

This is a thought that exists in me only in a timid way, a thought that I don't feel able to support. I am really thinking it, it's true, but I must say it, like a coward, like someone who covers their eyes, who hides and who is, at base, delirious with fear. Yet that signifies a rather cowardly reaction.

## Nonknowledge, Laughter, and Tears

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Knowledge demands a certain stability of things known. In any case, the domain of the known is, in one sense at least, a stable domain, where one recognizes oneself, where one recovers oneself, whereas in the unknown there isn't necessarily any movement, things can even be quite immobile, but there is no guarantee of stability. Stability can exist, but there is not even any guarantee as to the limits of the movements that can occur. The unknown is obviously always unforeseeable.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the domain of the unforeseeable unknown is given in the laughable, in the objects that excite in us this effect of intimate overturning, of suffocating surprise, that we call laughter. This is what is very strange in the laughable. Nothing is easier to study, finally to know, than laughter. We can observe and define the different themes of the laughable precisely enough; it does not at all elude clear and distinct knowledge, methodical consciousness. What's more, once the cause of laughter is revealed in its various aspects, we can reproduce its effects at will. We have veritable recipes handy, we can unleash laughter, through various means, just like all the other *known* effects we have at our disposal. In sum, we can create the laughable. Now, one might say, and we have said, that to understand [*connaître*] is to know [*savoir*] how to do. But because we know how to laugh, can we say that we truly understand the laughable?

It does not appear so, if we refer to the history of philosophical works on laughter. It is, in sum, the story of an insoluble problem. What at first seems so accessible never ceased to escape investigation. The domain of laughter is perhaps even, definitively, or at least so it

seems to me, a closed domain, given that the laughable remains unknown and unknowable.

At this time I do not intend to take up all the explanations of laughter that have been given, all the explanations that never knew how to resolve the given enigma in a truly thorough way. No doubt, the most well known is Bergson's, that of the mechanism applied to the living being. It seems that Bergson's theory, very well known, is sometimes the object of a hardly justified discredit.

I was surprised, in particular, to see Francis Jeanson in a recent book on laughter, and one of the most significant works that has been recently published, make something of Marcel Pagnol's theory.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps you know that Marcel Pagnol published, maybe three or four years ago, a little book on laughter.<sup>2</sup> His theory, however, is in fact not very original, and it even seems to me among the most summary. For the author of *Marius*, laughter responds to the laughing person's feeling of superiority.

Fundamentally, in the last place, Pagnol's short book might substantiate the opinion according to which it is one thing to know how to make someone laugh, and something else to understand laughter. Besides, I'm not denying that the philosophical theorists of laughter have ever excelled in the art of having fun and rousing waves of laughter.

It is no less true that Bergson's hypothesis is, from his own point of view, far from being able to be given as the solution of the enigma for which he himself offered it as explanation, not of the laughable in general, but of a particular aspect of the laughable that he names the comic.

Thus, independently of the value of Bergson's attempt, we must confirm that laughters which, all the same, have many meanings, like the laughter of the accidental meeting, the laughter of tickling, the child's immediate laughter, are excluded from it.

In fact, studies have multiplied without our being able to explain laughter fundamentally. Beyond the convictions of the authors of each particular theory, fundamentally, we don't know the meaning of laughter. The laughable always remains unknown, a kind of unknown that invades us suddenly, that overturns our habitual course, and that produces in us this "abrupt broadening of the face," these "explosive noises from the larynx," and these "rhythmic jolts of the thorax and abdomen" that doctors talk about.

Perhaps one final theory remains, which would at least merit application on the most remarkable part, on that which is essential to all the theories that have preceded it, *their failure*.

Suppose that the laughable is not only unknown, but unknowable. We still have to envision a possibility. The laughable could simply be *the unknowable*. In other words, the unknown character of the laughable would not be accidental, but essential. We would laugh, not for a reason that we would not happen to know, for lack of information, or for want of sufficient penetration, but because *the unknown makes us laugh*.

In sum, it makes us laugh to pass very abruptly, all of a sudden, from a world in which each thing is well qualified, in which each thing is given in its stability, generally in a stable order, to a world in which our assurance is suddenly overthrown, in which we perceive that this assurance is deceptive, and where we believed that everything was strictly anticipated, an unforeseeable and upsetting element appeared unexpectedly from the unforeseeable, that reveals to us in sum a final truth: that superficial appearances conceal a perfect lack of response to our anticipation.

