

CONTEMPLATION, SILENCE AND THE RETURN TO REALITY

Johannes Hoff

ABOUT THIRTY YEARS AGO, in the 1980s, the German film director Phillip Gröning spent a week in a Carthusian monastery. This was an unusual opportunity, because Carthusian monasteries are no ordinary places. For nearly 1,000 years the monks who inhabit them have lived in the detachment of an almost unbroken silence. No visitors are allowed to enter the monastery, no artificial devices are allowed to distract the attention of the hermits. Spending their time in meditation, prayer and manual labour, Carthusians only leave their cells for the daily Eucharist and three prayer services in the monastery chapel, where they congregate in silence. Only on Sundays do they talk with each other and take a walk together.

A few years after this visit, in 1984, Gröning asked the prior of the community for permission to make a documentary film about his monastery. The prior promised that he would think about this request, and talk about it with his fellow monks. In the year 2000, sixteen years after this conversation, Gröning received an unexpected phone call. The prior was at the other end of the line and he said: 'yes'.

Gröning was allowed to enter La Grande Chartreuse, mother house of the Carthusian order, which is located in the Chartreuse mountains north of Grenoble. But he had to come alone, equipped only with a hand-held camera, and he had to promise that he would not use any additions: no soundtrack, no narration and no artificial light. Only natural noises and the chants of the monks were permitted to break the silence.

Gröning spent almost six months with the hermits, and it took him five years to edit the footage. When his film finally appeared it enjoyed considerable popularity in France, Italy, Spain, Germany and Japan.

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A still from Into Great Silence

Gröning's documentary does not include any story, nor does it draw out emotions. Hence, it might be thought that it has nothing to offer and nothing to say. But it captures what we have lost under the dictatorship of modern technology: *time*. And it makes audible what we no longer hear: *the silent voice of the present time*.

At the beginning of the film, an intertitle relates the story of Elijah's return to Mount Horeb. Several centuries after Moses had encountered the Lord for the first time at this place, Elijah returned to Mount Horeb in order to complain about the faithlessness of the Israelites. It seemed to him as if they had forgotten the Name of God. But on his way back to the place of Moses' first encounter with the Lord, Elijah also became forgetful: he no longer recalled why he felt the desire to return. When he finally arrived, he hid himself in a cave. But the word of God came to him saying:

Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by. Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was *not* in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was *not* in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was *not* in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. (1 Kings 19:11–13)

We might call this experience of forgetfulness a religious experience of a kind. But it is not only of religious significance. It shares its most significant features with a key philosophical problem of our modern world: the ‘forgetfulness of being’. As philosophers who are familiar with the continental tradition know, the modern ‘forgetfulness of being’ was first thematized by the German philosopher Martin Heidegger, shortly after the First World War.

According to Heidegger, we are not autonomous subjects that relate to empirical facts in the world ‘out there’. Our scientific, artistic, ethical, political or philosophical attempts to make sense of the world are always modes of caring for the world that we *inhabit*. Consequently, our reasoning about the world is always governed by preconceptions about its meaning; we are always already ‘situated’ in the world to which we relate. However, we can become forgetful of the point of our ‘being-there’ (*Dasein*). We may still be perfectly fitted to do what we are expected to do in the hamster-wheel of our everyday business; we may even be able to provide a sophisticated account of the ultimate meaning and purpose of our hamster-wheel that is consistent with the common beliefs of the people, the collective reasoning of the philosophical or scientific community, or the ecclesial teaching of the Christian tradition. But our sophisticated reasoning no longer relates to our being-there, here and now.

In states such as angst or boredom, we may then discover that everything ‘slips away’, that no matter *matters* any longer; and this experience is, according to Heidegger, more than a fleeting *subjective* mood. It reveals something about the ‘fundamental attunement of being situated’ (*Grundbefindlichkeit*).¹ If we are aware of this basic attunement, we start to understand why our access to the ‘being’ of the world is not self-evident, and why the scientific systems, opinions and narratives that shape our everyday attempts to make sense of the world can lose their reliability, both on the private and on the collective (political, scientific, cultural or ecclesial) level. If this happens to be the case, we may discover that we are lost in our hamster-wheel—and we are now prepared to realise that there is no hope of changing this fate by speeding up our activity or inventing new ideas about the overall purpose of the wheel.

