignorant and realize just how little one really knows. Most often one does not bother plunging into such a personal reflection because doing so is too much trouble. After all, there are many other things in life besides intellectual pursuit. So one makes the best of it. One adheres to what the prof is saying and leaves it at that. One puts one’s confidence in our Holy Mother the Church and continues learning what appears in the curriculum.

We do not realize just how important is our constant search for truth. We do not see how important all truths are, even the smallest ones. We do not realize that our craving for life, for action, for that which is good and brings us peace and joy is the same as our craving to know. We do not understand that trying to know and love Christ is akin to trying to know and love truth. And in Christ nothing is left out. In knowing Him I know all there is to know. Outside of Him, nothing is. In Him, everything is. Outside of Him, nothing has meaning. In Him, everything has meaning.

No one knows a priori that he is endowed with sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge. No one knows a priori that he is endowed with a will, with different faculties. The thing we do know is that we are alive; that we have an experience of knowing. That we have an experience of reality and of ourselves in reality.

When I say that I am sleeping do I mean the same thing as when I say that I am eating? When I say, "I don't know you at all", am I saying the same thing as when I say, "I cannot stand you!" When I say that I am running or jumping or eating or thinking or loving or hating or suffering or rejoicing, etc., am I saying the same thing as when I say that I am, that I exist?

Notice how I am in contact with being here. Notice also how active the principle of identity is. Eating is not the same as sleeping. Both are ways of being but both are different.

My various activities are distinct from my act of existing. When I stop sleeping, I do not stop existing. When I stop running neither. When I stop eating neither. Doing without food for an extended period of time would affect my existence but since I continue existing even though I am not *in the act of eating* I am not reducible to the act of eating.

All these distinctions sometimes appear superfluous. We can believe that we are losing our time in trying to thus deepen our knowledge. But all you have to do is discuss with university students for a while and you will feel the necessity of pursuing your task. One reads Camus. Another Sartre. Sartre does not acknowledge that there is a hierarchy in the world. One gets the impression that he is alone in his world and that Peter and Paul do not exist for him. Reality for him seems to be flattened out, vague, meaningless. Heidegger himself, perhaps the most important and influential contemporary philosopher, admits that man becomes himself only at that very moment when

he realizes that the world does not have meaning all by itself, that life is devoid of meaning. This experience of the nothingness or the void of reality brings one to the sudden realization that one must fill this void by oneself. One must give meaning to one's life. One cannot discover the meaning of life because there is simply no meaning there to discover. One must find personal fulfillment by contemplating being with love. Understanding is not trying to read into the heart of reality; it consists in projecting meaning into the heart of reality. Understanding another person is not trying to place oneself in an attitude of openness to being; it is trying to see the world the way he or she sees it.

It seems to me that only the mutual experience of being can bridge the ontological chasm that separates human beings. If I can never see reality *the way it is* but only the way I make it be *for me* then my only way of communing to another person is by communing to his or her values and way of seeing life.

If my knowledge of reality is not valid, healthy, real, and this right from the start, then I do not see how it would ever be possible to find a valid way to reality.

At the beginning of *L'être et le néant* (Being and Nothingness) Heidegger says that he must find the right method or approach to reality. Is he so sure that because our knowledge of reality is not already valid we must therefore find a way of rendering it valid? Is this not a postulate that he makes and simply leaves unquestioned? Is he not telling us what knowledge is before even reflecting on his own experience of knowing? On what is he basing himself to assume, from the start, that his primary experience of knowing is not valid?

“If being is to reveal to us its structure without falsification, then it must be, of itself (*de son côté*), rendered accessible to us in itself.” (p. 22)⁹⁵

This argument assumes that being is not attainable in itself, as it is, and this right from the start. Heidegger says: if being is to reveal its structure *without falsification* then it must be, of itself (*de son côté*), rendered accessible to us in itself. If it must be rendered accessible to us in itself it is therefore not—at least, this is so assumed—already accessible to us. Therefore we do not know the meaning of being. We only know it superficially. The question immediately arises, “Where, then, shall we search to find the real meaning of being? Which being is most privileged in this respect?”

“The problem of being, in relation to the object under scrutiny, requires that one first find a suitable mode of access to being and firmly establish this path. But we call 'being' many things and in many different senses (...) In what being will it be necessary to read the meaning of being, in what being will the explanation of being take its starting point?” (p. 22)⁹⁶

Descartes had done the same thing when he had started doubting the validity of his primary experience of knowing. Descartes was searching for something that would give meaning and solidity to his knowledge because he did not see how his everyday experience of knowing already enjoyed meaning and solidity. Once he found the criterion

⁹⁵ “Pour être capable de nous révéler sans falsification les caractères de son être, l'étant devra d'abord, de son côté, nous être rendu accessible en lui-même” (This is the French version, which I translated into English).

⁹⁶ “Le problème de l'être, relativement à ce qu'est pour lui l'objet interrogé, exige que l'on commence par trouver un mode d'accès convenable à l'étant et qu'on s'assure de ce moyen. Mais nous appelons 'étant' bien des choses et selon bien des sens différents (...) En *quel* étant faudra-t-il lire le sens de l'être, en quel étant l'explication de l'être prendra-t-elle son point de départ?” (This is the French version, which I translated into English).

of validity—clear and distinct ideas—he then approached, armed with this criterion, all of reality. Not surprisingly, all that did not fit inside the prism of this criterion of validity would have to be thrown out of the window or placed on the backburner.

As for Kant, he was struck on the one hand by the fact that metaphysics seemed arbitrary and imprecise and on the other by the fact that the physical sciences were precise and solid. What can I do, he pondered, to eliminate the impreciseness and arbitrariness that has characterized metaphysics for the past centuries? The physical sciences made great steps forward the minute humans started approaching reality, not with a blank mind that would so to speak scan or copy reality, but armed with a precise question. *Philosophers have always believed that the mind depended on reality and not reality on the mind, just as scientists all believed, before Copernicus, that the sun moved around the earth and not the earth around the sun.*

Although Kant was writing his introduction when he put down on paper the above thoughts, I believe that he was providing us with one of his conclusions, and probably the most important one. Trying to understand why the scientific judgment was so solid and precise, he was forced to ask himself whether or not necessity and universality originated from the senses. Adhering as he did to Hume's conception of sense knowledge, he could not see how they could, how the senses could ever give birth to necessity and universality. When I say that the fire burned my hand, Hume said, all I am really saying is that I have become accustomed to feeling heat every time I have seen fire come close to my hand. Strictly speaking, causality is only an association between two concepts here: that of fire and that of the sensation of heat.

All you have in sense knowledge then is pure contingency and the latter, as we all know, represents a very poor basis

for scientific judgments. But sense knowledge is my only way of being in touch with the world, with beings, with reality. Therefore scientific intelligibility—necessity and universality—does not come from the world, from beings themselves. However, given that science is an indubitable and undeniable fact, one *must* explain this fact, this fact of intelligibility. As it cannot come from reality, it must originate from human beings themselves.

Why did Kant not think about abstraction and analogy as Aristotle and later Saint Thomas Aquinas had? He does not seem to have read the latter at all.

Kant was obliged to turn to human beings, to man himself, to explain metaphysics. So was Heidegger in his quest for the true meaning of being.

