Being, Becoming, and the Good

Proposing this as the title of a short paper seems presumptuous even for someone whose life has been spent in that most presumptuous of human endeavors – philosophical speculation. But having already jumped into the deep end, I intend to be even more presumptuous by beginning to mark out what I'd like to say today by quoting myself. In a recent paper, I concluded some remarks on the "ultimate why question" by saying,

> Ends make sense only when drawn into relation with the practice which gives rise to them. Being makes sense only when drawn into relation with Becoming. Theory becomes meaningful only when drawn into relation with the practice of which it is a part and to which it must return in order for there to be any possible answer to the ultimate why question.[1]

It seems to me that this question, "Why is there something rather than nothing?" is, and has always been as much a question about the Good as it is a question about Being. From the earliest stages of the philosophical tradition, we have sought an answer to ultimate questions concerning the nature of being in order to answer even more fundamental questions, questions about meaning and value. And, equally from the earliest stages of the tradition, we have persuaded ourselves that if we can just manage to clear away the fog created by the play of appearances in our immediate experience, we will somehow succeed in answering the question that every intelligent being asks at some point, "Why should I do this rather than that?" Practical experience itself answers this question for us until we have provided ourselves with the basic necessities of life, but once having done so, perhaps just out of the habit engendered

[1] "Why Ask Why? Pragmatic Reflections on the Ultimate Why Question," in *The Ultimate Why Question*, John Wippel, ed., The Catholic University of America Press, 2011

by the exigencies of practical experience, we continue to seek out answers to questions now phrased in much larger terms. Why is one course of action to be preferred to another, when a review of the consequences of action provides no obvious (or at least, no indubitable) criterion? Is there an ultimate criterion ontologically independent of our question? Does the good lie out there somewhere beyond us? As we all know, many have proposed in one way or another that it does, but each of the proposals advanced carries along with it still more questions, the most important of which just draws us back to the reason it was proposed in the first place: in the absence of consensus concerning any of these proposals, how are we to distinguish among them? Should we retreat into ourselves, into the origin of these questions, supposing that there is nothing after all to be found out there? Perhaps the answer – such as it is – lies within ourselves. New proposals, new theories, emerge, now attempting to justify this retreat as something more than a reliance upon idiosyncratic preference. Alas, this path seems as little likely to lead to general agreement as the other. Should we concern ourselves with general agreement in the first place? I should like to suggest that we begin again. But I believe we must begin with a willingness to put aside, or at least to modify, some of the age-old prejudices which arise out of our worries about the uncertainties of immediate experience. These worries are natural enough, grounded as they are in practical concerns, but they have too often functioned as blinders to a full assessment of the intricate and unending play between practice and theory, becoming and being, and the gradual, emergent nature of goodness. In this paper, I should like to sketch out a path which in drawing upon the American tradition and contemporary phenomenology, sees theory, including theory directed toward an understanding of the good, as simply another kind of practice. If we are to move beyond the

proposals we have made thus far, I believe we must seek the ontology of the good in a richer understanding of the reciprocal nature of the relation between being and becoming, those grand expressions that arise first and last out of our common human practice.

We have been in the habit, time out of mind, of assuming that it makes most sense to consider becoming the annoyingly obstreperous stepchild of being. From Parmenides onward – putting the occasional divergent opinion, Heraclitus for example, to the side – we have persuaded ourselves that a static conception of being, or for that matter of whatever other expression we use to refer to what is ultimate, is to be preferred. The chief reason for this is of course always a logical one. In saying that, I do not in the least mean to praise our reason, but simply to identify it. It is a logical concern that drives us to this notion. We worry that unless *something* holds steady, nothing will. At least, nothing will hold steady enough to provide us with a foundation for knowledge. Or, as I found myself saying to some students in a seminar last term, nothing will hold steady enough to get a good shot at it. I was kidding at the time, but I'm not kidding now. I really do think that this bias, tripped out as it comes to be in all the finery of our abstract theoretical concerns, arises first out of the exigencies of direct experience. Those basic needs drive us to think first and last about how to locate things in our experience which will stay put long enough for us to make use of them. I need to know where to locate the sorts of plants I can eat, when and where the animals I can use for food are likely to be found, how to identify the natural patterns that can help me succeed in cutting my way through the befuddling jungle of immediate experience. Having done so, having that is to say lifted myself out of the confusion of the immediate, I find myself living in a world much more congenial to my needs. Here there are regularities, here there is a way of thinking about things

I can put to use in satisfying those basic needs, and before long I say to myself, here is the truth. The mind-numbing play of appearances that troubled me while I was trying to figure out where the rabbits are likely to be found can be evaded if I only focus my attention on something that (as I now say to myself) transcends the appearances. And of course, this works. It should not surprise us that when our distant ancestors finally in this fashion provided themselves the luxury of time to speculate on the nature of things, they were already certain that there was such a nature and that it had a constant character. It was a thought embedded in their practical experience and, as a result, imprinted on their theoretical assessments of that experience. I do not take myself to be saying anything that everybody doesn't already know. But I do think that we have continued to lose track – the efforts of the American thinkers notwithstanding – of what this actually means.