According to Heidegger, this is one of the most characteristic features of our modern world: we have become forgetful of the simplest thing in

¹ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, translated by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY, 1996), nn. 29–30, 40.

our life, our ability to be. How can human beings forget to be present in the world that they inhabit and enact? We are inclined to become forgetful of our ability to be present because it is frightening—as Heidegger realised when he considered existential basic experiences such as boredom and angst as key to recovering the foundations of philosophical considerations about the concept of being. Elijah was about to realise something similar when he hid himself in a cave. He no longer knew what it is like to face God’s presence, and this forgetfulness was frightening.

Now it is worth recalling the place where Elijah’s forgetfulness happened: the mountain where his forefather Moses had encountered the Lord for the first time. Already in this first encounter, the Lord had provided a quite philosophical response to the question of forgetfulness. He recalled the concept of being in telling Moses how he might recollect the name of the Lord. At Mount Horeb, Moses had asked God the following question:

If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you’, and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?’ God said to Moses, ‘I AM WHO I AM’. (Exodus 3: 12–14)

More than 2,000 years later, Thomas Aquinas provided the most concise philosophical summary of this response to the question of forgetfulness: God is not an ‘entity’—God is being itself.²

Heidegger was not interested in the forgetfulness of God. As a philosopher, he confined his research to the forgetfulness of being. But the modern forgetfulness of being has much in common with the older problem of the forgetfulness of God. In both cases our forgetfulness is related to a kind of anxiety—the inclination to hide in caves instead of facing the present time.

In his early writings, Heidegger used an everyday example to illustrate this phenomenon: the example of mortality. Every one of us knows that we are mortal ‘beings’ that will sooner or later die. But do we really believe that? Do we really know what that means—what it means to be ‘no more’? Many people discover only in the last hours of their life what it means to be mortal. Death is not a possibility that we can imagine or hypothetically anticipate. It is a paradoxical possibility: namely the possibility that nothing is any longer possible. ‘Death is the possibility

² Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, 1, q. 8 a. 1.

of the absolute impossibility of Da-sein.’³ This is the reason why we are inclined to evade this possibility. But if we fail to face up to what we are—mortal beings—we *exist* only in an improper or inauthentic sense, we are no longer *one* with ourselves. Our familiarity with the world fades away; we do longer understand what it means ‘to be’.

In my own research, I tried to go one step further in that I focused not on Heidegger’s ‘forgetfulness of being’, but on the forgetfulness of the *act* of being. What is the difference? The focus on the act of being reminds us that the *actuality* of being becomes manifest only through our ability to *act*. Already Thomas Aquinas noticed a mysterious connection between the words ‘actuality’ and ‘action’.⁴ The *actuality* of ‘beings’ makes us *act*. As contemporary psychologists put it, the presence of things ‘affords’⁵ actions—it enables us to act in body, mind and spirit.

**The actuality
of ‘beings’
makes us act**

Aquinas was also already familiar with the metaphysical reason for this phenomenon. According to his teaching on the ‘transcendentals’ (the ‘trans-generic’ predicates that characterize every creature in so far as it participates in the ‘being’ of its creator), being is not a kind of neutral facticity. The actuality of ‘being’ (*ens*) coincides with ‘the true’ (*verum*) and ‘the good’ (*bonum*) that reveals itself through ‘the beautiful’ (*pulchrum*) in creation wherever it is one (*unum*) with itself. The ‘brilliance’ (*claritas*)⁶ of everything that is truly one with itself attracts our attention and actualises itself in responsive actions—like the beauty of a virtuous person, that reveals itself in responses of wonder and praise.