We see that finally, given the exercise of knowledge, the world is likewise situated completely out of the reach of this exercise, and even that not only the world, but the being that we are, is out of reach. There is, in us and in the world, something that reveals that knowledge was not given to us, and that situates itself uniquely as being unable to be attained by knowledge. This, it seems to me, is that at which we laugh. And fundamentally, one must to say it immediately, when it is a question of a theory of laughter, this is what illuminates us and what fills us with joy.

Obviously, this theory presents a lot of difficulties from the very beginning, possibly even more difficulties than most.

In fact, I believe that, first, it does not give us the specificity of laughter. This is obviously its principal flaw. It will perhaps be possible for me to show, if necessary, that in every case when we laugh we pass from the sphere of the known, from the anticipated sphere, to the sphere of the unknown and of the unforeseeable. An example of this is a chance meeting in the street, which perhaps does not make us burst out laughing, but which most often makes us laugh. Likewise, another example is laughter from tickling, which overtakes us at the moment when we least expect it. There is also something of this, I think, in the confusion that a very young child can experience when leaving the kind of torpor that we might imagine embryonic existence as being, when it discovers the affection of its mother, when all of a sudden it

discovers something disturbing, exciting, and absolutely inconsistent with its already given experience.

Meanwhile, this does not mean that we laugh every time a calm vision consistent with our expectations follows, through an overturning, even the reversal of this vision. And this is easily proven.

Suppose, in fact, that abruptly, as sometimes happens in certain cities, the ground begins to tremble, that the floor shakes beneath our feet. I think that none of us will dream of laughing.

It is true that in spite of this we can say that there is, in the relationship between laughter and the unknown, a relatively measurable element. The causality of laughter given in the unknown can be represented as having an effect that will be proportional to the importance that this diminution of the known nature, or this suppression of the known character of nature, makes us laugh. It is certain that the more that what happens unexpectedly is unknown, the more vigorously we laugh.

And, on the other hand, the abruptness of the appearance of an element unknown to us plays with us. Now, this abruptness has precisely the sense of intensity. The more rapid the change is, the greater the sensation, the more perceptible the experience that we have of it is intense. And the alteration that I mentioned earlier is much more perceptible than this intensity is strong.

But finally, this does not make a sudden catastrophe laughable. I think that it is necessary, in these conditions, to envision the thing in another way.

I profoundly believe that the principal fault, characteristic of those who wanted to talk about laughter on the philosophical level, is of having isolated the laughable. It seems that laughter is part of an ensemble of possible reactions when facing the same fact. This same fact that I was talking about, this suppression of the known, can result in several reactions, each different one from the other.

Laughter, in this respect, can serve to lead us on the path, the consideration of the laughable can introduce us onto the path that will lead us to the comprehension of this fundamental fact. But, we have hardly succeeded in determining this fact when we must immediately add that the sudden invasion of the unknown can, depending on the case, have laughter, tears, and not only laughter or tears, but other reactions for its effect.

Furthermore, laughter and tears—I must mention it because this goes a bit counter to what I'm saying—have not always been studied in isolation. Recently, a philosopher who lives in America, Alfred Stern,

studied laughter in connection with tears, in what is, in my opinion, an interesting work. This work is called *La Philosophie du Rire et des Pleurs*.<sup>3</sup>

But, as I was saying, other reactions might still be connected to the same fact. For example, the sudden invasion of the unknown can have as an effect the poetic feeling or the feeling of the sacred. It can also have anguish or ecstasy as an effect, and not only anguish, but of course even terror.

Furthermore, I don't think that this picture is complete. In fact, there are other aspects. But it is perhaps complete insofar as certain other forms are not exactly reducible to a single one of those that I have just enumerated. This is the case with tragedy, for example.

Anyway, it seems that we might recognize the impossibility of talking about laughter in any other way than within the framework of a philosophy that goes beyond laughter alone, as does, for example, what I might call a philosophy of nonknowledge, which I am trying to sketch for you, through a series of conferences that are planned, up to a certain point.

