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## **Imagination on the Move**

What I want to attempt in the following essay amounts to lining up different versions of imagining alongside one another. I will do this more or less systematically, and at the end should stand the outermost goal of imagination.

### **From the Sight of the Pacific to the Essential Image of the Pacific**

Our imagining *something* must naturally stand at the beginning of this series of versions of imaging. To give an example: While sitting at my desk, I close my eyes and imagine the Pacific Coast in California. I recall a particular place I have often visited: a bay north of Point Año Nuevo. I see the sand and the sea, feel the wind and the sun. Then in my imagination I walk for kilometers along the coast, as I liked to do. Section by section the familiar cliffs and rocks appear, and time and time again the unforgettable sight of the rolling waves. In all of this, of course, I make use of my reproductive power of imagination.

Suddenly Robinson Jeffers, the great poet of the Pacific, comes to my mind. And now my imagination wanders to Big Sur, where Jeffers spent most of his time. I climb Hawk Tower at Tor House, which he built in Carmel. The Pacific here appears less majestic, somehow more swirling.

This brings me (still strolling on the tracks of the reproductive power of imagination) to recall other encounters of mine with the Pacific at other places: in Japan, in Chile, etc.

Eventually I begin to imagine the Pacific in a way I have never seen it in reality. I envision it from far out at sea, on a ship, so far out that all around one sees no land, but just the Pacific. That is how, I think, it must have been perceived by Magellan, who, impressed by the tranquillity of this ocean, gave it its name: the peaceful ocean.

Finally I concentrate (having in the meantime made the transition to the productive power of imagination) on my essential image of the Pacific. One might think such an essential image cannot exist. But I bear such an image within me. If you were to transport me to the coast of an ocean anywhere in the world, without my knowing which one it is, I am sure I would be able to recognize immediately whether it is the Pacific or not.

This inner image is not simply empirical (it could not be photographed anywhere); nonetheless it is based on experience, and it proves its value empirically everywhere.

So much for a first journey in the imagination: from memory images to the essential image.

### **"Mountains Flow"**

Secondly, I want to carry you off to the mountains, to the Alps or the Andes. Viewed from the valley, just as from the heights, the summits appear majestic. One can well understand why several authors have spoken of this experience as leaving an impression of eternity. The world of these mountains is a world of its own, a sovereign and unchanging world in contrast to the bustling world of humans. So much for the common perception and the usual view. But then, here too, I begin to become *imaginatively* aware of various types of movement.

Everyone can see from the glaciers that they are moving. It is quite rightly said that glaciers "flow." Indeed, in the Alps they flow between 30 and 150 meters per year toward the valley, and in

the Himalayas even more than one kilometer.

As I contemplate a range of mountains, the delimitation between the individual mountains becomes questionable for me. The mountains have famous names (Eiger, Mönch, and Jungfrau). We are used to treating mountains as individuals. But is our division of the mountain range into single mountains really justified? Actually there is only the mountain range as a whole, not individual mountains. A single mountain cannot be separated off from the mountain range, either in reality or analytically, nor can it even be delimited from the next mountain in a convincing way. And the reason for this is clear: The mountain chain at one time came into being in a single process with the entire range (not individual mountains) rising up from the earth's floor.

Eventually temporal perspectives become altogether irresistible. If you look around, you see not only mountain peaks and glaciers, but also endless masses of scree. They are the products of erosion. Mountains (because of their particular height) are constantly exposed to erosion. That is why for thousands of years they have been getting constantly smaller. And suddenly you understand what these peaks that appear so impressive truly are: not the radiant testimony to the first day of their existence, but the relics remaining after the process of erosion. Mountain peaks are the remains of decomposition, momentary remnants. What once gave them a prouder height is now spread out before our eyes as scree and rubble.

And now the whole genealogical film runs before my imaginative eye: 130 million years ago these heights (the Alps) were pressed upwards out of the ground due to the movement of tectonic plates. At that time they acquired their original height. But since then it has all been decomposition and decay. Erosion has increasingly carried them away, and today they are nothing but shrunken forms of their erstwhile greatness. Yet we admire these transitory relics of decomposition as majestic peaks!

Meanwhile the whole perspective has changed. The view of eternity has turned into a cinema of evolution. What momentary perception reveals has been relativized. In the film of the imagination I see the original emergence and then the successive decomposition that followed it. Moreover, this film in the imagination is by no means fictive; it is realistic. It shows us not the image of another world, but the truth about this world of mountains. The current sight is just the momentary result of the processes that the imaginative film reveals. Imagination, not direct perception, provides the truth.

My contemplation of the mountains might appear unusual. Yet in other spheres we are actually very familiar with what it points to. In spring we see a flower growing, coming into bloom, and withering soon after. Or we see a tree growing over the course of many years, and another one dying off. We see children growing up, and we prepare ourselves for our own death.

Very well, I have changed spheres. I have moved on to examples from the realm of the organic. There the perspective that everything is in motion, that everything evolves and decays, is familiar to us.

