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Philosophical Considerations on the Divine Phantom, the Real World and Man

Mikhail Bakunin

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Here is a selection from the beginning of the “Appendix” to
The Knouto-Germanic Empire and the Social Revolution, which
Bakunin wrote in November-December, 1870. Working
Translation by Shawn P. Wilbur.

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1. The System of the World

This is not the place to enter into philosophical speculations about the nature of Being. However, as I find myself forced to use this word, nature, often, I believe I should say what I mean by it. I could say that nature is the sum of all really existing things. But that would give a completely dead idea of that nature, which, on the contrary, presents itself to us as all movement and life. For that matter, what is the sum of things? The things that exist today will no longer exist tomorrow; tomorrow they will be, not lost, but entirely transformed. So I would approach the truth much more closely by saying that nature is the sum of the real transformations of the things incessantly produced and reproduced within it; and in order to give a bit more definite idea of what that sum or totality, which I call nature, could be, I would make, and I believe I can establish as an axiom, the following proposition:

Everything that exists, the being that constitute the indefinite ensemble of the universe, everything existing in the world, whatever their individual nature, as much in relation to quality as quantity, the most different and most similar, large or small, near or immensely distant, necessarily and unconsciously exert, either in an immediate and direct way, or by indirect transmission, a perpetual action and reaction; and that whole infinite quantity of individual actions and reactions, by combining in a single, general movement, produces and constitutes what we call universal life, solidarity and causality, nature. Call that God, the Absolute, if that amuses you, it matters little to me, provided that you give to that God no other meaning than the one I just specified: that of the universal, natural, necessary and real (but in no way predetermined nor preconceived, nor foreseen) combination of that infinity of individual actions and reactions that all really existing things incessantly exert on one another. Universal solidarity thus defined, nature considered in the sense of the Universe, which has neither end nor limits, is imposed as a rational necessity on our mind, but we could never embrace it in any real way, even through our imagination, and still less recognize it. For we could only recognize that infinitely small part of the Universe that is demonstrated to us by our senses; as for the rest, we suppose it, without really being able to even observe its existence.

Naturally, the universal solidarity, explained in this way, cannot have the character of an absolute and first cause; it is, on the contrary, nothing but a Resultant,¹ always produced and reproduced anew by the simultaneous action of an infinity of particular causes, the ensemble of which constitutes precisely the universal causality, the composite unity, always reproduced by the indefinite ensemble of the

¹ As each human individual, at each given moment of their life, is also nothing but the Resultant of all the causes that have acted at its birth and even before its birth, combined with all the conditions of its later development, as well as with all the circumstances that act on it in this moment.

incessant transformations of all the things that exist, and at the same time creator of all these things; each point acts on the whole, (that is the universe produced) and the whole acting on each point (that is the universe [as] producer or creator). Having explained it in this way, I can now say, without fear of giving space for any misunderstanding, that Universal Causality, Nature, creates the worlds. It is [Nature] that has determined the mechanical, physical, chemical, geological and geographical configuration of our earth, and that, after having covered its surface with all the splendors of vegetable and animal life, still continues to create, in the human world, society, with all its developments, past, present and to come.

When man begins to observe with a persevering attention and pursues that part of nature that surrounds him and that he encounters in himself, he ends by perceiving that all things are governed by laws that are inherent to them and truly constitute their individual nature; that each thing has an individual mode of transformation and action; that in that transformation and that action, there is a succession of phenomena or facts that constantly repeats itself, in the same given circumstances, and that under the influence of new, determined circumstances is modified in an equally regular and determined manner. That constant reproduction of the same facts by the same processes, properly constitutes the legislation of nature: order in the infinite diversity of phenomena and facts.