Of course we opt in favour of what does not change. Presumably, those among our ancestors who did not left little mark on the gene pool as we would now say. Accidentally stumbling upon a rabbit, say, or some kind of fruit that can be eaten, does of course happen from time to time, but counting on lucky accidents doesn't work out well as a program for a successful life. Well, enough of imagining those very early moments of our forbears huddled as they were at the mouths of caves wondering where to find their next meal. Enough at least for this moment, but it seems to me that it is unwise ever to leave these thoughts far behind as we pursue the questions that our luxurious style of life has allowed us to consider. Of course we continue to find in ourselves a bias in favour of abstract thinking. Thinking is itself abstract. It requires lifting oneself out of the moment so as to consider how this moment is related to

others. But this is also a kind of practice. It is a kind of practice that grows up out of experience in its most raw and fundamental character. And that is just what we have too often forgotten.

We propose to ourselves a conception of what is most fundamental that is aligned with the assessment of the sort of experience which is indeed most fundamental to us. Being (or whatever other expression one chooses to use in this abstracted way of considering experience) is naturally – and I mean to stress that this logical move is natural – elevated in our thinking to a plane that transcends what I have called the confusion of the immediate. And then we try to think it on its own. What can Being be? It must be something like those anchors that we throw out either theoretically or practically to make it possible to stay more or less in one place while everything else seems to move on around us. If it's not, we're up the creek – again, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically because there can't be any meaning if things mean one thing one day and another the next, practically – and I would argue much more importantly – because we can only deal successfully with our experience, again, practically, if we can lift ourselves out of this or that moment in such a way as to recognize patterns of various kinds. It's not surprising that we begin to suppose that those patterns upon which so much hinges are actually there quite independent of us and our immediate concerns. That quite different patterns might become a focus of our attention if we were ourselves different does not much trouble us. It's the notion of patterns themselves that we elevate. And in doing so, we have often forgotten to attend to the genealogy of the patterns and of our interest in them.

So, now provided with enough food and shelter and ways of securing a future of putting these immediate concerns aside, we think. What made all of this possible? The answer is clear. If one wants to live successfully, the first step is to move away from the immediate. Those abstractions that arose out of immediate concern are now cut away from their origin and treated as logical structures that must have been there all along. After all, we have discovered that we can't do without them, so how could the world itself? What is Being? It is that which never changes. How can we be sure of this? Well, just think. At the most fundamental level of thinking about anything large or small, the choices seem clear. It either is or it isn't. There is either Being or Nothing. Since nothing is of course just nothing, there is only Being. What next? Unhappily, the next move is a tricky one. If there's only one thing – no matter what one chooses to call it – there is no room for differentiation of any sort. Do we reconcile ourselves to a radical split between our logic and our experience? Curiously enough, as we all know, the answer is yes. We are quite prepared to accept the completely ridiculous notion that we should put aside the weight of our experience in favour of this bizarre and now fully abstract conception of Being. It is the category of all categories, but it is that in such a way as to make no logical space for any other categories. Now we have lifted ourselves out of our immediate experience all right, but we've done so in such a way as to make nonsense – and that literally – of the experience from which we've departed. Yes, of course, Plato and Aristotle propose ways of getting ourselves out of this Parmenidean trap, but neither succeeds in the end. As they both know. Even Aristotle, that most practical of all thinkers, continues to accept his teacher's notion that the theoretical supersedes the practical in all important respects. It is only by

means of theory, after all, that we can gain access to the eternal, the unchanging face of the real.

Of course we must remove ourselves from the confusion of the immediate. Of course this requires a conception of experience at odds with our most direct sense of it. But this is itself a part of experience, and that's what we seem time and time again to ignore. Magical as it must have seemed at first, surely we should now be able to see that there is nothing magical either about our ability to separate ourselves from the moment – if only momentarily – nor about our ability stretch the moment by connecting it with other moments. So we conceive the categories, classes, sets, the whole family of logical structures that make our lives liveable, but we neglect the fact that this activity is itself of the moment. It's just another kind of moment, another kind of experience. One equally immediate, equally crucial, but different from the confusion we sought to escape. Lost in the fog at sea, we found that choosing some direction was crucial. Lost in the woods, we thought the same thing. I can't afford now to attend to the ways in which each tree is different from every other. I must see the water on which I float, or the forest in which I'm lost, as a potential set of paths, watery or solid, the ground has to be informed by some figure, some plan. Those plans become so crucial that I forget – because I must – that they are just plans. But then I think to myself, it is perfectly reasonable to elevate those plan above the plane of my most immediate experience, inasmuch as they are critical to the possibility of reaching some shore, of getting out of the woods. Fair enough. We do it and we remember doing it. That is, we remember surviving only because we retreated from the confusion of the immediate and found in abstracting ourselves from it a way to go on.