It's necessary to note a reciprocity in this respect: I think it is impossible to talk about nonknowledge other than in the experience that we make of it. This experience is an experience that always has an effect, an effect like, for example, laughter or tears, or the poetic, or anguish, or ecstasy. And I don't think that it is possible to talk seriously about nonknowledge independent of its effects.

Evidently we can speak about these effects, in spite of the primary contradiction that the fact of talking about nonknowledge always represents. Of course, something paradoxical will remain in the act of speaking, when the principle of nonknowledge is articulated. Though in fact I have already expressed myself on this question. It seems that we might admit that, whatever the proposition into which a philosophy of nonknowledge would finally resolve itself, we are not restricted from speaking of the possibility of its effects.

Furthermore, I will now emphasize another aspect of the difficulties posed by the interpretation of laughter. I believe it is fruitless to want to approach laughter as an enigma that the personal philosophy of an author, elaborated independently of the consideration of laughter, would allow him to resolve.

There is always something very interesting in the effort that consists in putting a philosophy to the test of the problem of laughter after the fact. It is always very interesting in the sense that one recognizes in this

way that a philosophy must be capable of offering the key to the problem of laughter. But I think this key can open nothing if it is not made expressly for the lock in question.

In trying to resolve the problem of laughter, I think it is necessary to begin with the consideration of laughter, insofar as one is writing a philosophical work. It seems that, in order to resolve the problem, philosophical reflection must *first* focus on laughter.

This might be surprising, given what I have just said a moment ago. But it is obviously a question of a superficial contradiction. I said that it wasn't necessary to isolate the problem of laughter, that it was, on the contrary, necessary to associate it with the problem of tears, with the problem of sacrifice, and so on. But what I mean is essentially that it is necessary to begin with an experience of laughter given in relation to the experience of sacrifice, to the experience of the poetic, and so on. Understood. I don't mean that these experiences must necessarily be given simultaneously, but I believe in the possibility of beginning with the experience of laughter first of all, and not letting go of it when ones passes from this particular experience to the neighboring experiences of the sacred or of the poetic. If you will, this is tantamount to finding, in the given that is laughter, the central given, the primary given, and perhaps even the given behind philosophy.

Now I would like to explain myself further on this point. I would love to make the determined orientation of philosophy tangible, in the most precise way I can, or at least the reflective experience apart from the experience of laughter. And I will set out toward this from my own personal experience.

In fact, I can say that, insofar as I am doing philosophical work, my philosophy is a philosophy of laughter. It is a philosophy founded on the experience of laughter, and it does not even claim to go further. It is a philosophy that doesn't concern itself with problems other than those that have been given to me in this precise experience.

I am emphasizing the fact that I prefer talking about reflective experience. This, in my opinion, has a great advantage. It is that, in the word *experience*, despite its association with the word *reflective*, a precise effect, like that of laughter, or ecstasy, or anguish, is maintained in a continuous fashion.

My philosophical reflection never proceeds independently of this experience. And I must say that this has a double meaning: it is that my philosophical reflection is valuable to the degree that it modifies the effects in question, that it makes these effects conscious. And I believe it

is useful to recognize the way in which I attempted to bring my reflection to this point.

From the outset, I must specify that I am not at all a philosopher by profession. I cannot say that I did not study philosophy, but I have not studied philosophy as it is normal to study philosophy, I did not study it as a student. Furthermore, in a rather systematic way, I wanted to study things other than philosophy. And my studies, as it turned out—excuse the anecdotal nature of this explanation—brought me to London, and in London I was received into a home where Bergson was also received.

In spite of everything, I said I had, like everyone else, studied some philosophy, and during this rather elementary study, the kind that one does in order to take an exam, I had indeed read some of Bergson's writings. But I had the very common reaction that one might have to the idea that one is going to meet a great philosopher; one is embarrassed to know nothing, or nearly nothing, about his philosophy. Then, as I have also said in one of my books,<sup>4</sup> though I would like to say it here in a slightly more concise way, I went to the British Museum, and I read *Laughter* by Bergson.<sup>5</sup>

This reading didn't satisfy me much, though it strongly interested me just the same. And I haven't stopped, in my various considerations of laughter, referring to this theory, which, all things considered, seems like one of the most profound theories that anyone has developed.