In the example of the mountains, however, something comparable has become clear to me in the imagination, within the realm of the supposed changelessness of inorganic matter, which represents the common counter-image to the organic. The Alps did not yet exist 150 million years ago, and in a few million years they will have disappeared. The inorganic is in motion just as is the organic, only over considerably longer periods of time. Even the cosmos is anything but stable; it came into being about 14 billion years ago, and some day it will perish or change into another cosmos.

What I sought to urge you to do in this second journey was to become aware of the changeability and mobility of even those things that are apparently most stable and most persistent, and to bring to mind, at least imaginatively, their fluid character. In a third journey I will try to point

out possible consequences.

## **Things Becoming Alike**

### *Imagination Suggests a Different Way of Seeing and Shows Another Order of the World*

I directed my imagination first to the Pacific, then to the mountains. In doing this it was seen not only that the ocean is constantly in motion, but that mountains too are in the process of moving. People often think that imagination is an ability to invent new, unaccustomed things. For me the imagination appears above all to be an ability to see familiar things in a new and sometimes very different way. Simple forms of the imagination merely vary things within established categories: snow is suddenly red, a man has a goat's head, or (but here it is already getting more difficult) a square is conceived as round. Imagination can, however, also go much further: it can transcend well-worn categories and show an unaccustomed order in the world. In my example, mountains, usually viewed as stable, are in motion. In their own way they too flow, just as the water of the ocean flows in its own way.

Likewise, however--I must add this now--the sea too can suddenly look quite different than it usually does. The ocean can appear rigid and solid, like a rock formation. When you drive along Highway One in California and catch a first glimpse of the Pacific through the hills, this can appear to you like a giant steel blue wall set into the earth. In its majestic breadth it has the effect of being completely unmoving, like a homogeneous dark wall. Of course, this is an image created by the imagination, not by perception.

Our usual perception says that the ocean is moving and the mountains are unmoving. But imagination leads us beyond this convention. We can imaginatively see mountains as flowing and the ocean as rigid.

### *An East Asian Parallel: Dogen*

The ocean and mountains are more closely related in their nature than the common view assumes. Dogen (12001–253), the first Japanese patriarch of Zen Buddhism, described this in detail in his main work, the *Shobogenzo*. In the chapter "Sansuikyo" ("The Mountain and River Sutra"), he explained that mountains "are always moving" (163), always "flowing" (169), whereas conversely water always remains the same in its essence and to this extent "does not flow" (170). Dogen's underlying thought is, of course, that mountains and rivers (just like all other phenomena) are manifestations of Buddha-nature and are to this extent also "detached" from their concrete form--hence everything is ultimately the same.<sup>1</sup>

### *In the West: The Pre-Socratics, Philosophers of the Imagination*

So my journeys in the imagination also led me to discover the kinship between oceans and mountains. But how can this way of seeing things be justified? How could one make it plausible (without borrowing from Dogen) by drawing on motifs familiar in Western thought?

Our customary view of the world perceives multiplicity and difference everywhere. We grasp things as substances that are well delimited and distinct from each other. However, as I have described, imagination can lead us to a different experience, to a different order of the world: oppositions begin to become weaker, delimitations disappear, things become more related and more

unitary, they merge into one another--and in the end everything seems to be alike.

The first Western philosophers, the Pre-Socratics, wandered on such paths of the imagination; they were, so to speak, the Dogens of the West. To begin with, the Ionian natural philosophers made considerable scientific discoveries. Thales, for example, was brilliant at geometry, navigation, and astronomy. He wrote an "Astronomy for Seafarers" and predicted an eclipse of the sun and an earthquake. Or take Anaximander, who invented gnomon instruments and drafted the first maps of the earth and sea. But we consider Thales and Anaximander to be philosophers because, beyond what can be known in this way, they imaginatively developed models of what the constitution of the *whole* might be like and how everything might have developed overall. Just think of the doctrine ascribed to Thales that everything arises from water and basically is water, or of Anaximander's explanation of the world with recourse to the *apeiron*. These were imaginative designs of how things stand as a whole. And today we are astonished to discover that several of these designs, acquired by means of the imagination, have in the meantime found scientific confirmation. This applies in much the same way to Anaxagoras, who was the first to develop the idea of the big bang, and similarly to Democritus: he had never seen atoms, but he conceived of them imaginatively as the constituents of the universe.

The same applies to Heraclitus, whose great insight, to which he gave the name *logos*, was likewise one produced by the imagination. Heraclitus realized that superficially dominant substances and oppositions are underpinned by a deeper relatedness and unity, just as their apparent stability is undermined by a deeper processuality. And both relationality and processuality are based on the deeper law of *logos* underlying everything. Only once one conceives of this notion, which only imagination can produce, can it finally become clear that everything is, despite the superficial appearance of multiplicity and opposition, basically one: *hen panta*, Heraclitus's famous phrase (*Fragmente der Vorsokratiker* 1: 161).

I have mentioned the Pre-Socratics for two reasons. First, I wanted to remind you of the extent to which these ancestral fathers of philosophy were imaginative thinkers. Second, I wanted to point out the great degree to which their teachings (particularly those of Heraclitus) converge with the conclusions to which my two journeys in the imagination have led. The world is basically characterized not by the superficial appearance of multiplicity, substances, and opposition, but by a deeper relationality, processuality, and unity.