Now, home and dry, we think. What is real? What is true? Those plans, those classes and categories, take on mythic proportions. How could anything be more important than they? Haven't we already found the truth – or at least part of it? We have certainly learned what the truth must be like. It's the definite path that we conceive and then experience. Definition itself is the critical thing. Yes, now we are just a hop, skip, and a jump away from saying to be is to be determinate. But we think that not because abstract logic tells us that it is so. We think it because life, life filled with all its demands and fears, tells us so. This judgment, seemingly so abstract, is really grounded in the most concrete and practical of our concerns. We pull ourselves away from immediate experience when we have time to do so, we convince ourselves that we have now discovered a truth divorced from the confusion of our direct experience, but as we do so, we simply ignore the fact that all of this thinking, all of this now calm insistence on the stability of meaning, is a discovery we have made independent of our immediate concerns. We cut it away from its origin, consider it something grander than its own genealogy, and puzzle ourselves about how this transcendent meaning could be related to the mess we find all around us.

How could Being have anything to do with Becoming? Surely Becoming is akin to being lost in the fog or the forest. It is transcended by Being. Being was already there – it is more fundamental, more true, since in the end (yes, the end looms large) it was thinking about those stable plans, those definitions, that got us out of the soup in the first place. And so we say to ourselves that Being has no need of Becoming. In fact, Becoming, as we now think of it, is probably just an illusion, as difficult and alarming as the confusion of the immediate moment. What is the good? We might be uncertain in respect to any particular definition, but we are

certain that it is not to be found in the muddle of the immediate. Surely it has much more the character of the path that actually got us out of the woods, the course that led us out of the fog. And I want to argue that it does indeed have that character. It has the character of the definition that emerges out of confused experience and allows us to move toward the satisfaction of our need to go on. But this allies our conception of the good with Becoming, not with Being, at least not with that notion of Being conceived in calm reflection, Being as something fixed and resolute. We are resolute all right, but what we are resolute *about* is always getting ourselves out of the fog, away from the fear engendered by the seemingly trackless woods. We have to pick a direction, we have to make a track, and in doing so, we – at least when we are fortunate – have arrived at the good, now finding ourselves home and dry. The inclination to elevate such moments to a status well beyond themselves is not hard to understand. I have actually been lost in the fog on various occasions and getting out of it is no small thing. There is nothing more immediately terrifying than the lack of definition. Of course we embrace definition. Without it, we are lost both practically and theoretically, but most importantly, practically. It is not surprising that our theories are driven by the absolutely primal drive for definition. But there is reason for caution here. We turn away from the experience from which the comfort we find in definition arose in the first place because we must. Experience itself requires us to do so – at least if our experience is lead to any degree of practical success. But we must be careful not to imagine that those definitions that led us out of the fog can stand on their own. Definition is just a response to the confusion of the immediate, and it is a response that cannot itself mean anything when divorced from the mess

out of which it arises. If we cut it away from its origin, we doom ourselves to an unnecessary muddle at least as frightening as the mess we used it to escape in the first place.

What is the good? The good is being home and dry. But being home and dry isn't of much use if we're not provided with the food the search for which got us lost in the fog or in the woods in the first place. Yes, I find myself using that expression, "in the first place," repeatedly. But not without reason. It's much too easy to forget about that first place as we warm ourselves by the fire with dinner cooking. Now we say to ourselves, "the path was always there," "the right course simply had to be found," and we trick ourselves into imagining that the definitions that arose out of our immediate needs had always some meaning in themselves distinct from and independent of those needs. So far I am voicing an objection that we've heard many times before. It's an objection that Nietzsche makes. It is echoed in slightly different terms by the Americans. And even those questions, critical as they have been in reshaping our project, are not new. Thought from the perspective of practical experience, we have always wondered about this. "What is truth?" Pontius Pilate asks. And we say to ourselves, we might not have an answer, but we know at least that you are wrong even to ask the question. Because sometimes one just knows the answer. How? Well, we say to ourselves, we know at least that it's good to find a way out of the woods. There is no need to ask why about that. We might well ask it while sitting next to the fire with the rabbit cooking on it, but we certainly didn't ask it before we got home. The age-old problem reasserts itself every time we try to reconcile these different but related experiences. Here, the American tradition is I think genuinely helpful. We puzzle ourselves unnecessarily by supposing that one can make sense of ends independent of the means employed to secure them. The ends only make sense

in the light of the means, the means only make sense in the light of the ends. The reciprocity between the two can of course be disguised by reflective experience, but the inclination to allow ourselves so to disguise this obvious relation is itself just a part of practical experience. We prefer to forget the labour of the immediate. We particularly prefer to forget the fear engendered by the confusion of the immediate. But without it, the value of the end is meaningless.