I have therefore read this little book, which impassioned me for reasons other than the contents that it develops. What impassioned me at that time was the possibility of reflecting on laughter, the possibility of making laughter the object of a reflection. Increasingly, I wanted to deepen this reflection, to distance myself from what I had been able to retain from Bergson's book, but from the very beginning this reflection followed the trend, which I sought to represent to you, of being simultaneously an experience and a reflection.

Furthermore, I must say that, remembering rather precisely the first movements of thought that I developed at that time, its experiential character was truly its sole interest. I lost myself in rather secondary difficulties; I was lacking, I was going to say experience, but I cannot use this word, since I am using it in another way while speaking now; I was lacking sufficient knowledge to bring this reflection to fruition. With the help of these unsteady reflections, I believe I was always able to deliver myself into a kind of dive, which tended to be vertiginous, into the possibility of laughter.

Still, there is something that I can retain from my reflection at that particular time, its principle. This principle was to consider that the major problem was the problem of laughter; and formulating this rather generally, very far from what I am even now presenting, I told myself that if I happened to know what laughter was, I would know everything, I would have resolved the problem of philosophies. It seemed that to resolve the problem of laughter and to resolve the philosophical problem were evidently the same thing. The object that I grasped while laughing, if you will, seemed to me of comparable interest to the object that philosophy poses to itself most of the time.

I don't intend to defend this point of view, at least not in the precise form that I am now presenting. I need to express myself in this way in order to arrive at describing this experience.

Further, I must specify that at the beginning of this experience, I was completely animated by a very precise religious faith, conforming to a dogma, and that this meant a lot to me, so much that I reconciled, as completely as I was able, my behavior to my thought. But it is certain that from the moment I posed the possibility of descending as far as possible into the sphere of laughter, I felt, as the first effect, everything that the dogma brought me as carried away by a type of difluvial flood that decomposed it. I felt that, after all, it was quite possible for me, at this particular moment, to maintain in myself all of the beliefs and all of the behaviors that were connected to these beliefs, but that the flood of laughter I underwent made a game of these beliefs, a game in which I was able to continue to believe, but which was surpassed by the movement of the game that was given to me in laughter. I was no longer able, from that moment on, to adhere to this game other than as to something that laughter had surpassed.

It is hardly useful to say that, in these conditions, beliefs in a dogma cannot persist, and that, little by little, without attributing the least importance to it, I separated myself from every belief.

In this sense, I emphasize that the fundamental idea to which I am clinging is the complete absence of presuppositions. The philosophy that I am advancing would be, at any rate, absolutely deprived of presupposition.

When I speak of nonknowledge now, I mean essentially that I know nothing, and that if I am still talking, it is essentially insofar as I have a knowledge that brings me to *nothing*. This is particularly true in the kind of knowledge that I am developing before you, since it is in order to succeed in placing myself before this *nothing* about which I am

speaking, to put myself and my interlocutors, if it is possible, before this *nothing*.

Furthermore, I must say that, from the very beginning, there was another aspect of this conflict between belief and laughter. What very quickly appeared to me is that, in my experience of laughter, there was nothing that was recovered from the religious experience that I once had. In other words, I didn't express myself in a precise enough way when I represented that I maintained my beliefs within the sphere of laughter. I maintained them, but they were so completely submerged that I felt that they were able to be indefinitely transposed in a movement of laughter, and that they were not impoverished by this. I was able to recover in myself all the movements of the religious experience, and to confound them with the experience of laughter, without feeling this religious experience as impoverished.

I can further say that, in an essential way, the movement, I would say more of my life than of my thought, has consisted in maintaining, in unexpected forms and perhaps as little satisfying as possible from the point of view of those who maintain themselves within the limits of dogma, all the religious experience that I had acquired in the limits of the dogma wherein I once contained myself.

Similarly, I believe that when I pass, as I am presently, from the pure and simple consideration of laughter to a more general consideration, such as that of nonknowledge, from the fact that, by nonknowledge, I mean principally an experience that I had once known. Nonknowledge, as I understand it, does not suppress for me the possibility of an experience that I consider as rich as the religious experience offered at the height of the knowledge that is revelation.