Whenever philosophy cuts itself from being at the very starting point, it will have to center itself, to focus, on man himself, and no longer on being. Describing one's experience as a human being, examining reality in this light will become the major emphasis, the field of philosophical analysis. *Subjectivity will be emphasized and objectivity downplayed and even feared. A value will appear as a value only inasmuch as it originates from the inner depths of the person in his or her own creative freedom.*

If one shares this philosophy and is also a believer, then one's God will reveal himself not so much through creation in general but more specifically through one's own personal and private life. God will reveal himself, not so much through events and through other people, but directly through one's inner self. The words one reads in the Bible will have the meaning that one chooses to bestow on them. The Bible will be valid or useful inasmuch as it turns one on, inasmuch as it provides one with a meaningful experience.

Now I shall return to the point from which I left off. I was reflecting on my experience of knowledge.

In my everyday life I never meet universals. I never come across Mr. Goodness, Mr. Beauty, Mrs. Being, Mr. Tallness, Mr. Table, etc. I always experience one table, one of a particular size and shape and this at a certain time and place. I never meet humanity nor man nor woman. I always meet specific persons: Peter, Paul and Mary.

But also in my everyday life I realize that I do know what it means for a table to be a table. I know what a table is and this, independently of all the specifics of the particular table I come across. I know who man is although I have only met specific persons. I know what goodness means even though I have only experienced good people and good things, not goodness itself.

Experiencing unity in multiplicity

Last night I was rather tired when I stopped writing. And I could not see the solution to the problem I was trying to solve. This morning when I was washing up the solution suddenly dawned on me!

All that I come across in my daily life are concrete and very specific beings. This is for me, an indubitable fact. So much so that I could never entertain any doubts about it.

But I also realize that I am never satisfied with the concrete and the singular as such. Why would scientists work so arduously at discovering regularities and laws if they were satisfied with singularity and uniqueness? Although I am always coming across only contingent and particular beings I am always trying nevertheless to attain necessity and universality. I come across beings that are unique and singular and yet I am always giving them *common* names. I speak about people, animals, plants, life, etc. And what I am doing when I am attributing these common names is a *reflection of what I am grasping or understanding*. When I

know, I *am* what I know. I am in a kind of vital relationship with what I know. I only come across singular, unique and specific human beings but I do not only experience or know singularity and uniqueness. True enough, I never come across universals such as beauty, truth and goodness but I do experience the latter in the concrete and unique beings I meet. Universality is present in the unique and individual. My experience of knowledge does not reveal pure multiplicity nor pure unity. The real is not chaotic but orderly. There is unity in reality. It is not a pure unity but it is nevertheless a very authentic one.

Each being is by itself. Is unique. Each being I know is concrete, particular. But are any of the beings I know necessary? No. They come and go. But are they completely devoid of necessity? No. It is not necessary that they be—for they could very well not be should Hiroshima occur again—but it is necessary that IF they are—and they are—that they really are. This is an absolute necessity. And I know that Tom *is not* Helen. Tom is something that Helen is not and vice versa. And this implies that Tom *is what he is* and no more and Helen also. I am not lost in an ocean of indistinguishable reality as Sartre claims. I can situate myself in an ensemble, a whole, and I can situate other people and other things in this ensemble. I know the difference between a toothpick and my mother who is lying in bed dying. I know that my mother does not only APPEAR to mean more to me; that she IS MORE. I also know that Tom and Helen are one inasmuch as they both are. Tom is never related with something that does not have existence. The minute something exists, then by that very fact it *is* similar to Tom, at least in this specific respect. To exist is just not one perfection or attribute among many others. If I am tall or short then it does not make much difference. But if I do not exist or do exist, then that makes all the difference in the world. There can be no greater difference than this one.

I can criticize someone throughout my life but when that person stops living, stops existing, I feel empty. Then I realize that his or her existence was a good, that he or she was a good, a value. I realize that what I was sad or critical about was not his or her existing but his or her WAY of existing. I can spend my whole life analyzing rats and insects. Their parts become very familiar to me. I can even forget that should rats and insects not exist there would simply be no parts to examine.

Meaning of freedom

I am not free to decide whether or not beings have value for me and in themselves. I can accept this or refuse it. I am free to accept or to refuse. But I am not free to decide that nothing exists other than me, that I am alone in the world. If I do refuse to welcome values then I am going against myself. I did not choose to exist. Nor did I choose to want to be happy, to want to live, to like eating and drinking, etc. This was me before I had anything to say about it. Nor do I choose what will make me happy. I cannot choose that this will make me happy and not that. I cannot choose that ice cream will make me happy. I can spend my whole life saying, "Ice cream is my ultimate happiness!" but the truth of the matter is that ice cream will always give me only what it CAN give me. It is what it is and not what I would like it to be. I cannot decide that Mary will make me as happy as it is possible to be. Throughout her entire existence she will only give me what she CAN give me. She is limited by what she is. What she can do; what she can become: all that is also limited by what she is.

I can spend my whole life telling everybody: "I do not depend on anything or anybody but myself; I can choose my own values". Yet, unless I eat food I will stop living. I depend on food and I cannot decide otherwise. Unless I eat food I will not be strong enough to assert that food is

absurd and devoid of meaning and that I in no way depend on it.

I am not free to decide whether or not God exists. Nor am I free to choose whether or not God exists. Freedom of thought should never be interpreted in this latter sense. Following this path would be committing intellectual suicide. I am not free to determine all by myself what I should believe. I am free to believe or not to believe but not free to decide what must be believed. I am not free to decide that nothing exists, that all is chaos, that the world is deprived of beauty and goodness and order. I am not free to decide what is good and what is bad. I am free to accept what is good and to do it or to refuse it and not do it: but I can never create this value. All I can do is make it become a value FOR ME.

I am not free to decide what philosophy is and nor what it should be. Nor to decide what is the meaning of life, of suffering and death. Nor to decide when something is true and when it is false. Because William James has said that something is true only inasmuch as it has practical consequences, both immediate and far removed, this does not render his assertion true. Nor does Saint Thomas's definition of truth necessarily represent the real criterion of truth. The whole question is: wherein lies the truth? Who is right and in what sense?

To return to the question of knowledge. It is a fact that I only encounter singular but it is also a fact that I not only have a knowledge that is singular and contingent but one also that is necessary, universal and eternal. I know the singular in a universal way. I know the contingent in a necessary way. Better still, I know the singular and the contingent in their necessity and universality.

Unlike Plato, Saint Thomas did not explain this experience of knowledge by postulating the existence of universals and necessities. Nor did he follow Kant's solution by

concluding that man is the source of intelligibility, of universality and necessity. He was logical with his realism just as Plato and Kant were logical with their idealism. Plato could not have recourse to sense knowledge in his explanation because he was convinced that the only true and real knowledge is that of the intellect and that the world of sense knowledge is not the real world. Kant could not have recourse to sense knowledge because he was, on the one hand, in agreement with Hume's Cartesian interpretation of sense knowledge and because, on the other hand, he had no idea about abstraction. Saint Thomas did have recourse to sense knowledge because he was convinced that human knowledge is essentially a relation to what exists. *He therefore acknowledged that if we know something universal and necessary about the contingent and singular beings it is because this necessity and universality are really in them.*

However, this must not be taken to mean that the necessary and universal are in the contingent as such, that is, as universal and necessary. In other words Saint Thomas's realism is not gross. The mind is not merely a copy or photograph of the necessity and universality found in being. 'Table' does not exist in reality; not does good, beauty, one, etc. In reality all we find are *this* table, *this* good person, *this* beautiful view, etc. To merely copy reality would therefore bring about only singularity and contingency, never necessity and universality. *I can know all the singular facts I want to but merely knowing them does not mean understanding them, perceiving their interrelatedness and interconnectedness.*

The human mind has a very active role in the process of understanding the universe. No doubt it does not have as active a role as Hegel thought it had; the latter felt that he could understand and explain the whole history of mankind just by sitting in his room and thinking. The mind depends

essentially on particular facts, on sense knowledge. It must never cut itself from facts. Hegel once said to one of his students, “If the facts do not agree with my system, then the heck with the facts. It’s too bad for them!”