The sum of all the laws, known and unknown, that act in the universe, constitute its sole and supreme law. These laws divide and subdivide into general and particular laws. The mathematical, mechanical, physical and chemical laws, for example, are general laws, which manifest themselves in everything that exists, in all the things that have a real existence, what are, in a word, inherent in matter, that is to say in the really and uniquely universal Being, the true substratum of all the existing things. I hasten to add that matter never and nowhere exists as a substratum, that no one could perceive it in that unitary,

abstract form; that it only exists and only can exist, everywhere and always, in a much more concrete form, as more or less varied and determined matter.

The laws of equilibrium of combination and of the mutual action of forces or mechanical movement; the laws of weight, of heat, of the vibration of bodies, or light, of electricity, as well as those of the chemical composition and decomposition of bodies, are absolutely inherent in all the things that exist, without excluding in any way the manifestations of sentiment, will and mind; all three of these things, which properly constitute the ideal world of man, being themselves only some absolutely material operations of organized, living matter, in the body of the animal in general and above all in that of the human animal in particular. — As a consequence, all these laws are general laws, to which all the orders of real existence in the world, known or unknown, are subject.

But there are some specific laws that are only proper to certain particular orders of phenomena, facts and things, and which form between them separate systems or groups: such are, for example, the geological laws; the laws of vegetable organization; those of animal organization; finally those that preside over the conceptual [*idéal*] and social development of the most accomplished animal on the earth, of man. We can say that the laws belonging to one of these systems are absolutely foreign to those that make up the other systems. In nature, everything is connected much more intimately than we generally think and more so, perhaps, than the pedants of science would like, in the interest of a greater precision in their work of classification. But we can still say that such a system of laws belongs much more to one order of things than to another, and that if, in the succession in which I have presented them, the laws that dominate in the preceding systems continue to manifest their action in the phenomena and things that belong to all the systems that follow, there exists no retrograde action of the laws of the successive systems on

son, organized in itself, but having, nonetheless, neither beginning, nor limits, nor end. It is thus the absolute opposite of Providence: the negation of God.

is the most human, and that man only actually distinguishes himself from the animals of all the other species through this inextinguishable need to know, that he only becomes really and completely a man through the awakening and progressive satisfaction of this immense need to know. In order to realize himself in the fullness of his being, man must recognize himself, and he will never recognize himself really and completely as long as he has not recognized the nature that envelopes him and of which he is the product. So, short of renouncing his humanity, man must know, he must fathom with his thought all of the real world, and without hope of every being able to reach the bottom, he must always deepen more its coordination [*coordonnance*] and laws, for his humanity only comes at this price. He must recognize all its inferior regions, prior and contemporary to himself, all the evolutions, mechanical, physical, chemical, geological, vegetable and animal, that is to say all the causes all the conditions of his own birth, his existence and his development; in order that he can understand his own nature and his mission on this earth, his homeland and unique theater; in order that, in this world of blind fatality, he can introduce his human world, the world of liberty.

Such is the task of man: It is inexhaustible, it is infinite and well sufficient to satisfy the hearts and minds of the proudest and most ambitious. An instantaneous and imperceptible being, lost in the midst of the waveless ocean of universal transformation, with an unknown eternity behind him, and an unknown eternity before him, the thinking man, the active man, the man conscious of his human destiny, remains calm and proud in the feeling of his liberty, which he has won by emancipating himself through labor, through science, and by emancipating, by inflaming, if necessary, all the men around him, his fellows, his brothers. If you ask him after that his private thought, his last word concerning the real unity of the Universe, he will say to you that it is eternal transformation, a movement infinitely detailed, diversified and, for that very rea-

the things and facts of the preceding systems. Thus, the law of progress that constitutes the essential character of the social development of the human species is not manifested at all in exclusively animal life, and still less in exclusively vegetable life, while all the laws of the vegetable and animal worlds are found again, undoubtedly modified by new circumstances, in the human world.

Finally, in the very heart of these great categories of things, phenomena and facts, along with the laws that are specifically inherent to them, there are also divisions and subdivision that show us these same laws always individualizing and specializing themselves more, accompanying, so to speak, the more and more defined specialization, and which becomes more restricted to the extent that it is more defined, of the beings themselves.