If the actuality of ‘being’ (*ens*) coincides with the one, the true and the good that reveals itself through the beauty of the world, then being is never neutral. The beautiful and good never leaves us untouched or indifferent. It is ‘erotically attractive’, in the Platonic sense of this expression—its glory attracts our attention and makes us act through its mere presence, its mere actuality.

However, in order to be attentive to the erotic power of the act of being, we have to adopt a contemplative attitude: we have to contemplate

³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, n.50.

⁴ See David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Scranton: U. of Scranton P, 2008), chapter 9.

⁵ See K. S. Jones, ‘What is an Affordance?’ *Ecological Psychology*, 15/2 (2003), 107–114, and the other articles in this special issue.

⁶ As for the subtle relationship between Aquinas’ concept of beauty (*pulchrum*) to the (more proper) transcendentals of *unum*, *verum* and *bonum*, see Oleg V. Bychkov, ‘Metaphysics as Aesthetics: Aquinas’ Metaphysics in Present-Day Theological Aesthetics’, *Modern Theology*, 31 (2015), 147–178.

the silent presence of the *actual* world, without being distracted by chatty speculations about *possible* worlds, without concerns about what ‘*might* have happened’ in the past, and without worrying about future *possibilities*. Consequently, a truly realistic philosophy has to have a contemplative core. The fullness of ‘being’ reveals its actuality principally in a contemplative science, the science of prayer, where ‘to be silent is to speak’ (as Nicholas of Cusa put it in the fifteenth century).⁷

The first significant steps in the philosophical movements that made us forgetful of this contemplative core of our theoretical reasoning about the ‘being’ of the world were taken a generation after Thomas Aquinas, in the Franciscan tradition of the late Middle Ages.⁸ But this was only the start of a long-term development that reached its turning point in the world-pictures of the founders of modern science and philosophy, Galileo Galilei, René Descartes, John Locke and Isaac Newton. In the age of Galileo and Newton it was still possible to relate the articulation of scientific theories to spiritual practices. But this was no longer the main concern of the innovators of this time. Hence, Descartes’ *Meditations* of 1641 marked a kind of threshold—the transition point between the premodern concept of *theoria*, which built on practices of *contemplation*, and the modern concept of science, which builds on practices of *manipulation*.

According to the modern concept of science, our ability to develop a scientific ‘theory’ does not require us to cultivate a tradition of ethical habits, narratives and contemplative practices. We can confine ourselves to constructing *possible worlds* that can be *expressed* in the quantifiable language of mathematical logic and *tested* through empirical observation. In order to assure that such hypothetical constructions are realistic in scientific terms, it suffices to make sure that the related empirical observations can be mechanically repeated, independently of the circumstances of their discovery—as we do when we test scientific theories in laboratories that enable us to control what might and might not happen. Already in 1644, Descartes summarised this new concept of scientific theorizing in the following words: ‘I have described this Earth, and indeed the whole visible universe, *as if it were a machine*’.⁹

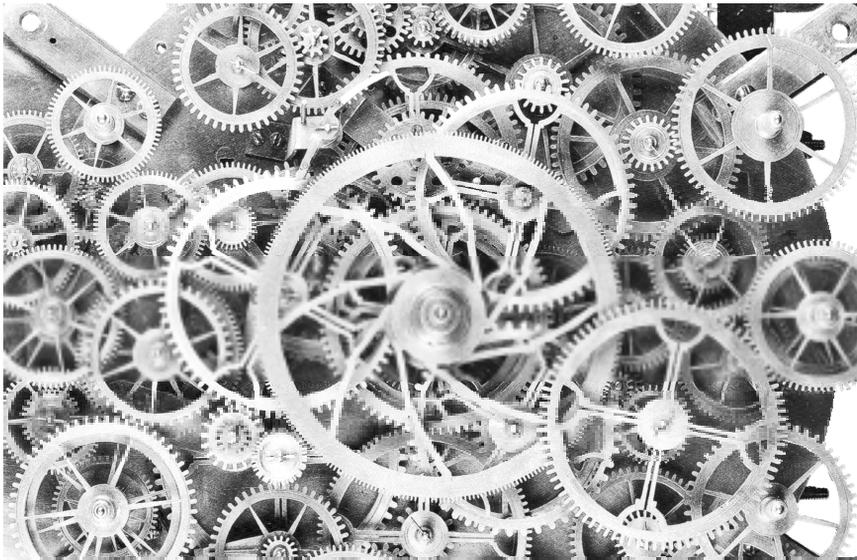
⁷ Nicholas of Cusa, *De dato patris lumini*, c. 3 n. 107, 9.