The human mind does unify and create necessity as Kant so correctly observed. But it creates unity and necessity *by adjusting itself to reality*, a reality that is pregnant with unity and necessity. The mind communes with reality. Reality represents its very life and soul. What exists, being, represents the very oxygen of the mind. As it is in touch with reality, the human mind does not put necessity where it does not exist. It does not reduce human freedom to necessity. Nor does it reduce man’s history to necessary laws. No doubt history does contain laws that are discernable to the human mind, human freedom being relative, not absolute. However, laws of necessity can never fully explain or account for the experience of human freedom.

When the mind is enjoying a healthy and authentic contact with being it does not try to reduce everything to necessity, sameness, oneness and eternalness as Parmenides did. Nor does it attempt to reduce everything to contingency, singularity, uniqueness and temporality as Saint Exupéry, Sartre and many others seem to be doing. It respects both unity and diversity. It respects freedom and necessity, determinateness and indeterminateness. It neither tries to reduce the human being to the status of material reality nor material reality (determinateness) to the human being. It respects both religion and science. It does not try to reduce to perfect intelligibility that which is obscure and unintelligible to us—evil, for example. It neither claims to have an exhaustive and thorough knowledge of all beings nor of being deprived of all knowledge of them. It never attempts to understand moral issues through the narrow lenses of mathematics, with its clear and distinct ideas.

Attempting such a thing, as Aristotle so wisely observed, is the trademark of the uneducated. Of those who fail to distinguish those issues that lend themselves to clear and distinct ideas from those issues that call for another broader and less black and white approach.

Whoever maintains that science as such represents a threat for humanity overstates the determinateness of being. If one views intelligibility, necessity and universality as flowing from the scientist's own mind, then science immediately becomes a threat to human beings. For the more he carries out experiments, hypothesizes, verifies and discovers, the more he discovers associations and laws; and thus the more human behavior becomes intelligible. And following this path ever more, one can start imagining a time when the scientist will obtain such an exhaustive and thorough knowledge of human behavior that life will appear totally depersonalized and deprived of freedom.

But if one views intelligibility as flowing from being itself and not from the human mind, if one perceives being as the very oxygen and life of the mind, then the threat referred to above fades away. For no human being on earth—and the latter is the only one we know in a direct manner—is the master of his or her existence. We have no immediate evidence of the eternity of being and of the immortality of the soul. Parmenides thought that because “what is, is and what is not, is not”, being must therefore be necessary, it must be eternal. In a way he was right. But so strong was his intuition that it prevented him from perceiving the aspect of becoming and change that one finds in all beings. Understanding as he did that something can never originate from nothing and that something can never become nothing, he brought to light that which constitutes the very heart of the efficient causality seen by Saint Thomas. The latter understood that “what is, is and what is not, is not”. He saw that the difference between to be and not to be is

radical and absolute. *But he also saw that no earthly being is existence*: there are many beings and they are contingent and in constant becoming. None of them is existence and therefore none of them exists of necessity. Contingency.

The fact of contingency and the principle of necessity... And both originating from our knowledge of being, of being in itself as it is. Plurality, becoming, temporality: all pointing to the undeniable fact of contingency. But the presence, the ontological intensity of being pointing at the same time to the necessary, the same, the one, the eternal. Never shall a presence be an absence. Never shall a presence come from an absence. To give one must have. To give presence one must *be* presence. To give reality one must be reality. Never shall a presence become an absence. This would be self-contradicting. Horses come from horses, not from nothingness. Dogs from dogs. Trees from trees. Beauty from beauty. Goodness from goodness. Being from being.

Never shall being come from non-being or non-being from being. Not acknowledging this amounts to saying that, “what is, is not and what is not, is”. One affirms something and at the very same time denies that very something. Why bother affirming it if it is not true? “This is pure logic”, you may say or think. “We are merely speculating”. But when one affirms that one’s father or brother has just been killed in a car accident on the 401 highway does one still think that the whole matter is one of playing with words, ideas or thoughts? When one says that one’s father has died does one mean, at the very same time, that one’s father has not died? Is the difference between affirming and denying and negating not radical? And this, both logically and ontologically?

Here I am trying to clarify and deepen my reflection and, somehow, I cannot find the appropriate words. For example, it seems to me that I grasp the heart of

Parmenides's intuition and yet I cannot see why something cannot come from nothing. Spontaneously I say, "it does not make sense", but why? I am at a loss to say. It is so simple a truth that it slips through my fingers.

Also I am still haunted by the relation between abstraction and analogy, by what Saint Thomas means by his famous separation, by the heart of causality. What do I personally think of causality? What do I think of the different causes? Are there different ones and why are they different?

To start with Parmenides once again. One thing of which I am sure: Parmenides did not only "take a good look" at reality, nor did he merely copy it or take a picture of it. One can look for one's entire life for the principle "what is, is" and one will never find it, *as such*, in reality. So Parmenides not only *knew* reality but he also told us something about reality. His mind was very active in this process; so much so that even a Hegel would find a small consolation in the event.

In which sense was Parmenides's mind active? Is his principle only superficial and not expressive of reality in itself? Does it express only a law of the mind and not of reality in itself?

From what I gather Parmenides is the *Father* of all philosophical realism. His principle is *real*. Reality is not an illusion, it really is. Nothingness cannot threaten us because something really is, we really are. *It is because the difference between something and nothing is absolute and radical that something will never proceed from nothing.*

Parmenides denied causality because he denied multiplicity, becoming, change. Had he faced this latter evidence he would have been compelled to acknowledge the principle of causality. His world is not one of relative unity but of absolute unity; not one of relative values but of

a unique Value; not one of relative intensity but of absolute intensity.

It is true to say that a toothpick is just as much as God is; but not that a toothpick is the same way God is. God is by nature. His essence is to be, to exist. The toothpick is not by nature because it can lose its existence: it does not exist of necessity. Parmenides saw the first truth but failed to see the second one. Plato's theory of participation bridged, to a considerable extent, the gap between these two truths.

When I meet a good person I actually meet God himself. This is not a way of speaking. It is very real and this, I believe, is what Teilhard de Chardin means when he says that God is at the very tip of his pen. Wherever and whenever I experience reality I am in direct contact with God himself.

The perfection "goodness" that I know in this person is God but when I attribute it to God I must deny its mode of existing. God is not good the way Paul is good. The goodness of Paul is God himself, but not *the way* Paul is good. We do not have a positive knowledge of *the way God is good*. We know him only in an obscure and very imperfect way—À travers le miroir (Through a Glass Darkly) as the great film producer Bergman titled one of his movies (1961).

The very minute that I experience reality I experience God himself. Of course I do not know *that* what I know is God. God is not immediately evident to us as we experience reality. I do not know much about Aimé Forest's philosophy but would this not be what he means when he asserts that when we know being we actually come into contact with Being?