Man has no other means to note all these laws, general, particular and special, than the attentive and exact observation of the phenomena and facts that occur both outside and within him. He distinguishes what is accidental and variable from what is reproduced, always and everywhere, in an invariable manner. The invariable process by which a natural phenomenon, whether external or internal, is constantly reproduced, the invariable succession invariable of facts that constitute it, are precisely what we call the law of the phenomenon. That constancy and that repetition are not, however, absolute. They always leave a large field to what we improperly call anomalies and exceptions, – a very unjust manner of speaking, for the facts, to which it relates, only prove that these general rules, recognized by us as natural laws, being nothing but abstractions drawn by our mind from the real development of things, are not in a state to embrace, exhaust or explain all the indefinite richness of that development...

Does that diverse mass of laws, which our science separates into different categories, form a single, organic and universal

system, a system in which they are linked, as well as the beings of which they manifest the transformations and development? It is very probable. But what is more than probable, what is certain, is that we could never manage, not only to comprehend, but only to embrace this single, real system of the universe, a system infinitely extended on one side and infinitely specialized on the other; so that in studying it we end up faced with two infinities: the infinitely large and the infinitely small.

Its details are inexhaustible. It will never be given to a man to know more than an infinitely small portion of them. Our starry heaven, with its multitude of suns, forms only an imperceptible point in the immensity of space and although we may embrace it with the gaze, we always know next to nothing of it. So we are forced to content ourselves with knowing a bit about our solar system, whose perfect harmony with the rest of the Universe we must presume, for if that harmony did not exist, it must either establish itself, or else our solar world would perish. We already know this last very well in the realm of mechanics and we already begin to recognize it a little in the physical, chemical, and even geological realms. Our science will have difficulty going much beyond that. If we want a more concrete understanding, we must limit ourselves to our terrestrial globe. We know that it was born in time and we presume that in who-knows-what indefinite number of centuries or hundreds of centuries, it will be condemned to perish, as everything that exists is born and perishes, or rather is transformed.

How did our terrestrial globe, which was at first burning, gaseous matter, condense and cool? By what immense series of geological evolutions must it have passed, before it could produce on its surface all that infinite richness of organic life, vegetable and animal, from the simple cell to man? How has it manifested itself and how does it continue to develop in our historical and social world? What is the end toward which we march, driven by that supreme, inevitable law of unceasing transformation, which in human society we call progress?

These are the only questions that are accessible to us, the only ones that can and must be really embraced, studied and resolved by man. Forming only one imperceptible point in the unlimited and indefinable question of the Universe, these human and terrestrial questions offer all the same to our mind a world that is really infinite, not in the divine, which is to say abstract sense of the word, not as the Supreme Being created by religious abstraction; infinite, on the contrary, in the wealth of its details, which no observation, no science could ever exhaust.

In order to know our world, this infinite world, abstraction will not suffice. Abandoned to itself, it would lead us back, without fail, to the Supreme Being, to God, to Nothingness, as it has already done in history, as I will soon explain. It is necessary, while continuing to apply that faculty of abstraction, without which we could never raise ourselves up, from an order of inferior things to an order of superior things, nor consequently understand the natural hierarchy of the beings, it is necessary that, at the same time, our mind immerses itself, with respect and love, in the meticulous study of the details and of the infinitesimally small, without which we could never conceive the living reality of being. So it is only by uniting these two faculties, these two actions of the mind, which appear so opposed: abstraction and the scrupulous, attentive and patient analysis of the details that could raise us to the real conception of our world. It is obvious that, if our feelings and our imagination can give us an image, a more or less false representation of this world, science alone could give us a clear and precise idea.

So what is that imperious curiosity that drives man to recognize the world that surrounds him, to pursue with a tireless passion the secrets of that nature of which he is himself, on the earth, the last and most perfect creation? Is that curiosity a simple luxury, a pleasant pastime, or rather one of the principal necessities inherent in his being? I do not hesitate to say that of all the necessities that constitute the nature of man, it