

Worlds Apart

GRAHAM PRIEST

The monads floated gently in space. Wave after wave of them, as far as the eye could see. Each a sphere, smooth and perfect. Each glistening faintly, emanating a soft white radiance. Somewhere in the distance a bell rang quietly. The spheres moved slowly, gracefully, majestically, performing a prearranged dance in the eternity of time. The bell rang again. As the eye approached the spheres, some of them could be seen to have small wings, as of an angel. The wings of a sphere did not move, but, somehow, guided it on its timeless path. Some of the spheres also spun slowly, rotating quietly on their geometric axes. The bell rang again, more insistently. As the eye approached one particular monad, its rear side started to come into view. It could be seen to have a small window, not disturbing the smooth contour of the sphere, and made of the same ethereal substance, but definitely allowing one to see within. As the eye moved closer still, one could see something inside. What was this?! The bell rang again, now hard to ignore. Could it be ...? Yes—inside the monad was a thing. Unmistakably. It was a thing in itself.

Brrrrrrrrrr.

“Bugger.”

“Bugger,” thought Immanuel. “Just a few more moments and I could have seen it up close.” “Bugger.” The new-fangled clock with an alarm bell had denied him a sight of that centrepiece, albeit that most problematic centrepiece, of his entire metaphysical vision. “Bugger. Bugger-ansich.”

On the other side of town, a dozen streets away, Georg was wistfully stropping his razor. He hated shaving. It wasn't because he had a tendency to cut himself, leaving little nicks that definitely didn't go down well with the young ladies. To shave, you have to look in the mirror, and it is hard not to look yourself in the eyes. That was the problem. “Here you are, the first person in the whole of History to embody the Completed Development of the World Spirit. In no one else has the Spirit perfected Itself as it does in you.” Yes, looking yourself in the eyes was a real problem. “Anybody in your Position,” Georg thought, “might well have a tendency to nick Himself occasionally.”

It wasn't till Immanuel was on his second bowl of porridge, and his third cup of coffee, that he remembered why he had set the clock-alarm.

It was the wretched meeting. He didn't want to meet this young upstart to talk about his philosophy. Philosophy was about writing things on paper, long contorted and unintelligible things. It wasn't about trying to communicate with people—especially face to face. And it meant that he would have to forego his daily walk. Every day he walked around the bridges of the town. They were in a curious configuration. It must be possible to leave his house and walk back to it in such a way as to cross each bridge only once. He hadn't quite done that yet, but another couple of days, and he was sure that he would have it figured out. But not today. Today he had to talk to Georg.

And now, to make matters worse, he would be late. Immanuel hated being late. Only a thing in itself, he was sure, could ignore time with impunity. Perhaps he should take a cab. But no, he reflected, what if everyone took that cab? It would be very crowded and most unpleasant. He couldn't will that as a universal maxim. Better to walk. Somewhere in the back of his mind, the thought insinuated itself that if everyone in Königsberg, let alone the rest of the world, walked from his house to the coffee shop where he had arranged to meet Georg, at the same time that he did, it would also be very crowded and unpleasant. But he pushed this thought out of his mind as he climbed the stairs to change out of his pyjamas.

As Immanuel approached the coffee shop, he could see its familiar sign swinging in the breeze. In large Gothic letters, surrounding an appropriate picture, it announced *The Bean-an-Sich*. It had occurred to him on a number of occasions to have a quiet word with the proprietor about this, but each time he had thought better of it.

As he entered, savouring the pungent aroma of coffee, he could see that the shop was already quite crowded. Many of the good citizens of Königsberg were sitting there, chatting, reading. Since he was late, Georg was probably there already. Which one was he? Not the person holding court on the rise of a German state. Nor the person with his nose in the collected works of Aristotle. "No self-respecting philosopher would behave in these ways in public," thought Immanuel. "Ah ... that would be him." He spied a man sitting on his own in a corner. The man was eating an enormous piece of Black Forest cake. He had cut it up into many small pieces, and arranged them into a long row. The principle behind the ordering, Immanuel could only guess at, but it was clear that the pieces of cake towards the right contained more chocolate. At any rate, the man was slowly working his way through the pieces from left to right.

Immanuel wandered over to the table and stood there. "Herr Professor ...?" "Herr Professor," said Georg, standing up and grasping him by the

hand. Immanuel put his hand behind his back and discretely wiped off the chocolate onto the tablecloth of the next table.

The pair looked at each other. Georg appeared to be an earnest young man, Immanuel thought; he certainly needed a few lessons on how to use a razor, though. Immanuel was much shorter than Georg had imagined. In fact, Georg was a good head and shoulders taller than Immanuel. From his vantage point, he could see the label that Immanuel had carelessly forgotten to tuck in in his haste to get dressed. It said: "Herr P. Zess. For Wigs of Distinction."