Whenever I reflect on the fact that God is immanent to all of reality I always become exceedingly enthused. This truth fills my life with so much meaning and intensity. Each

person I meet, the sun I feel and enjoy, the water I swim in, the air I breathe, the food I eat, the beauty that seduces me in nature, in children, and in a young married couple, the charm, the intimacy, the voices I hear, the music I listen to, the feelings I feel: *all of these are God himself*.

Importance of silence

Perhaps it is for this reason that I so highly esteem those moments in my life when I am relaxed and deeply concentrated in an attitude of silence. Very often it is when I am absolutely alone in my room or in a chapel that I am actually less alone in a profound sense of the word, and more intensely present to beings, to those people whom I know and love, to God and to myself.

Why have so many fled to the desert to find life? Why does Antoine de Saint-Exupéry consider his experience in the desert as perhaps the most intense and revealing moments of his life? Why does the psychotherapist Carl R. Rogers cherish so much those moments he has spent far from his colleagues and in solitude? Why do people, upon entering a religious order, spend one year or two in relative silence, reflection and meditation?

Difference between abstraction and separation

A while ago I think I grasped the difference between abstraction and separation. The human mind is in contact with being. It does not do whatever it wants to do and this in two ways: it is limited by what it itself is and by what the being it knows is. It is okay to abstract whiteness from Paul because the whiteness of Paul is abstractable. It lends itself to this process. I can grasp the whiteness of Paul by concentrating my attention on it alone and by turning my back to everything else that Paul is. I can grasp the quantity of Paul by leaving out everything else that he also is. But when it comes to considering Paul in his beingness, inasmuch as he is Paul, then I can no longer abstract.

Abstract from what? What could ever be left out of my consideration? His hands, his feet, his quantity, his hair, his qualities, etc.? Do his hands, feet, quantity, etc. have existence or not? They do. They all are one with Paul; Paul is not two beings but one. But if they share in Paul's existence and I am at the moment concentrating my attention on Paul inasmuch as he is a being, inasmuch as he exists, then I cannot, logically, exclude any of these. I must respect each and every one of Paul's particularities and idiosyncrasies. I must respect his ontological uniqueness; the fact that he is not Mary nor Tom nor a table nor any other being, that he is Paul and that *he is the only one in the entire family of being to be Paul*. Fragile but irreplaceable!

Would it not then seem as if metaphysics *as a science* is utterly impossible? Wanting to consider being qua being does not metaphysics enslave itself by this very fact to what is unique, contingent and unintelligible? This would seem to be the case were we to have failed to grasp Parmenides's intuition of being. But are not all beings made out of the same fundamental stuff? Are they not all mysteriously and very intimately related to one another? Thales thought it was water; others, air, earth or fire. Being, Parmenides affirmed, is what all of reality is made up of. Inasmuch as all the beings in the world are, then they all resemble one another, they all have something in common: they all exist. And they all exist each according to their own self. An apple does not exist like a dog and a dog like a human being. Perceiving only the aspect of unity and absolutism, Parmenides stated that being was perfectly one.

In reality Paul and Mary both are, they both exist. Yet Paul is not Mary and Mary is not Paul. They are one inasmuch as they both are and are only what they are and no more or less. They are two inasmuch as one is not WHAT the other is. The 'isness' is the same but not the 'whatness'. Yet since the 'isness' is not something that comes and adds

itself to the 'whatness' but rather that which allows the 'whatness' to *be* and thus to be *itself*, there exists a paradoxical duality at the very heart of being.

A person becomes a metaphysician when he or she distinguishes between the isness and the whatness as described above, the *act* of existing and the *mode* of existing. The human mind thus grasps that to exist does not necessarily mean to exist the way grass exists or horses exist or cats exist. This will always be an act of *distinguishing* only; never can a real abstraction take place here because doing so would imply that one could isolate the isness from the whatness. The minute one attempts to abstract the isness from the whatness the latter is destroyed and the former loses all its meaning because existence does not exist.

We are dealing here with a very sublime mystery. The going is rough and perhaps does not seem to warrant the effort required. And at times I have entertained doubts about the value of distinguishing between existence and mode of existence, viewing it as a bit farfetched. Yet when I consider my concrete everyday experience I am always compelled to arrive at the same point.

We meet people and things. This mere affirmation summarizes globally our experience of knowledge. *All the people and things we meet exist. Thus in this respect they all resemble one another. Yet Paul is not Mary and I am not you and you are not me.* This also is undeniably true and in this respect no two beings are alike; each one is unique, alone in its ontological solitude, fragile, beautiful. We all belong to the same family of being but each one of us is different. These two truths are immediate evidences. Everyone knows them at least roughly. We all know that both our mom and dad exist yet they are not the same persons or beings. *Both are; one is not the other.*

We do not know what it means to exist. All we know is what it means to exist in a particular manner or way. When we say God is existence we do not mean to say that we know what it means to be existence. We understand God through our limited experience of existence. *We are wisest not when we say something positive about God but when we say something negatively. Put another way: we know that to exist does not only mean to exist in a limited manner; beyond that, only silence befits us.*

We do know what it means to exist. We have a taste of what it means and is and our whole life is nothing but a deepening or purification of this basic experience.

It is perhaps significant that one of the world's greatest philosophers was the very person who was convinced that he knew next to nothing about life. Yet he was not a man who was afraid to affirm. On the contrary, he himself spent his time defining and getting others to define. He was wise not because he knew a lot of things but because, contrary to most people, he knew that he did not know very much about reality.

Importance both of studying great philosophers and of thinking personally

Sometimes I get the impression that I am losing my time and energy reflecting on my own life and activities instead of studying directly what Plato said, William James said, Thomas Aquinas said, Aristotle, Descartes, etc. Were I to leave these thinkers aside it is obvious that my search for truth would be rather superficial. I would then be more interested in the *fact* of reflecting personally than in truth itself. Were I to interpret these thinkers rapidly and superficially, that is without going through the necessary readings and contextual analyses necessary to develop a proper understanding of them, then I would still be deceiving myself. My search for truth would still be lazy and dishonest. I would still be too attached to my own

experience and to my own *reflection* on this experience and not enough to truth itself, wherever and whenever and however it is to be found.

But the more I study other people's thinking the more I realize that it is impossible for someone to respect tradition, in other words to seek truth in the two above mentioned dimensions, unless one first of all and continually respects oneself. Philosophically, I can never adhere to a truth just because of human authority. No doubt this is an unavoidable stage all of us must experience and never quite succeed in eliminating completely; however, it never represents the ideal situation. Can I agree with Saint Thomas or disagree with Descartes *if I do not see for myself and in my own actual existence* the veracity of what Saint Thomas asserts and the falseness of what Descartes asserts? Not at all. Yet how many students react in this very way, most of the time without even being aware of the meaning of their reaction!

