

Otherness

Martin Heidegger notoriously fostered the idea of truth (*aletheia*) as ‘Being’ revealing or ‘unveiling’ itself in the world of humanity. ‘Meaning’ or ‘truth’ is revealed, not reached by argument. One might call this a way of viewing truth as inherent in reality, and capable of manifesting itself in an epiphany, albeit that for Heidegger, ‘it is the very fact that one is *outside* that makes possible the revelation of truth or meaning’.¹ Similarly, structuralist theory sees meaning as inherent in the different systems it observes (e.g., linguistic, social, or cultural), and as manifesting itself in the ways the various elements in such systems interrelate.

As against such theories that propose an ‘internal solution’ to the grand question of ‘meaning’, one could cite other approaches that find no such ‘internal solution’ to the riddle of understanding any aspect of reality. The world remains permanently opaque, permanently incomprehensible. ‘Being’ does not reveal itself, or articulate itself, or become itself. What instead is offered by such approaches is a belief in an ‘external solution’ to the incomprehensibility of the world, ‘external’ to the world itself, though clearly not ‘external’ to the divine Creator.

The difference between any ‘internal’ and any ‘external’ solution to the enigma of the world lies in the belief that truth – the truth that alone is of vital interest to us – is not so much a buried treasure to be hit upon within the confines of creation or a synonym for the laws of nature, in any or all of its branches, but is rather a connection between the world of the divine and the world of the creature. In recent times, Emmanuel Lévinas (‘from Being to the Other’) has, in the notion of ‘otherness’, highlighted the alternative, so to speak, to a fixation on ‘Being’. Not entirely surprising is his Jewish background, which he shares with many other recent figures, such as Martin

¹ Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), 39.

Buber, who also stressed in their thinking the dialectical or ‘diological’ principle, as it is often somewhat paradoxically termed, rather than any monistic rationalism. Not entirely surprising, because for Judaism, even more radically – seemingly – than for Christianity, God is other than and cannot be confused with his creation. Which still leaves God intact, and our world intact as his creation, and the possibility of a connection between the two.

If one accepts this sense of truth, there is naturally a price to be paid, which is that one will never know fully either this world or God, either here or anywhere else. Since, however, reality transcends understanding, it is presumably unaffected by our cognitive ‘gridlock’, and indeed may come to be seen as growing in attractiveness for this very reason. This should not be interpreted, needless to say, as an appeal to give up on reason or to glory in confusion. It is just another sign that the innocence of truth transcends even the cunning of reason.