It is entirely in the act of posing being as a problem for myself, being as completely unknown, and of throwing myself into this nonunderstanding [*non-connaissance*], that I discover an experience not only as rich as religious experience but, it seems to me, even richer, more profound, if that's possible, because in this experience I separate myself further from communal experience. I separate myself further from the experience of the profane life, wherein we entirely adhere to objects that have only an extremely debatable right over us, a right these objects acquired by the isolated fact that we are hungry, by the isolated fact that we can suffer, by the isolated fact that fear often governs our actions. In the experience of nonknowledge about which I am speaking, if there remains a religious experience, it is entirely detached from our anxiety over the future, it is entirely detached from a possible and

threatening suffering that would govern this future, it is no more than a game.

Of course, I am led to emphasize the fact that this experience of laughter is rather far from the common experience of laughter. At first, I must say, because this can seem rather peculiar, that this experience can be as completely detached from the movements described by the doctors as I previously detached it. It is always possible not to enlarge the face, and fundamentally this does not change much. All that I might say in this regard is that of course the enlargement, the opening of the face, and even mad laughter are part of this experience, that one cannot assume that this experience does not know moments of real mad laughter, as they are defined by physiology. But, on the other hand, what seems important to me is to specify that I separate myself from the experience as from laughter on a point that is all the same very important, insofar as, in laughter, I no longer understand only that which is in principle given when one uses the word but something more.

Of course, the joyousness of laughter remains. But in spite of everything, the joy that is given in laughter, and that it is paradoxical to see associated with the objects of laughter, which are not usually joyous, for me, this joy cannot be separated from a tragic feeling.

Furthermore, I believe that this is not quite outside the joy that is commonly granted by laughter, in the sense that, for each of us, for everyone, it is always possible to pass from the movement of common joy to the tragic feeling, without even having that joy diminished. Though one always, in most cases, refrains from this passage.

Here I will further insist on a point on which I have often insisted in my books; it is the fact that this is a question of an experience that is, I believe, rather profoundly in common with that of Nietzsche. I have often had a means of presenting rather bizarre things, I believe, by saying that I felt united with Nietzsche's thought, with Nietzsche himself, also with Nietzsche's experience, through a fundamental connection. And, in principle, one can wonder if this means much; we are all isolated, communication from one being to another is minimal; on the other hand, my interpretation of Nietzsche could be contestable. Meanwhile, I insist on it, and there is a reason, that isn't simply an intellectual reason, for this comparison between what Nietzsche was and what I am. This reason is that there is a kind of very particular experience that seems to me to have been Nietzsche's and to be my own, in the same way that, for example, Saint Teresa's experience was equally proper to Saint John of the Cross as to Saint Teresa herself, if you will, in that

they were brought together on the level of a communication given in dogma and by belonging to the same religion. This community can be found between two beings, outside of their belonging to a religious community. This is why I spoke about community while speaking about Nietzsche. I am saying precisely this: I believe that there is a rapport between Nietzsche's thought and experience and my own, analogous to the one that exists in a community.

Furthermore, I don't want to remain vague about this. I think Nietzsche's thought makes this experience very understandable. It is given in particular, naturally, in the importance that Nietzsche attributed to laughter, and this in a very large number of passages, but especially in a rather late text in the posthumous work: "To see tragic characters founder and to be able to laugh . . . this is divine."<sup>6</sup> I don't think that what I am representing in general when I talk about nonknowledge and about the experience [of] its effects [can] be disassociated from an expression like this one.

If you will, what is important to me when I am talking about laughter is to situate laughter at the point of slippage that leads to this particular experience, laughter that becomes divine insofar as it can be the laughter that one has in seeing a tragic character founder. I don't know if there isn't, in spite of everything, something that bothers me in Nietzsche's phrase. It is perhaps a little, I wouldn't say grandiloquent, but a little too tragic. In fact, from the moment that one clarifies the experience of what is properly tragic, up to the possibility of being able to laugh at it, everything is lightened, everything is simple, and everything could be said without any kind of painful accent, without any call to emotions other than emotions that are already overcome.

In fact, this is, I believe, what characterizes laughter inside of the ensemble of effects that I connect to nonknowledge; it is connected to a dominant position. In tears, for example, one's experience of nonknowledge, of what is given when one cries, is not an experience wherein one is situated in a dominant position. Here one is clearly overcome.

Now, in this regard it is necessary to specify that the overcoming offered in laughter is not very interesting, as long as it isn't the overcoming that Nietzsche's phrase indicates. In general, one laughs on the condition that the dominant situation in which one finds oneself is not at the mercy of laughter, of the object of laughter. In order to laugh, for example, it is necessary that one not risk losing one's dominant situation.