If one does not have an authentic personal reflection, and a well balanced one, then the study of various philosophers the world has known from Thales de Milet to Heidegger will only confuse him or her ever more. The historical philosophical experience will appear to such a person as deprived of all unity and cohesion. One philosopher will seem to maintain that a certain being is white and the other that this very same being is black. One will argue that man is not endowed with a definite (thus definable) human nature and is nothing but freedom and another that he does have a definite human nature and that his or her freedom is only relative and always oriented. One will affirm that philosophically the existence of God is not provable and even impossible and another will affirm just the opposite. One will affirm that the world is absolutely meaningless in itself and orderless; another that it does have meaning in itself and is orderly. One will say that the role of

philosophy is to serve theology; another that its role is to judge theology. One will say that man only knows the particular, the singular, and the individual; another that he only knows the universal and necessary. One will explain all of human experience, present, past and future, through conceptual knowledge; another will maintain that conceptual knowledge does not even grasp reality or that when it does it necessarily reduces it to the status of an object, deprived of all historicity, individuality and freedom. One will say that it is impossible to attain the real world and that all our knowledge is relative; another that man does attain the real world and that he experiences an absolute in his knowledge. One will explain the movement of the stars and the meteors by using final causality and another will explain the movement of man by carrying out scientific experiments.

Imagine the shock one can experience when one suddenly comes into contact with such a mountain of apparent contradictions! And contradictions originating not just from any old passerby but from the thinking of those deemed to be the world's greatest philosophers! From geniuses who have spent their entire lives searching for truth. And here we are, plain ordinary people that posterity will certainly not remember in the least, here we are trying to understand and critically evaluate them. And this within three or four years of more or less intense reflection!

Whence the importance of being personal in one's meditation on life, on being. Of being honest, sincere and ardent. Of being led, inasmuch as possible, by an authentic master, one who does *see* the unity in various philosophical experiences. One therefore who does not see all in black and white, who does not maintain that one philosopher is all right and another all wrong, who distinguishes in what respect one is right and one is wrong, who respects the search and contribution of each and finally, who can

synthesize all this in one global and profound picture. And not a superficial synthesis; not one based on a wild and imaginative intellect or a proud and arrogant one. But a synthesis based on an intellect whose creativity depends essentially on being itself in all its simplicity and complexity.

Today it is impossible to deny the fact that our world is profoundly divided in its ideology. And I am inclined to believe, as many contemporary thinkers do, that this division may be greater than ever before in human history. What renders this situation so explosive is the fact that we are living at a time when, in the realm of communications, we are experiencing a veritable revolution. Never before in history has man known so much about his neighbor throughout the entire world. Never before has so much knowledge been made available through radio, TV, newspapers, magazines, movies, telephones, tape-recorders, and books. Never before has man been specializing to such an extent, and this latter phenomenon has become an utter necessity if we are to continue progressing. Never before have people become so earth centered. A well known economist, Barbara Ward, maintains that our world is experiencing unprecedented growth but one characterized by growing inequality between rich and poor nations. It is generally acknowledged that our world has never had so many atheists. At the last international encounter between Christians and Atheists in Europe (last May, I believe), an atheist asserted that atheism represents an essential characteristic of contemporary man. The philosopher of history, Eric Voegelin, is also of that opinion. He emphasizes the fact that ancient paganism was not atheistic in the modern sense of the word. The Greeks and Romans were not godless; on the contrary, they believed in many Gods. According to the Romans, Rome had originated thanks to two Gods; worshiping these Gods was essential to being a Roman citizen. We all remember the martyrdom of

the early followers of Christ who refused to pay tribute to these Roman Gods.

But the paganism of contemporary man is godless. God no longer has a place in their everyday life and as Mircea Eliade affirms, man today has desacralized many of his ordinary daily occupations. Never before has man had so much time to spend in leisure. What sacredness he has lost in his work he tries to recuperate in his leisure time. He has lost the myths of the Greeks and the Romans but he has replaced these with other myths: cinema, radio, magazines, newspapers, etc.

So personal reflection appears to me as a very urgent task for all those who have the necessary capacities and means. It represents a *human* responsibility. It proceeds from the very fact that we are what we are: human beings. Today we are realizing, more acutely perhaps, our social responsibility towards one another. We are making enormous efforts to help those underdeveloped nations and regions gain their economic, political and cultural maturity. Included in these efforts we are making, much emphasis should be placed on the communication of knowledge, and not just informational knowledge. Cardinal Newman has rightly insisted at a very crucial moment of his time on the danger of losing oneself in erudition, in a type of learning that has only immediate and practical uses, and of the importance of personal reflection. Only such a reflection can unify one's knowledge of history, math, science, geology, English, French, poetry, literature, etc. Only a reflection that includes the theological dimension can provide the basic unifying factor of knowledge: God.

Sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge

Having finished this long digression on the importance of personal reflection, I shall now return to a theme that I had already started examining: sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge.

I must not examine these two types of knowledge merely in the light of what my teacher is saying, or what has been stated by Aristotle, Saint Thomas, Kant, or anybody else. This would merely be a hypocritical substitute to real thinking.

In my immediate experience of knowledge what I first grasp is the *activity* of knowledge in its ensemble. In fact this intuition is not, I believe, my first one. I do not at first become aware of the fact of my knowing but what comes first is the awareness of known objects: other people and things and myself. *Never do we hear ordinary people speaking about the activity of knowledge as such.* They are always speaking—everybody is that way—of their brothers and sisters, their parents, their children, their friends and relatives, sad events and happy ones, deaths and births, love affairs, robberies, injustices and crimes, etc.

Furthermore, although I realize that I am always distinguishing, in my experience, between knowledge and love or hate, concretely and in actual practice these two activities intertwine inseparably. I can hardly say I really love someone whom I have never met. Sure I can have an attitude of civility, as Aristotle recommends, towards all persons or of charity, as Saint Paul recommends. Yet my love always depends on my knowledge.

If I concentrate my attention as much as possible on my experience of knowing as such, here is what I find: *I know with my whole body.* I am sensitive to the least change in temperature in this room for example. And if my window is open I can feel the draft in my neck and on my feet if they are bare. *I realize that I hear sounds.* Right now I can hear the tractor working outside removing the snow from the skating rink. But when I hear sounds it is not the same as when I feel something on my body. In a way it is the same inasmuch as something contacts me or better still inasmuch as I *contact* something—sound or touch. But it is different

for if I block my ears I can hardly hear the sound anymore, and it has been scientifically proven that without ears, a person is just plain cut off from the world of sound; while the experience of feeling or touch occurs all over my body and inside my body also. I can actually feel pain in the interior of my body; pleasure too; sometimes it is here, sometimes it is there and at other times it is more widespread. And when I am really sick to my stomach my whole body is miserable: I would rather be dead than alive in these situations. I do not feel like communicating with anyone nor can I really communicate with anyone.

Here is what I can tell from whatever I contact directly with the exterior portion of my body. What I touch is hard, soft, cold, hot, round, square, rough, smooth.

I can smell odors. In a few minutes I shall smell the hot coffee and the biscuits. I can only smell with my nose; not with any other part of my body.

I can also see. What I see are colors. Never do I hear colors, nor see odors, nor touch colors. Without eyes, I would be blind to this world of colors.

Now without all this sense knowledge how poor I would be! I would not be in touch with anybody or anything. I would not even be in touch with myself. I would be something like a piece of wood, a board, or a plant in the garden.

But there is infinitely more to my experience of knowledge than what I mentioned so far. In what does this more consist? I know right off the bat but it is very hard to express adequately and clearly.

When I am walking with someone on the street I am not satisfied if I can only look at my companion, listen to the sounds he produces, smell his good or bad breath. No, I am satisfied when I really meet him or her. I am satisfied when I understand the sounds he utters. Not that I am interested

in the sounds and words in themselves. I am interested in them inasmuch as they are expressive of *him*, of what he feels, thinks, desires, regrets, loves, dislikes, fears. If I am sick at the hospital and receiving care from a nurse I am not moved by what she does for me but rather by what she does for me signifies about her attitude towards me.