They sat down, Georg ordered a coffee for Immanuel, and, to the other's relief, set what remained of the Black Forest cake aside.

"How was your journey, from, er, ...?"

"From Tübingen," Georg helped out.

"Yes, from Tübingen".

"Not too bad, thank you, Herr Professor; though the seats of those carriages—even the modern ones—are very hard on the posterior. Especially after the first day or so. Still it was worth it, just to meet you."

Immanuel wondered.

"I have read and reread your work many times. It is always so clear, so fresh."

Immanuel suddenly feared that Georg had confused him with David Hume.

"And so profound. Herr Professor, you are the greatest philosopher of your generation."

Immanuel was relieved that Georg had not confused him with anyone else, though he was a bit worried about the "of your generation" bit.

Immanuel's coffee had arrived. He sipped it appreciatively. Sublime. Maybe there was a book to be written on this, but *The Critique of Pure Coffee* didn't sound quite right somehow. He started to relax. Maybe this meeting with Georg wouldn't be so bad after all. He seemed an amiable enough fellow.

"There is just one problem with your ideas, though, ..." continued Georg. Immanuel tensed slightly. "... and once you start to unravel it, your whole metaphysics collapses." Immanuel's cup lurched sideways from his lips, spilling hot coffee painfully on his knee.

"You see, according to you, there are two sorts of things. The things of the empirical world, and the things that lie beyond it." Georg illustrated by bringing the pieces of cake back into play, and dividing them neatly into two groups. "The empirical ones,"—he pointed at the group on the left—"are partly constituted by the categories of the Mind. Brilliant. Absolutely brilliant. You forgot, of course, the dynamic role of the Mind, but you can be forgiven for that."

Immanuel's dislike for Georg was starting to return.

"The problem is over this side." He pointed to the pieces of cake on the right. "The things on this side, God, the Soul, the Thing-in-Itself, all transcend human thought." As he enumerated the transcendental objects, he pointed in turn at particular pieces of cake. God, Immanuel was relieved to see, was the largest piece, with a blob of cream and a cherry on the top. "About these things, we can know nothing, think nothing, say nothing. But there are, in fact, no such things. There can be nothing which transcends our thought in this way." To illustrate the ontological situation, Georg slowly ate all the pieces of cake on the right hand side. He particularly relished the one with the cherry on the top.

"Nonsense," said Immanuel. "There are things in themselves, though it is true that you can know nothing of them. The schemata of the pure concepts of the understanding are the true and sole conditions under which these concepts obtain relation to objects and so possess significance. As the grounds of an a priori unity that has its source in the necessary combination of all consciousness in one original apperception, they serve only to subordinate appearances to universal rules of synthesis, and thus fit them for thoroughgoing connection in one experience. Things in themselves cannot, therefore, be the subjects of categories."

"Ah, but how do you know that?"

"Just guessing," admitted Immanuel.

For some moments, it seemed, words would form themselves at Georg's lips, but evaporate before getting as far as the unity of anyone's apperception. Eventually, a few did. "But it's not simply that you can't know them. You can't categorise them at all, which you do when you think about them in any way, as you have just done."

"My dear boy,"—Immanuel felt on safer ground here—"the thing in itself is a concept whose very function is to draw limits to what you can do: to show you what you cannot do. You cannot categorise them in any positive way, but you can categorise them negatively." Immanuel had learned this line from a couple of door-to-door negative theologians who had called at his house once. He thought it quite ridiculous, and had told them so, but had filed it away for moments such as this.

"You mean," said Georg, "you can't say anything about these things that isn't negative?"

"Exactly."

"But then, everything you can say about them is negative—and that's a positive claim." "Gotcha," he thought.

There was a pause while Immanuel struggled to check the validity of the inference. "Ha!" he said, "That's the law of double negation, and I'm sure that's not valid. Sometimes when you put two negatives together, you

don't get a simple positive. The two negations don't simply cancel each other out."

Georg thought this quite ridiculous, and was about to tell Immanuel so. But first, he made a mental note of it. He had an odd feeling that he might be able to use it somehow. Before he could reply, however, Immanuel went on to the counter-attack.

"Look, there must be things that transcend all empirical conditions. You agree that everything empirical has a cause?" Georg nodded. He was still trying to construct a Venn diagram in his head to check the law of double negation. "And you agree that you have free will?" Georg nodded again. "Well, if your actions were causally determined, you wouldn't be free, would you? So you, the real you, must be a thing in itself," Immanuel concluded triumphantly. "As well as a thing up itself," he added in thought.

Georg knew how to handle this one. "No. Freedom and causal necessity are not incompatible. They're the same thing!" Then, raising his voice till he was sure that the people sitting near could hear: "Everything becomes identical with its opposite. To be free is to be causally determined." Georg looked around to the people at the next table, waiting for what he was sure would be the admiring glances. They studiously paid him no attention.