⁸ For a critical discussion of this genealogy see Johannes Hoff, ‘The Analogical Turn: Responses to John Betz, Michael E. Moore, Matthew Moser, and Daniel O’Connell, Virtual Symposium on Johannes Hoff: *The Analogical Turn*’, *Syndicate Theology* (2015), available at <https://syndicatetheology.com/symposium/871/>.

⁹ René Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, translated by John Cottingham, part 4, n. 188, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, volume 1 (Cambridge: CUP, 1999), 279.

In a certain sense, this summary became the charter for the modern ‘age of the world-picture’:¹⁰ from this point on the world appeared as configuration of neutral facts that operated, like a well-constructed machine, in accordance with a predictable, fixed and invariable (algorithmic) ‘picture’ of its rules. Hence, we became used to the modern fiction that the world is a kind of clockwork that operates without any spontaneity or creativity.

Under the influence of this clockwork imagery, theist philosophers and theologians concluded that God has to be a kind of watchmaker. God was no longer conceived as the silent voice of our present time that calls us to get out of our caves—or at least not from an educated, scientific point of view. Rather, God appeared as a kind of engineer: a remote builder of a gigantic mechanism, or an intelligent designer who triggered the evolution of human life billions of years ago. We are still trapped in this imagery when we consider God the initiator of a ‘big bang’, or when we say that our behaviour is ‘programmed into our genes’, as if God were the first link in a chain of temporal causes, or a gigantic anthropomorphic entity that created the world in accordance with a predictable algorithmic plan—and not the incomprehensible principle of *everything* that exists (including the secondary principles of temporality, causality and human engineering).



¹⁰ See Martin Heidegger, ‘The Age of the World Picture’, in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, translated by William Lovitt (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 115–154.

Already in Descartes, this mechanical cosmology was accompanied by a picture of the world in which the human soul adopts the position of an external spectator. We cannot describe the world as a mechanism without assuming the position of a detached observer, who is able to observe it without intervening in its automatic operation. Our physical activities might be part of this cosmic clockwork, but the scientific observer has to adopt a detached ‘view from nowhere’ in order to draw an unbiased, objective picture of the world. But is this really the world that exists? Is this way of investigating the world still faithful to what we experience as *being*?

**We are
not detached
observers of
neutral facts**

If we adopt a more realistic point of view, we soon see that the modern strategy to construct an algorithmic ‘picture of the world’ was *unrealistic* from the outset. We are *not* detached observers of neutral facts. Even scientists are always part of the world that they observe; we are always involved in the world that we perceive, and this includes modes of affective, ethical and even spiritual involvement. The hand that touches the world can be touched as well; the eye that sees the world is itself a visible thing. I do not see my eye when I am looking at other people, but I am aware that my eye is visible in the same way as the back of a door is visible, even though it is not visible for me here and now.

As the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty has pointed out, our ability to see is always accompanied by the awareness that we are a bodily part of a sensible field in which objects can be seen, heard, touched, smelled and tasted.¹¹ For this reason, perception is always interactive. We might stare at objects from the distance, but our view is not detached. The object stares back.¹² Whatever I see is looking at me—it attracts my attention and guides my action. To use the language of Thomas Aquinas: whatever *actually* emerges in my perceptual field makes me *act*.

