

Persons and Metaphysic

Sebastian Moore, O.S.B.

‘The thinking, presenting subject—there is no such thing. . . . *In an important sense* there is no subject. . . . There is (therefore) really a sense in which in philosophy we can talk non-psychologically of the I. The I occurs in philosophy through the fact that the “world is my world”. The philosophical I is not the man, not the human body, or the human soul of which psychology treats, but the metaphysical subject, the limit—not a part of the world.’ Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 5.631-5.641.

One may disagree with this. But it gives the mind that jolt which is absolutely needed before we can think truthfully about ourselves and our world. Only genius, with its preternatural command of words, can give this jolt, can really make us see.

The study of man has made unprecedented advances in the recent centuries. And all would agree that the major advance has consisted in a new emphasis on the concrete. We are no longer content to *define* man—as rational animal, say: we seek to know how he ticks, what goes on in him. The emphasis is on experience.

But the very placing of this emphasis makes us forget a very simple fact: that all experience is *somebody’s* experience. In order to keep open to the puzzling nature of this fact, ask: what can be meant by attributing ‘experience’ to ‘somebody’? What sort of ownership is referred to?

It was the strangeness of this ownership that drove Wittgenstein to make the way-out but very alerting statement that there *is* no owner, that ‘I’ refers not to an ego-substance in which experiences inhere but to ‘the limit of my world’. What I call ‘my experience’ is ‘the world being my world’, and this means ‘the world with a limit, a shape to it’. And however much the Wittgenstein statement has to be qualified, we may not, on pain of sinking back to a miserable psychologism, attenuate its arresting, jolting force.

At this stage I shall be content to insist on this exciting dimension that Wittgenstein opens up for us and keeps open by his insistence that we stay with, and fully appreciate, the strangeness of the ascription of ‘experience’ to ‘somebody’.

We need to do this because, as I say, this strangeness is the one thing that gets forgotten when we talk about ‘experience’. When we say ‘experience is always somebody’s’, people reply ‘of course, that goes without saying’, thereby showing that they have not *seen*. ‘Of

course experience is somebody's, of course somebody is having the experience, of course the experience is going on *in* somebody.' In these three putatively synonymous statements of the case, you have the progressive evisceration of the original fact. The genitive of possession weakens and finally is lost in the vague image of 'something going on inside somebody', and with this model we happily settle down. 'Experience' becomes reified, as a sort of a current or bleep, going on in somebody. And that somebody, in turn, is easily imagined as 'in the world', a transmitter/receiver of messages. This is what I call psychologism. Note too that the 'I' in which something is going on is that inert ego in which nothing need be going on, an ego that could be the substance of which experience is an accident, which has dogged all our philosophizing, and whose contradictions Lonergan and Dewart have brilliantly exposed, thus ushering in a new philosophic age. Wittgenstein's statement of the non-existence of this ego is on the same line.

With the methodical elimination of the presiding strangeness of the 'I', God becomes meaningless. I am not concerned here to prove the existence of God. I only want to suggest, rather forcibly, that a great deal of the modern reduction of God to psychological states is based on the palpably false reduction of *man* to psychological states. For instance, the line of argument, made familiar by Harvey, Cox and Woolwich, that modern man no longer needs God because he increasingly finds rational explanations for things he used to attribute to God, tends in this direction. All you have in this argument is 'man's experience', meaning 'things going on in man' which he used to account for supernaturally and now accounts for naturally. You have a *theatre* called human experience, on which Gods used to walk and which is now filled with rational explanations. There simply is no room for the quite other idea that 'God' has to do with the whole huge problem of an 'I' that is and yet is not anything, the 'I' as problematized by Wittgenstein: there is no room for God as having to do with this 'I' because this 'I' itself does not emerge to puzzle the mind.

So doggedly do we ignore the 'I' that emerges as a problem through that disciplined commonsense that is called philosophy, that when we do call to mind the possible validity of mystical experience we posit a special, 'deeper' self. Instead of recognizing the puzzling truth of ourselves, which emerges from the most trivial human context correctly analysed, we recognize religion by tarting up the misconceived ego in which something is supposed to be going on. The rarer spirits, we say, are summoned from the everyday to a gala performance.

There is another very important implication in exorcizing the image of 'something going on in somebody': the notion of experience as purely private has to go too. For if my experience is *mine*, and not just *in me*, then the very notion of it immediately raises the problem

of *your* experience. The concept of 'mine' becomes strictly meaningless unless there can be yours. Even in the comparatively simple ownership, of property, we can see that the very notion of private property involves a public order that recognizes the stuff as mine. Apart from this order, what on earth am I doing with it?—and this not merely in the sense of the question 'what are you doing with that gold?' addressed to the disciples of Jesus, but in the radical sense of 'what on earth is going on here?' Now just because the 'ownership' of experience is so much subtler than this, its appeal to *other* owners is correspondingly more intimate and subtle.

As long as we are content with the notion of 'things going on in a person', the question of *other* people's experience becomes at most an optional question, a theme for curiosity. 'This is going on in me: I wonder what goes on in him?' But once I take full stock of the fact that experience in me means 'the world as mine, as under my limit', then I tremble on the edge of the absurd and am redeemed *only* by asking you about *your* 'world'. And if I go on thinking, I must wonder about 'the' world—which is the God-question. The Godlessness of so many of our *soi-disant* modern thinkers is due to the fact that they do not feel the insanity of consciousness.

And you, my friend, my only redemption from insanity is to love you. The world as my world is a nightmare from which I only awake in meeting you in your world. And to this love I am wonderfully seduced by the fact, recognized by all our language and burked by our Cartesian thinking, that your experience is the same yours as is the colour of your hair and the way you laugh.

What emerges from all this is that love is not a 'psychological' escape from privacy but the 'metaphysical' fact that we are not private. My experience puts a limit to the world for me that is meaningless and quite horrible apart from 'the world for you'. And we do not share the world, you and I. We share, you and I, in each other in so far as we live the world. 'Sharing the world' is the laudable but pathetically limited aim of the social reformer. Communion of selves in the world—that is the love in which alone we can live. I cannot bear to be with reformers unless I can state, without inhibition, my world, and await with joyous anticipation their statement of theirs. God tremblingly is in the tremulous whole of people together. For God means *the* world in which the respective worlds of people coincide in the huge task of loving.

Finally, the world, to me, is my world. I am its shaping limit. But the fact that I shall die warns me that *my* world is not *the* world: for the latter will go on when I am gone. Death forces me to face this contradiction which is myself, of which God is the resolution. But rather than face this contradiction, men have killed God: and that is the revelation. For in killing God we push death onto God and so confess the connexion between God and the death we cannot bear. The killing of God is the portentous obverse of the truth. To come

into that truth is to receive God in our dying. Death is a love-affair with the universe which only the love of God can sustain. Conversely, God is a love that I can only know in dying. At the heart of all our unlove, which confines us to our separate versions of the world, is the crucified love of God, transforming our unlove into the churching of man.