Immanuel wasn't quite sure what to make of the law of single negation. He couldn't remember it from the Prior Analytics, and it didn't seem very plausible. Bank overdrafts did not normally, he reflected, turn themselves into credits in the natural course of events. And dead people didn't often get up and play the piano. Still, logic is a strange thing, and it never had been his strong suit. "Make your arguments as long and contorted as you can," his old logic teacher had told him. "They probably won't be valid, but if they are tangled enough, nobody else will be able to figure that out either." Immanuel had taken his advice to heart. Which made the present situation even more distressing, since Georg's argument could be written on the back of a postcard, with plenty of space left to write "Having a great time in Königsberg. Wish you were here"—and the address. And even after airmail had been invented, there was still enough room to affix the Par Avion sticker without having to cover up the signature.

Georg could see that Immanuel was deep in profound thought. "He is, after all, the greatest philosopher of his generation," he reflected.

"Wish you were here," muttered Immanuel.

"Pardon?" said Georg.

"Nothing."

There was a pause in the conversation as each man struggled with the laws of logic. To aid his thoughts, and without thinking much about it, Georg poked his finger at the bits of the empirical world left in front of

him. Maybe, if he prodded hard enough, he could get a bit of cake to show free will.

Immanuel, who was trying to figure out whether the two sides of a postcard were the same or different, and who had never really cared for chocolate, was becoming increasingly irked by Georg's playing with his food. "I would be grateful if you would stop that," he said firmly. Georg looked at Immanuel, looked at the bits of cake, looked at his finger, and realised the connections. Why should this crusty old man, the greatest philosopher of the previous generation, tell him what to do with his cake? He continued prodding, but this time with scientific precision.

"Will you stop that" said Immanuel, his annoyance manifest. Georg pretended not to hear. The people at the next table, now no longer able to ignore what was going on, were glaring in their direction.

"Give me that wretched plate," said Immanuel. Georg stared at him defiantly. "Pass the plate over." The people on the next table got up to leave.

"The plate. Pass it over. Pass the plate over." Immanuel was slowly turning into a large aardvark; a large aardvark wearing a wig of distinction, certainly; but an aardvark nonetheless. "Pass the plate over. The plate over. Plate over ... Platove ... Plato ..."

Plato awoke, the warm late-afternoon sunlight gently suffusing his consciousness. "Come on young Plato," Socrates was saying, shaking him gently. "If you don't come now, you'll miss the new flute-girl. They say she's a real cracker."

"Bugger," thought Plato. He hadn't meant to doze off like that. It must have been that extra bottle of ouzo. "Bugger. Buggeredness itself." He had dozed off trying to think through a conversation of Socrates that he had overheard yesterday. Is a wife a shrew because she is not loved by her husband; or is she not loved by her husband because she is a shrew?

He slowly roused himself, musing on his dream. Very strange. It must have been the plate of goat's cheese. Still, it might make the basis of a good dialogue. No, not really. What possible interest would there be in the ramblings of a couple of northern barbarians; it was just a lot of old cant. He wouldn't be able to sell more than a couple of copies. In any case, he wasn't sure that he understood some of it. Perhaps he should talk to Socrates about it. No; that didn't seem like a very good idea either. "You know what Socrates is like," he thought. "He'll just wait till everybody is pissed, then he'll get someone to propose that everyone make a speech about dreaming. When it comes to his turn, he'll find some way to work in the dream." Plato wasn't really sure that he knew what chocolate cake was, or that Socrates did either. But the fact that the Ancient Greeks hadn't

read Freud wouldn't stop Socrates making rather unpleasant jokes at Plato's expense. He was sure of that.

Still, bits of the dream fascinated him. Especially the bits about a realm of objects existing beyond the empirical realm. Totally absurd; but given the right twist, he might be able to work the idea into a dialogue or two that could be sold to a good number of the more gullible people around. Another reason for not talking to Socrates about it. He could hear his sarcasm now. "Oh yeah? And how do we get to know about these things? The Delphic Oracle?" Socrates was going to come to a rather sticky end one day if he wasn't careful.

By this time, Socrates and the others were already a good distance down the path, their voices out of range. The only sounds to be heard were the chirping of the cicadas and the gentle swish of waves breaking in the distance. Plato picked up the bottle of ouzo, and finished it off. As the bottle drained, he gazed into the azure Athenian sky, which was starting to turn orange and pink in the west. The shadows cast by the Parthenon grew longer. Out to sea, a small fishing vessel, returning home, could be seen against the deep blue Aegean. The moon was already out, low on the horizon. It was a full moon, a sphere, smooth and perfect, emanating a soft white radiance. Just barely, Plato thought, he could make out some wings.

G.P.