There is an interiority characteristic of the person that I have never found in any other being in the world. When I am in the company of a dog, a cat, a cow, a horse, or when I am in the company of water, sunlight, snow, earth, trees, etc., I realize that it is very different from being with Mrs. McKay, with Léo, with Father Superior, etc.

Man is alone to wonder at the beauty of a sunset. Man is alone to worry about his orientation, his destiny. Alone to smile and to laugh and to tease. To dance. To sing. Alone to make movies, statues, paintings, and to write poems and novels. Alone to look at them and to read them.

Man is alone to know that he exists.

Exist? What does this word signify? When we say color we know what it means. Only he who was born blind will forever be deprived of this knowledge. He can never know the meaning of color as color; all he can do is discover it in its other dimensions, inasmuch as it is expressed in waves, for example. When we say odor, we know what it means because we have a nose with which to smell. We taste with our tongue. We feel with our whole body. But where do we get to know what it means to exist?

From the fact that we do know what it means to exist we must conclude that we have what it takes to do so. This is nothing but a direct consequence of the philosophical realism that we discussed at length above. There must be a power in us to explain this mysterious activity that is an inevitable fact. And it was called, this power, the intelligence. Intelligence comes from the latin "in-ligere":

to read inside, the interior. So you see that the word was well chosen.

We not only know what it means to exist but we also know that to exist never has the very same and identical meaning for each being. The only chance a horse has to exist is to exist as a horse, to be himself, to be what he is. The only chance a man has to exist is to exist as a man should exist. The whole problem is, though, “Who am I?” This is one of the most difficult questions facing all of us and I am convinced that it was properly answered only by He who made us: God.

We thus have a knowledge of reality that digs and penetrates into the very heart of reality. We perceive how all beings are alike and how each one is very different and unique. This is one of our most fundamental and important experiences.

When engaging in scientific research one merely deepens this basic intuition. One tries to discover more commonality in being. To reduce multiplicity to unity. The psychotherapist tries to discover significant correlations in the process of therapy. He or she tries to find out how human beings function. Obviously if every human being were absolutely unique and different from all others in his or her ways of behaving or functioning, such a scientific endeavor on the part of a psychotherapist would be doomed to failure; it would be pointless and even impossible.

When engaging in artistic creativity one also merely deepens this basic intuition. When one sings, one allows oneself to be taken up by and to express what one experiences of reality. The artist perceives the unity of reality; he or she does not like to distinguish in the following manner: “the coffee I am drinking from the person I am conversing with, and the latter from mom and dad, etc. As one artist put it, “When I’m singing everything

is everything else: God, snow, rain, sun, moon, tears, love, etc.”

Thus our experience of reality—whether ordinary or primary, or scientific, or artistic—all points in the same direction, but in different ways. And, as pointed out by Merleau-Ponty, one must never forget that scientific and artistic knowing are not primary experiences of knowing; they merely constitute a prolongation and deepening of one’s primary or ordinary experience.

All these different types of knowing point to the fact that we have a power, a faculty that can penetrate the heart of reality, discovering necessity where necessity there is; discovering freedom where freedom there is; discovering probability where probability there is; and discovering uniqueness and freshness where uniqueness and freshness there are.

I cannot define being itself for it is not reducible to anything more primary and simple than itself. It is the only reality I cannot explain and will never be able to explain. It is the very stuff with which I explain everything else I know. I can define goodness for it is but a way of being; it represents being as related to our will. I can define a human being because being human is a way of being. I can define white, color, etc. because these attributes represent ways of being. The same is true of life, animal life, political life, artistic creativity, religious activity, philosophy, etc.

This analogous and universal knowledge of being forces us to admit that we have an intelligence, just as our experience of perceiving colors, hearing sounds, and smelling odors forces us to admit that our eyes are made to see, our ears to hear and our nose to smell.

The radical difference between sense knowledge and intellectual knowledge lies in two factors: the *way* we know and *what* we know.

1) The way we know: when I sense something, *I never sense it in a universal manner*. The sounds I hear are always particular sounds. *This* sound and *that* sound. The sound of the violin or the sound of the tractor. I never see color as such but only *certain* colors: *this* one or *that* one. I never smell odor in general nor hear sound in general: always *particular* odors and *particular* sounds. When I understand a being I grasp him or her in a universal manner. When I understand my father I see that he is unique—very true. But I also see at the same time that he is similar to all other beings in that he exists and in that he is what he is, no more no less. Thus I see him as related to all other beings, in the ensemble of beings. I situate him in this ensemble.

2) What we know: eyes only see color and ears only hear sounds and noses only smell odors: never do they ever attain anything else but color, sound and odor. They do not attain existence, nor the interrelatedness of all that is, nor the nature of different beings. Our intelligence knows reality in its isness and whatness. It knows color, sound, odor, table, car, and man. It can grasp the essence of table. It can define table by grasping what is proper to the table as such and by distinguishing it from all other beings.

Now my only way of attaining the real world is through my senses. If I had never known a man or woman through the senses of my body I would never be able to define a human being. If I had never perceived particular colors, heard specific sounds, etc., I could never have meditated on the meaning of sound as such, and of color as such. If I had not had concrete and specific experiences of justice and injustices I could never arrive at a definition of justice through reflection. Thus, in a very real sense, I am totally dependent, in my experience of knowing as a human being, on my body, on my senses.

However, through sense knowledge I only attain *this* color, *these* sounds, *this* hardness, etc. I do not attain the necessary or the contingent. How is it possible to grasp that which is and which cannot be if I do not even grasp that a thing *is* in the first place? And how is it possible to grasp that a thing is but could not be if I do not first grasp that it is? My sensing experience does not plunge me into the heart of reality. It cannot, as such, allow me to experience and feel the radical fragility and poverty and insecurity of all beings (contingency). Nor can it allow me to experience the radical necessity, stability, orderliness, and sameness of all beings (necessity).

Thus when Saint Exupéry awakens us to the radical contingency of the world and of each and every one of us he is not doing away with our intellectual knowledge as such and merely reducing it to our sense knowledge. Instead he is emphasizing a very real aspect of our intellectual knowledge: contingency, becoming. If he sees with such acuteness and admiration and even pain the UNIQUENESS of each being, and at the same time the profound UNITY of all being, it is because he affirms quite radically the power of our mind. My eyes do not see unity but color.

Thus Plato was right when he held that the really real world stays hidden to the senses and is only revealed to our intelligence. But this experience led him to downplay and devalue the body and sense knowledge and to postulate the existence of a world of ideas, essences, and universals. Saint Thomas interpreted his experience of knowing in a different manner: he was convinced that our body was noble and sense knowledge valid, and thus could not turn his back to this fundamental part of our being. Given his strong faith in God, it would have been so easy for him to explain everything directly through God as some modern philosophers have done. Given that he was living in the

Middle Ages, he at least did not have the temptation to explain everything through man. What he actually did was explain his experience by referring to the real, to concrete nature, and to human beings and to God.

The world, as it appears to us in sense knowledge, is not intelligible in act, according to Saint Thomas. Beings are always particular, unique and changing. But this does not mean that it is not at all intelligible, that it is meaningless as Sartre and many others have held. I cannot *prove* that it is intelligible *because I actually experience its intelligibility*.

And one must never attempt to prove or disprove, to confirm or infirm, that which is already evident.