If you will, in order return to the terms that I presented earlier, if laughter is the effect of nonknowledge, in principle, laughter does not have the fact of not knowing as its object, we don't accept the idea that we know nothing by the fact that we laugh. Something unexpected is produced, something contrary, something in contradiction to the knowledge that we have.

Here I will cite a sentence from an article by Charles Eubé that was particularly interesting to me.<sup>7</sup> I am a little chagrined to say it, since I published the article in the last issue of *Critique*, but there is one sentence in particular that I retained, which seems to be very meaningful. This is how he defines laughter at a given moment. This is not a definition of laughter strictly speaking. It is a definition of the position of someone who is laughing. Laughing implies, according to Charles Eubé, "the refusal to *accept* that which most profoundly within us, we *know*."<sup>8</sup>

In fact, someone who laughs, in principle, does not abandon his science, but he refuses to accept it for a while, a limited time, he lets himself pass beyond it through the movement of laughter, so that what he knows is destroyed, but in his depths he preserves the conviction that, just the same, it isn't destroyed. Someone who laughs preserves, deep within him, what laughter suppresses, but that it only suppressed artificially, if you will; likewise, laughter has the ability to suspend a very closed logic. In fact, when we are in this domain, we are just as able to preserve our beliefs without believing in them, and reciprocally we can know that which we simultaneously destroy as known.

Here I am returning to the theme I developed last time when I spoke about the opposition between the minor risk and the major risk. There is a major laughter beside a minor laughter. Today, I don't want to be limited to speaking about the major laughter, though, nevertheless, I am essentially referring to this laughter.

The strangest mystery to be found in laughter is attached to the fact that we rejoice in something that puts the equilibrium of life in danger. We even rejoice in the strongest way.

Further, I believe that this is the case without ever showing that we cannot consider a question like this in isolation, in the sphere of laughter. In fact, the same thing exists in tears.

There is a profound ambiguity in tears. Everyone knows that it is pleasant to cry, that one finds a kind of consolation in tears that we would often even not like to accept, but that goes beyond us. There is something intoxicating in tears, just as there is something intoxicating

in laughter. I think it will not be difficult to show that tears can be considered as linked, as well as laughter, to the invasion of the unknown, to the suppression of one part of the world that we consider as a world known in all its parts, that we consider as an ensemble. If someone dies, for example, the known order is in fact profoundly altered, and we must see something that we don't know substituted in front of us, in spite of ourselves, for something that we know, such as, for example, the presence of a death, or more precisely the absence of the living, the disappearance, the sudden destruction of the known universe to which we belong.

But tears, the same as laughter, present a stranger character. And this strange character, I will have a little difficulty talking about it, because it is not classically the object of study. There are, beyond tears of pain, tears of sadness, tears of death, initially tears of joy. Now, about tears of joy, if necessary, we speak fairly often. But, beyond the tears of joy there are perhaps still more curious tears, which are not the object of a common dread. I believe that tears rise to the eyes for all sorts of complex reasons. Further, I don't believe I'm capable of doing anything here other than offering indications in the direction of what I mean.

There are, I believe, tears of success, which are extremely frequent. Obviously, they are not frequent to the point to which I might not be, for example, curious to know if some of you have not had such a concrete experience, and weren't aware of tears of success. At bottom, I don't know anything about what I call the tears of success; these tears have not been the object of studies corresponding to the studies done, for example, of laughter; at any rate, I am not aware of such studies.

For example, an unhopd-for success or even a quite extraordinary bit of luck can bring tears to the eyes. I will cite an example of this, which even surprises me, like all the things about which one generally does not speak. This surprises me, but I was never capable, without bringing tears to my eyes, to talk or hear talk about a certain act. I knew someone who, during the war was an officer aboard the *Hood*, nearly up to the day of the catastrophe. That particular day, or perhaps the day before, it was a question of a difference of a few hours, he left on a mission in an observation boat; thus, his mother had naturally believed him to be dead. Besides, his death had been announced, and it took days and days before his mother would learn that he was still alive. And well, I think that this unhopd-for character is something, I'm not saying that it necessarily brings tears to your eyes, but that it

might bring tears to your eyes. And this is situated, I think, rather far from what one generally, classically says about tears.