Enough of this you think. Here we are, sophisticated metaphysicians all, isn't about time to move away from the primitive fire above which the rabbit turns on its spit? I'm not so sure. But I am as much a decadent and pampered being as the rest of you. So I am happy to translate this into the language of abstraction with which we are all more comfortable. I started with big words. Being. Becoming. The Good. What I mean to suggest to you is not simply that we have to take Becoming into account when we consider our various conceptions of Being. I mean that the notion of Being is impossible to conceive without the notion of Becoming. There is nothing else that can provide the ontological boundary without which Being – that magnificent idea with which we have befuddled ourselves for so long – can possibly mean anything. Being is no different from our humbler notions. In order to make sense of anything, we obviously have to provide some logical boundaries. But those boundaries cannot themselves be defined in terms of the same notions they are used to pick out. In order for difference to be discernable, there must be genuine difference. This all seems straightforward enough when we are thinking about the logical boundaries that distinguish one determinate being from another. The matter becomes much less clear, however, when we examine the logical boundaries of Determinate Being itself. I have argued for years, before this august group and in print, that we have been in

the habit of making a logically illegitimate leap from Being to Determinate Being. If, as our forefather Aristotle suggests, Being has no contrary, the logical consequence he neglects is that Being lies completely outside the bounds of what we usually mean by reason. Reason requires boundaries: one thing – no matter what one means by a thing – emerges into rational discourse only by contrast with another thing and things are only distinguishable if they have boundaries. But if we are try to conceive of Being itself – Being qua Being as he liked to say – Being must also have boundaries. What can bound Being? It's not hard to see why Aristotle argued that there can't be any other that can provide the boundary here. What could there be besides Being? Following his own grandfather Parmenides, he supposes that there can't be anything else. That is, the only conception that could provide such a boundary is the absence of conception, that is, Nothing. But Nothing is just nothing, not a conception at all, it is simply a word for choosing not to conceive. And that is of course right. But Nothing isn't really the only notion that can be contraposed with Being. There is also Becoming. And Becoming is not an empty conception. As I have been trying to suggest through calling to mind our distant ancestors, it is a word that calls to mind all of those dimensions of experience from which we like to avert our gaze once we are home and dry. It's a word that signifies the struggle of immediate experience. It calls uncomfortably to mind those moments when we are utterly uncertain. It is uncertainty itself. It is at the same time not only a fact of our practical experience, it is a logical other without which – however much we would like to leave it behind as we rejoice in the stability of our abstract notions of Being – those notions cannot mean anything any more than any lesser notions can without some logical boundary. Becoming is not the illegitimate stepson of Being, hoping against hope to lift itself into the eternal realm of

those things which do not change, it is the necessary ontological other without which our conception of Being would be itself completely empty of meaning. Being and Becoming are logically conjoined. But this is not merely a function of logical requirement, it is a fact of the practical experience from which both notions arise as we reflect upon the confusion of the immediate and attempt to make sense of it.

I hope my understanding of the Good and its relation to Being and Becoming has gradually become clear in all of this. That is probably a foolish thing to say just on the face of it. It would make more sense to say that I do not think that there is such a thing as a clear understanding of the Good. I believe that goodness evolves in the midst of the play between Becoming and Being. If that's right, it means among other things that the Good cannot have a single, let alone an eternal definition. Finding ourselves home and dry is good. That we are as a result inclined to suppose that there must be some ultimately stable meaning for goodness is not really foolish, it is just itself a practical departure from practical experience. There is reason to value those moments of quiet, those rare times when we can put aside the fearful confusion of immediate experience as we retreat into reflection. But there is also value in the immediate itself, and I think we all of us know that value as well. Thinking for a moment just in terms of the moment, we smile at the joy of the child rolling in the grass with a puppy, we rejoice in the love we see in the eyes of the older couple as they watch the child and remember, we teachers see value in the determination of the student as she begins to mark out – however uncertainly – a path for herself. The good emerges into definition as we learn to resolve practical problems through using our native abilities more and more successfully. But I believe that our understanding of the good begins with our immediate encounter with the exigencies of natural

experience, growing piece by piece with our sense of our responsibility to ourselves and to others. All of the questions that have seemed so trying, all of the puzzles we propose to ourselves in the abstract, are certainly not solved, but can nonetheless be formed more usefully if we simply allow ourselves to attend more fully to the origin of those questions. The good is not to be found in theoretical abstractions, it is to be found in our determination to rise out of the fog of immediate experience and to create meaning where there was only the possibility of meaning before.

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