This becomes most evident when a human *person* emerges in my perceptual field. The French philosopher and mystic Simone Weil has provided us with a concise description of this phenomenon:

Anybody who is in our vicinity exercises a certain power over us by his *very presence*, and a power that belongs to him alone, that is, the

¹¹ See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1968), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge, 1989).

¹² See Georges Didi-Huberman, *Ce que nous voyons, ce qui nous regarde* (Paris: Minuit, 1992).

power of halting, repressing, modifying each movement that our body sketches out. If we step aside for a passer-by on the road, *it is not the same* thing as stepping aside to avoid a billboard; alone in our rooms, we get up, walk about, sit down again quite differently from the way we do when we have a visitor.¹³

The things in my world have the power to make me act and respond to their presence. Even stones and trees have the power to make me responsive—they speak to me with a silent voice. When I see a mug, it invites me to grasp it. When I see a paved avenue it invites me to walk along between the trees.

Descartes' mechanical view of the world built on the assumption that we have to suppress our involvement with the world in order to be realistic observers. But this assumption was neither realistic, nor was it based on scientific evidence. It was a pragmatic fiction. Our ability to observe is always embedded in our active *engagement* with what we observe. As long as we exist, we participate as thoughtful, animated and acting bodies in an animated world—as it was still self-evident for medieval philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas.¹⁴

The philosophical realists of the past were still aware that our ability to theorize *about* the world is derivative of our ability to respond to the world. Since our childhood, we know what the word 'being' means, because we have learnt to *respond* to what we perceive. Hans Urs von Balthasar exemplified this tacit knowledge by the smile of a mother who looks at her child: 'The mother's smile is *understood* by her child, and in this event the world of being as a whole lights up behind the world of images'.¹⁵

For the same reason, premodern philosophers such as Thomas Aquinas knew that practices of prayer and contemplation are more than a private activity. Contemplative practices bring us back to the responsive basic attitude of our childhood. They enable us to act in response to the world that we inhabit. Against this background it might be argued that only the responsive practices of prayer and contemplation can enable us to recover again a *realistic* understanding of our world.

Leading spiritual teachers of our time, such as the Benedictine monk John Main, have argued in this direction by drawing our attention to

¹³ Simone Weil, *The Iliad: or, The Poem of Force*, in *War and The Iliad*, translated by Mary McCarthy (New York: NYRB Classics, 2005), 7 (my italics).

¹⁴ See also Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Ma: Belknap, 2007), part 1.

¹⁵ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, volume 2, *The Truth of God*, translated by Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 254.

the modern forgetfulness of being from a religious point of view. Like Heidegger, Main acknowledged that the 'speaking silence' of 'being' is frightening:

Many of us spend a great deal of time in inane conversation because we are so frightened and feel socially awkward of silent spaces We fear silence when we are alone as well and so we often live with a constant background of radio chat or muzak.¹⁶

The release of Phillip Gröning's film *Into the Great Silence* provided us with an illuminating example of this. Many people who went to see it left the cinema early because it made them feel unsettled and restless. Spiritual guides know this phenomenon. The silent presence of a dirty, empty floor, the voiceless inertia of a glass of water, the delusively noiseless movement of an aeroplane in the sky, or the speechless presence of a human face that is not as beautiful and innocent as we would like it to be can make us feel disquiet. But this encounter with the actual world can also be the first step to a responsive action that reveals the meaning of our being in the world—the glory of a finite creation. John Main expressed this basic experience of the spiritual traditions of the past in the language of our present time when he wrote:

In meditation we cross the threshold from background noise into silence. Silence is necessary if the human spirit is to thrive and to be creative. Silence releases a creative response to life, to our environment because it gives our spirit room to be. In silence we do not have to justify ourselves, apologize or impress anyone. Just *be*.¹⁷

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¹⁶ *Silence and the Stillness in Every Season: Daily Readings with John Main*, edited by Paul Harris (New York: Continuum, 1998), 315

¹⁷ *Silence and the Stillness in Every Season*, 315.