I must say that in this regard I was taken aback by one thing; it is not that it is the only example that I have known, but generally I am not good at remembering the examples that my memory should offer me; I almost always forget this one. This experience has happened to me quite often, but I have never taken note of it, so to speak; I am not very methodical, and in general I forget about it. Furthermore, you see that here I am talking about a domain that remains completely open to investigation, which in sum is not at all known.

I don't want to make things more confusing. It is certain that when I am speaking about the unknown, I am not speaking about the genre of the unknown. But there is something quite particular, which in the meantime appears rather clear to me, which is that what makes us cry in this way is essentially the unhelped-for, the unexpected, and this seems to bring us back to the theme that I have developed generally.

I won't prolong this presentation by speaking more generally about the different effects that I enumerated earlier. I have already spoken here, in this series of lectures, about the relations between eroticism and nonknowledge, and between the sacred and nonknowledge. Perhaps, in another lecture, I will be able to talk about the relations between ecstasy, anguish, and nonknowledge, but this evening I will stop with what I have already shown.

Pronouncing the word *ecstasy*, I will limit myself to saying only this. Which is that laughter, considered as I have described it, opens a sort of general experience that, in my opinion, is comparable to what theologians have named "mystical theology" or "negative theology." But I must add that, in this regard, it is necessary to differentiate: this experience, for my part, is not only negative within certain limits, but totally negative. I will willfully give this experience, and the reflection that accompanies it, the name *atheology*, formed with the privative prefix *a*, and the word *theology*. If you will, this is given in a proposition like the following: *God is an effect of nonknowledge*. Though, as an effect of nonknowledge, God is always knowable, like laughter, like the sacred.

This allows me to show that this experience situates itself in sum in the general line of religions. In speaking as I do, I am conscious not only of assuming a fundamentally religious attitude, but even of representing a kind of constituted religion. It is not a question of the foundation of a religion. No, there is no foundation, because there isn't any

possible presupposition, because only one experience is possible. But, after all, all religions have not been founded; religions were simply able to be experiences constituting a more or less coherent dogma, often less coherent than more.

Furthermore, I will conclude in showing that despite this I wouldn't want to underestimate the philosophical character of this whole way of seeing. First of all, I really want to show that this way of seeing, in spite of its negative character, is associated with a kind of necessity toward a positive philosophy, and that all that it can add to this principle, to the principle of negation, is that the positive philosophy is not itself given for the principle that is situated in the experience about which I spoke as a kind of inevitable necessity, but that it is suspended, if you will, as I said that dogma was able to be suspended, within laughter.

I would also like to talk about something that seems to me to be of particular importance. The philosophies I am talking about—Hegel as much as Heidegger—have a theological experience in common. This seems very curious to me. The word *experience* is perhaps out of place, I don't know, but they had knowledge of theology. And even, I think there is every reason to think that negative theology was not unknown to Heidegger or to Hegel, and that in particular the Hegelian dialectic cannot be considered as completely without relation, historical relation at least, to negative theology.

Furthermore, I will add what seems more important to me, that it is truly necessary, when one expresses oneself in this manner, to arrive at saying what one believes possible in the domain, if you will, of morality, of human conduct. I have already indicated certain principles in this regard in the lecture I gave last time. But I'm not sure that this was sufficient; I am furthermore also not even sure that what I will say this evening will be insufficient. But I was rather taken aback seeing that one of the listeners, last time, asked me if I was not able to say something like: in these conditions, what must one do? I think that the question was not as badly posed as I have just posed it, but it amounted to about as much.

What I had said was very simple. I had represented that the risk would demand a certain boldness and that it was in the boldness of the risk that one was able to find the only possibility, in the boldness of the risk wherein nothing is ever given, wherein, after all, one can have no assurance. All this is to make evident in relative coherence in relation



to what I said earlier. But I would like to offer a more tangible idea of what I now have to add.

A few days ago, I read a book that a certain number of you have no doubt also read, a book by Hemingway called *The Old Man and the Sea*,<sup>9</sup> and I was taken aback after reading this book, to see for myself that Hemingway's morality is, after all, a well-known one. I say Hemingway's morality, because it is evident that he has moral preoccupations, that it would be an injustice not to see the morality in his work. And fundamentally, it is very simple, it is the morality of the master, the morality of the master according to Hegel, I don't think according to Nietzsche, but this might be stated more precisely.