### *Unity--Things Imaginatively Becoming One*

These features, I presume, provide the key perspectives for an appropriate ontology. When we move from the foreground perspective of substantial being to the deeper one of processes we see the objects that surround us in a different way. Chains of events take the place of substances. You no longer see, for example, a dog, but a type, a series of generations, a species; and you see this in the sequence of other species. Or you see an old machine, for example, a grandfather clock, in the sequence of inventions of mechanical apparatuses. And in the same way you no longer see a work of art simply for itself, but in the sequence of productions of artistic paradigms. Your whole view becomes historical. That is one thing.

The second thing is that you increasingly perceive and understand things in their relations. In this way, too, their independence dissolves. An example: we often see how water evaporates. We are able to observe this at home on the stove or in nature where vapors rise over a lake. But in doing so our perception was being a bit narrow-minded. Water, we thought, evaporates into the air. We took water for itself, and air for itself, and then marvelled at the transition of the one into the other, as if

the air had not already had its part in the substantiality of the water. For without the atmospheric pressure of the air, the water would not have been water, but instead vapor from the start. The air into which the water merely appears to evaporate had already previously co-formed the water. Water, vapor, and air stand in a holistic co-conditioning relationship. Yes, it's really like that: you do something in the kitchen, and the whole earth takes part in it.

And the third trait, unity: When you have made clear to yourself that processuality and relationality are the basic traits of the world, then the division of the world according to substances, elements, and the like increasingly dissolves. The things that appear to stand as independent before our eyes are everywhere multiply conditioned by, and related to, one another. They are all connected (more remotely or closely) with one another; they form a pervasive and unitary nexus. In the end it is indeed true: *hen panta*. Heraclitus proclaimed this by appealing to the *logos*. Dogen expressed it in his way, teaching that everything is Buddha-nature. And several mystics in the Occident (and in more recent times, some physicists) have reiterated this insight. Leibniz, for example, thought that every living creature is a mirror of the universe. Another common trope for this view reads: "The whole world is contained in a drop of water." The imagination has long been a good means for realizing this view of the world. Today scientific reflection is lining up behind it.

### **And What about Consciousness--the Producer of Imagination?**

I come to a final question: Is it really the case that *everything* converges to form a unity? Isn't one thing excepted from this? Precisely that thing which is responsible for developing this way of seeing: the imagining (and reflecting) consciousness itself?

To be sure, our imagining consciousness is also processual. It goes from idea to idea, and in doing so can change its whole way of seeing things. But despite all the changes in its ideas, this consciousness as such still seems to remain the same, namely, *my* imagining consciousness. Is this really so?

The dissolution of the self-being of things does not stop short of the being of consciousness. In precisely the same way as the imagining consciousness, for instance, begins to interpret the mountain range that stands before one's eyes differently, namely as the momentary state of an ongoing process, consciousness, on its path toward a unitary interpretation of the world, will likewise be unable to avoid changing its interpretation of itself.

To begin with, consciousness is required in order to situate and explain its own constitution, position, and capacity in the context of the conception of the whole that is dawning on it. Consciousness must comprehend itself and its capacities within the whole. It cannot exclude itself from its view of the whole, for otherwise this view would not be a view of the whole.

But how can it comprehend itself as an aspect of the whole? Only by understanding itself as something made possible by the whole and as a form of actualization of the whole. Consciousness itself belongs to the constitution of the whole it imagines and upon which it reflects; it must be made possible by this whole as an entity that also brings to mind its own constitution.

But if it is a consciousness that belongs to the whole, can it then still straightforwardly be "my" consciousness? In any case, surely not in the sense of an ego standing opposed to the whole. That would immediately bring down its claim to comprehend the whole--the true whole would then be the "whole" plus the ego. Consciousness must therefore comprehend its I-ness in a non-egoistic way, in something other than an I-like manner.

Certainly, the consciousness that grasps the constitution of the whole remains personal, linked with the actualization of a person. But if it really lays claim to insight into the structure of the

whole, it cannot straightforwardly understand itself as the contingent consciousness of a contingent individual person, but instead must comprehend itself as the actualization of a consciousness that, so to speak, looks at the world and itself with the eye of the world. In any other case it would be incoherent. Hegel is perhaps the philosopher who has shown most clearly how an individual consciousness can also be the world's consciousness.<sup>2</sup>

As we've seen, imagination can alter one's view of the world and of oneself. Its power reaches surprisingly far. To conclude, I'd just like to emphasize that this is true not of the banal imagination that takes pride in producing ever more fanciful images, but of an imagination that is in league with reflection. In this alliance both imagination and reflection seem to accomplish their best work.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed analysis, see my essay "Zur Rolle von Skepsis und Relativität bei Sextus, Hegel und Dogen."

<sup>2</sup> For an alternative option arising today from the perspective of a strictly evolutionary thinking, see my essay "Absoluter Idealismus und Evolutionsdenken."

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