I see that each being is both unique and different from all others and, in a way, the same as all others. Each one is what it is, no more no less; but each one is related to all others in that they are and in that they are what they are. Science, art and poetry are but variations on one same theme.

I cannot deny the world's immanent intelligibility (order, meaning, relatedness, causality) because this would mean denying my experience of knowledge. And knowledge for me is not a thing in itself cut off from the world but is essentially a *relationship* to the world of beings. When I know I am what I know. I cannot deny this everyday experience. Thus when I experience intelligibility in my knowledge *I am not experiencing the intelligibility of my knowledge itself but of the beings known to me*.

Thus, when I realize that my senses do not directly reveal an intelligible world; do not directly provide meaning; I must not conclude that the world is not intelligible or meaningless but merely that, in Saint Exupéry's words, "L'essentiel est invisible". Meaning, what is important and really matters, escapes the eyes; it is invisible. Perceived through eyes alone (the senses) the world is not intelligible

and in this sense I agree with you Sartre, with you Plato, with you Kant, and with you Descartes. From this perspective the world does appear as a void, a shadow, an absurdity, and as something on which science and metaphysics cannot be based.

And in a way, too, the world remains unintelligible and meaningless without the active presence of human beings. *Human beings must really intervene, act on the world, influence it, for it to reveal its meaning, its intelligibility.* And from this precise perspective, I agree with you Kant, Fichte, Shelling, Hegel, Heidegger and Sartre. Nevertheless I cannot conclude from this that *I*, a human being, am the one and the only one who can *bestow meaning on life and on my life*; I cannot conclude that I am the one who *creates whatever values there are*. All I can conclude is that the world would not be intelligible for me without my personal intervention.

In a sense I agree with you who maintain that the real world is the one of daily experience, of facts, of individuals, of unique events, of illusions and deceptions, of chance, of obscurity and vagueness, of acts of love expressed through bodily motions, etc. But where I part company is when you maintain that the real world is *only* that.

But what, you may wonder, do I mean exactly when I say that humans must act on the world of senses, must intervene personally, in order for it to become intelligible? Am I thus not acknowledging that I will only find in reality that which I have first inserted into it? Am I thus not actually placing order into my sense experience, making relationships, and creating necessity?

The crux of the matter lies in what happens when the mind grasps the real world. The mind here is not active in the sense that one is active when constructing a car or a boat. When I am building something, when I am doing something, the best way of knowing what I am making is

by discovering what I myself have been putting into it, what I myself have given shape to, have created. But when I'm experiencing being, my best way of knowing it is by *allowing it be for me*. Through my action I am not making it become something else—it stays what it is—but I am becoming it and it is becoming me. *The act through which being reveals itself to me is the same act through which I am making it be for me*. We both pass—reality and me—from a state of passivity to a state of activity. But both passivities are ordained to one single act, not two separate ones. The act by which being is understood by me and the act by which it sheds its intelligibility are one and the same. Reality is made for me and I for reality. We were meant for one another. We accomplish ourselves together and only together. My intelligence is itself when it understands and being is itself when it is understood.

It is the sameness and oneness of the ACT that explains the oneness that I experience in knowledge. I am not cut off from reality and reality is not cut off from me. I *am* to being and being *is* to me. I am not merely *juxtaposed* to what is, to reality; *I am in a relationship of communion with reality*. To be in relationship with being, to any being, is to be in relationship with God. Being close to what is, is being close to God. Being attentive to being is being attentive to God.

When I judge, when I rectify my knowledge and try to render it, by moving away from error, always closer to the truth, I do not merely unify. Nor do I merely compose and divide. Truth itself is not attained in this mere act of composing and dividing, and of unifying. It is attained through an act of intuition. All acts of judging are in some way intuitive. A person cannot think and reflect without bothering about concrete life, about what is, about reality.

The point to which I should like to return concerns the relation between sense knowledge and intellectual

knowledge. Plato concluded that there existed a world of essences; Saint Thomas that our intelligence was nothing but a tabula rasa (clean slate or uninformed original state) at the beginning. Plato thought that man existed before his earthly existence and that his mind was thus full of this perfect knowledge before his birth. Saint Thomas, after Aristotle, concluded instead that man knew from sense knowledge and that his intellectual knowledge was conceptual. Plato failed to distinguish sufficiently between the object known – being – and that in which it is known – concept – and expressed.

Not long ago I showed how Saint Thomas was both a realist and an intellectualist. When he refers to “intellectus possibilis”, Saint Thomas is manifesting his radical realism and respect for what is, including all facts. In this respect man’s intelligence is completely dependent—it depends on another than itself. And when he speaks of the “intellectus agens”, he is manifesting his radical intellectualism and respect for the transcendental character of the human mind. In this respect man’s intelligence is no longer dependent on reality: it is that very energy that makes reality be, exist, become intelligible. However, this does not mean that reality is deprived of all intelligibility; it merely means that reality is only potentially intelligible.

Sometimes I am scandalized when I realize what boldness Saint Thomas had in affirming the necessary existence of the intellectus possibilis and the intellectus agens. But was he any bolder than Plato who went as far as to affirm the theory of reminiscence and of the world of essences? Than Kant who arrived at his categories and the transcendental one? Than Hegel who affirmed the existence of a Transcendental Ego?

The gradual discovery of the conceptuality of our intellectual knowledge proved to be a great leap forward in the history of philosophical reflection. Similar to the

“intellectus agens”, concepts are not objects of our direct experience and thus are not immediate evidences. *They merely explain our experience of intellectual knowledge.* And they are both arrived at because of the same intellectual realism.

When I know, I am what I know, I exist more without becoming other than myself, and the object known becomes more without becoming other than itself. I *actually contact what I know* and not merely what I know of what I know.

It is a fact that I attain a certain universality, commonality and necessity when I know.

But it is also a fact that the world as it appears to me—always and only through sense knowledge—appears to be deprived of these qualities as such.

Through the intuition of being I attain the heart of all individuality and commonality. Thus I give life and solidity to all of my conceptual knowledge.

If I actually could not SEE the commonality of reality, of different beings, then I could not universalize. Then my world of concepts would represent a world in itself, a bit like Plato’s essences; and conceptual knowledge would be mere speculation in the derogatory sense of the word. Then Gabriel Marcel’s fear of the concept would be well founded.

Thanks to the intuition of being, when I define man or animal or life or love, etc. I am actually getting closer to reality, not farther from it. Thanks to the intuition of being, when I define, I actually know being in a better way and am closer to God. Thanks to this same intuition, the scientific project becomes pregnant with meaning and must not be feared by those who strongly believe in God. Science itself is a manifestation of God and should not be an obstacle to God. Thanks to this intuition, the study of logic does not

make us become indifferent to what is but on the contrary
renders us even more sensitive to what is.

The point that it is very important to understand: *all
concepts are relatedness to what is real*. Not all in the same
manner and with the same intensity, of course, but all of
them just the same.

The concept of being is the richest of all concepts. It is the
one which is most related to reality. It does not exhaust the
richness of being but merely points to it. It is open to all
that is and excludes nothing in its power of signifying.

Part IV - Social science: our quest for unity and meaning

(Written in 1999)

Understanding. Trying to fit the various pieces of the puzzle together. The puzzle of my life, as it constantly unfolds. Three meals a day, at approximately the same time, in the same place, with the same people. A few special events. Otherwise, mere repetition. More of the same.