In sum, Hemingway loves only what men who had adopted the attitude of master were able to love. The master is a man who can hunt, who can fish, who does not work. The master confronts death through risk, and this is always what interests Hemingway. One does not see a working-class hero represented, for example. He always shows men that take a risk, and not a risk wherein anguish enters as a destruction . . . Something is always overcome in Hemingway's characters. Now, it is possible that this means of overcoming is more perceptible in the last book that he wrote: *The Old Man and the Sea*.

For those who have not read it, I will say that this book shows an old man struck by bad luck, who is fishing for a swordfish, a very large fish, and who, each time he disembarks, leaves in vain, and returns continually without anything to bring back. Finally, he leaves once more, but alone, without anyone to help him, because, since he has bad luck, no one wants to follow him anymore or can no longer follow him. He has some good luck, but in conditions that become, in a very short amount of time, the height of misfortune. In other words, he first has the largest misfortune to undergo with the big fish that he has caught and that drags him where he does not want to go, that makes him, to a large extent, endure a veritable torment, because he doesn't have the strength to manage this big fish; and all this in order to end with the fact that upon his return, when he has all the same gotten through it, the sharks begin little by little, and in spite of the old fisherman's desperate efforts, to eat this fish, which could have allowed him to live for a long time; and, despite his efforts to kill the largest number of sharks possible, he returns with nothing.

In my opinion, from my point of view, there is something remarkable here; it is that despite everything there is something in the old man that remains, from beginning to end, essentially *sovereign*. It is not

without importance that this man is not a worker in the proper sense of the word, but a fisherman. Fishing is not quite a job. It is, if you will, the job of the primitive man, but it is a job that does not create the alienation that is characteristic of the work of the slave. At the present time even, there is no one who, considering himself a master, cannot fish. Fishing is still a thing for masters.

Well, I think that the possibility that Hemingway represented here is rather remarkable. It is that which consists in knowing how to keep quiet, in knowing how to put up with everything, and, finally, while living in the only possibility offered by luck, of knowing how to be in a state of finding oneself in a dominant position, in spite of every imaginable misfortune.

I must say that I cannot speak about this without any reservations. It was rather pleasant for me to present things in this way; but, in spite of everything, there is something bothersome, it seems to me, in Hemingway's characters. I am bothered perhaps, in particular, since the day that I found out that Hemingway, whom I don't know, converted to Catholicism. Obviously, for many people, this can, on the contrary, be agreeable knowledge. For me, it was profoundly disappointing. And, moreover, I place this in relation to what the character has furthermore that is deceptive. Everyone knows about Hemingway's profound anti-intellectualism, and I think that this anti-intellectualism exposes that which in this affirmation of the morality of the master is fundamentally very limited, and quite anachronistic, which he furthered throughout his work. I am saying that he affirmed the morality of the master, but I think that it is possible to say it.

Nevertheless, I would like to emphasize the rather painful feeling that fills me with the same hate that someone like Hemingway has for the intellectual effort of men; not that I don't perceive and even that I don't share the possibility of feeling a great repugnance in regard to everything that is intellectual, but I think that this repugnance must also be overcome. It is necessary to overcome it. In fact, I don't believe in the possibility of avoiding going to the end of things. The present world poses multiple problems for us, which are connected, for example, to work and to all the questions that it poses. Anyway, I think that, in this world of work, we are like people who submit to its law, we cannot escape it, we cannot play fisherman, hunters, and amateur bullfighters who have nothing else to do, and, reciprocally, we cannot ignore what is represented by the desperate effort of men to go to the end of their intellectual possibilities.

In any case, it seems to me that if what is seductive about Hemingway, which is connected to ignorance, might be attained by us, it can only be attained on one condition, that of having first been to the end of the possibilities of knowing. It is only beyond knowledge, perhaps in the nonknowledge that I have presented, that we could conquer the right to ignorance. But I don't think that this can be done immediately. I don't think that we can disappear before whatever the problem might be, and I think that we must also have the resolute courage that can be demanded of us in every way, in order to bear what is perhaps exhausting, wearisome even, in the work of the ant that is accomplished in our mind.

## Part V