The need to understand, to find meaning and purpose. A need that is constantly with me, even when I'm thinking about something else. A need that I manage to satisfy, sometimes more, sometimes less, but never fully. Never once and for all.

Understanding... Fitting various pieces together... Moving from a situation in which events seem to occur in disorder, in a haphazard way to one in which a pattern suddenly emerges: relationships, links, meaning.

A religion or a cult: an effort to understand. To unify. To give meaning and purpose to. The pieces put together here are not only what happens now, as my life is developing from day to day. These pieces include what was happening before I was born, before I came to be the person that I am. They include what will happen after I stop existing, after my death. The belief in God the Creator of everything that exists as well as the belief in the afterlife, in heaven, represent the global, unifying principles of Christians: this, more than anything else, allows them to discover a pattern of meaning. To understand. The small things in life, as well as the great momentous happenings: birth, suffering, solitude, presence, love, death etc...

Having a friend, falling in love, belonging to a family, a community: other means of finding unity in one's life, in the world. *You mean the whole world to me...* This expression, typical of the language of love, illustrates unity. By being one with you, by and through this relationship I am having with you, I am experiencing all that exists. I am plunging into the world, the stars, the sky, the oceans, the birds, the sound of music. You, who represents only a drop in the ocean, a tiny and humble reality, a person characterized by uniqueness, allow me to experience all that is.... Something sacred. Something not only beautiful, but absolutely beautiful. A moment so intense that I wish it would never end. Experiencing eternity in the now and here. The sounds of silence...

Another path in one's quest for unity, for meaning: studying the workings of human behavior, both individual and collective, in its various dimensions. The social sciences. Psychology, political science, anthropology, sociology, geography, psychology, history, economics... Putting together the various pieces of the puzzle of human activity. Why? What are the links between this and this? Why is England producing more and more material goods and improving its wealth, why is it moving a lot faster than most other countries in the world: such is the question addressed by the father of economics, Adam Smith, in the late 18th century. Why do some people relate to others with openness and warmth whereas others always appear cold, unfriendly and judgmental? What factors brought on the Second World War? Why did a violent coup d'Etat occur in Chile in September 1973? Why is it that for many years in the 20th century there was a Cold War going on between the United States and the Soviet Union? Why is it that as the economic pie grows worldwide it is increasingly hard to find jobs? Why are the high paying, stable and unionized jobs disappearing rapidly and the part time, low paying and precarious ones mushrooming? Why is it that such a huge

percentage of French-speaking Quebecers want to separate from the rest of Canada? Why is it that interpersonal relationships seem so simple, real and profound in so-called developing nations whereas they are increasingly superficial, rapid, anonymous and purely functional in the wealthy, industrialized countries? Is our world progressing? What is progress?

The social sciences: an effort, among many past and present efforts, to explain, to find links, to unify, to find meaning. A typically modern effort. The rise of reason in the 17th, 18th century and 19th centuries. Reason: the new, guiding light. The age of speed. Of technology. An effort not only to find links, to discover unity and meaning, but especially to explain, to master, to dominate, to control. Finding how something works in order to modify human behavior. To shape the world. Explosion of the physical or natural sciences in the context of ever growing markets and the ensuing technological revolution. Worldly philosophers. The desire not only to increasingly dominate nature, the forces of nature, to exploit, use, and modify its resources, but also to dominate and exploit other peoples, other nations. Colonialism. Spain dominating Latin America. England dominating huge parts of the world. Europeans bent on civilizing the uncivilized.

The spectacular success of reason. Of the physical or natural sciences in shaping the world. The scientific method, the new star or showcase of knowledge. Of what knowledge could and should become. Facts, observations, statistics, surveys, experiments, the discovery of patterns, of laws. Increasing application of the scientific method in the study not only of things, of the physical or natural world, but also of human beings, of their behavior, both individual and collective. Birth of the social sciences. Knowledge not just for its own sake, but practical

knowledge, knowledge geared to measurement, to control, to transforming reality.

Religion, theology and philosophy shoved to one side and replaced, increasingly, by the age of reason. More precisely, by science and technology. Sometimes shoved to one side altogether in a radical and revolutionary fashion, sometimes merely overshadowed. The scientific control of the physical world, a spectacular success. New, gigantic hopes about the possibility of transforming the world. With Adam Smith, a great admirer of Newton, an immense and new faith in the unleashing of market forces, perceived as the atom, the molecule of human behavior. Competition, markets, ever-greater markets, considered part and parcel of nature. The secret, God-created force of all human progress. The law of gravity of human activity, the all-embracing, all-explaining law. The key to all human progress. The organizational principle of human society. The birth of modernity, of the idea of progress.

More recently, in the late 20th century, the crisis of modernity, of the scientific and technocratic view of the world. Postmodernism. Promises not held. Progress? Leisure society? Says who? The trend towards global, world markets, means more freedom, a more meaningful and fulfilling human existence? For whom? For the many or for the few? The domination of nature, the historically unparalleled use of its natural resources, as well as the historically unparalleled destruction of the ecosystems, of the environment.... The domination of an increasing number of the world's populations and cultures by the few, thanks to growing markets, to the power of wealth, of money, of superior technology... The destruction, with the speed of light, not only of plant and animal species, but of the languages spoken in the world, of the beautiful garden of cultures... The birth of standardization. Mass production not only of things, but also of ideas, of feelings, of ways of

living and relating. The consumer, publicity and profits-hungry world. The way to be, in order to be... La mode supérieure...

In this crisis, a new and very profound disarray. Crisis of science. Of technology. Of the social sciences. Having turned away from religion, theology and philosophy, and having passionately embraced cold, calculating, fact- and statistic-hungry reason, what now? To what does one turn in order to find unity, meaning, and explanation? Wherein is the light, the shining path?

The temptation, because of this profound disillusionment with science, technology and modernity, to return to religion. The growth of religious sects. Back to religion, often with vengeance. Often in the form of fundamentalism. The intolerance to which all, deep and existential insecurity gives birth. New films portraying, for the first time, the life of the primitives, of the Amerindians as noble, wise and environmentally friendly. An old answer to a new and disturbing question?

Crisis of the social sciences. A society moving, on the one hand, full speed ahead. Full speed ahead towards ever greater, more rapid technology. Towards ever more global, and world-wide markets. Billions of dollars moving across the planet every day, with the speed of light, in the search of maximum, immediate and mostly speculative profits. Coca-Cola becoming the world's preferred drink. For the Americans, but also, increasingly, for the Nicaraguan campesino who barely makes a dollar a day. McDonald restaurants spreading like fire, not only to the developing world but also to the countries of the ex-Soviet Union. Several new McDonalds constructed every single day. Ever-freer markets gobbling up not only nature, but also people, cultures, and human relationships. Reducing human life to market activities. Reducing communication to the standardized incommunication that originates from an

increasingly concentrated and elite-propelled mass-media empire.

Crisis of the social sciences. On the one hand, the social sciences are increasingly perceived as irrelevant and losing ground to other, more practical, down-to-earth sciences geared to the needs of the one-dimensional logic whose grip on the world is rapidly growing. On the other hand, what is left of these social sciences is often reduced to a form of empiricism, a theory-free (the end of ideologies) field of knowledge, useful in surveys, in fact-finding for the interests of the moneyed elite. A social science similar, in the world of knowledge, to that of CNN in the world of news: facts, and nothing but facts. Immediate, fast food facts.