

## CHAPTER 1

# RELATIONS, INDETERMINACY, AND INTELLIGIBILITY

Le bon sens est la chose du monde la mieux partagée: car chacun pense en être si bien pourvu que ceux même qui sont les plus difficiles à contenter en toute autre chose n'ont point coutume d'en desirer plus qu'ils en ont.

Descartes, *Discours de la methode*

## I. THINGS IN RELATION

It was in reflecting on the nature of the individual that I first became interested in the status of relations in ordinary experience. As I tried to come to a clearer understanding of the relation between individuals and universals, it began to dawn on me that I had been focusing on the wrong things altogether. In fact, it began to seem to me that my mistake had been precisely in focusing on *things*. I had started off, in a manner typical of the modern tradition, assuming that some of the things in our experience are universals, others individuals, and that in order to describe the relation between these two primary entities it would be necessary to detail something like their most fundamental characteristics. Here, of course, the underlying assumption was that they *had* some fundamental characteristics that could be described independently of their relations to one another. The relations that stand between the individual and the universal could then, and only then, be completely explored.

The problem I confronted was the same problem that every thinker has had to come to terms with at some point. No sooner do we try to describe the individual independently of the universal than we run into an apparently insurmountable problem: the words—any words—that are the basic tools of the task we have outlined are themselves entities of a certain sort, or at least signs that point to entities of some sort, and the entities that they are or to which they point appear to be things that stand in direct logical contrast to

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the entities one is trying to describe as independent. The only tools available to description are already biased in favor of the universal, and that seems to leave open only a couple of alternatives: one, the "individuals" that had originally been taken to have a fundamental character of their own really do not; or, two, they stand in principle outside the reach of discursive language and thought.

The reasons that neither of these alternatives seems acceptable are detailed in the first chapter of *Individuals and Individuality* and the search for some third alternative is the primary concern of the rest of the book.<sup>1</sup> Allow me to quickly retrace the steps that led to my suggestions concerning such an alternative. It is clear enough that, short of treating individuals as inaccessible to discursive thought, we are forced to admit that we cannot *think* about them independently of their relation to universals. The possibility that they cannot *be* independently of that relation arises quite naturally then as the ontological correlate of the logical point. Nor does this come as a surprise. To modify Whitehead's claim, it is certainly true that one branch of the Western tradition can be understood as a series of footnotes to Plato or at any rate as variations on an essentially Platonic theme; and although that lends a certain air of respectability to our ontological correlate, it provides at least as much reason for pause. We have been down that road before only to find that it can lead to a position just as unattractive as consigning the individual to the logical wasteland of bare particularity. Here, instead, the individual turns out on reflective consideration to amount to a sort of logical mistake, a function of the failure of naive consciousness to recognize the essentially universal structure that undergirds that which at first presented itself as self-contained.<sup>2</sup>

As I continued to work my way through this tangled web of relations between individuals and universals, (supposing as I did so that it was at least in principle possible to disentangle the two, exposing their discrete and independent characters), it began to seem more and more likely that some fundamental misconception was standing in the way of a solution. Is it really reasonable to imagine in the first place that the terms *individual* and *universal* refer to logical or ontological entities that can make any sense independently of their relations to one another? That is, if we begin by assuming that there are some things in experience that can be identified as universal and others as individual, we will always find ourselves confronted by the problem of how to construct a coherent logical framework that can draw them back together (hence making them accessible to discursive thought) without doing damage to the independent ontic and epistemic characters that we took

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1. Brian John Martine, *Individuals and Individuality* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984).

2. *Ibid.*, see esp. Ch. 2, "Hegel's Beginning."

as givens, as the fundamental elements of our account. The temptation, of course, is to take one or the other as more fundamental, thereby making it possible to discuss the relation between the two from the point of view of a single ontological ground. But this will only give rise to some version of the familiar difficulties that I mentioned a moment ago. Put in slightly different terms, if we take the individual as fundamental and reduce the universal to a derivative status, we fall into the traps common to various versions of nominalism, the most significant of which is that we cannot do so without calling the logical character of our own speech into question. On the other hand, if we take the route of the rationalists, positing the universal as fundamental, the individual ends in being reduced to an instance of this or that category (or perhaps a cluster of such instances), and we are brought up short by the concern that we have done violence to our direct experience of the individual by depriving it of the concretely resistant character that seems to lie at its very core.

We seem at this stage to be confronted by the most serious sort of dilemma. The course of our reflection has bifurcated, issuing in two quite different but equally unacceptable alternatives. Moreover, given our historical vantage point, it seems unlikely that much would be gained by some further exploration of these alternatives in the hope of discovering some solution that had eluded the finest minds of our tradition. (At this juncture, the thinly veiled intellectual despair of the "deconstructionist" critique becomes understandable, if no more palatable.) The most reasonable response, then, is a return to the point at which we began and a reassessment of the presuppositions that guided our movement away from that beginning. Now, as I've said, as I set out to consider the relation between individuals and universals, I initially assumed that each introduced its own character into the subsequent structure of the relation and, as a result, that the relations between the two could only be understood after having come to an understanding of those fundamental characters. In the end, it occurred to me that quite different conclusions might issue from taking the relation (or relations) between the two as prior, as giving rise to the "fundamental characters" we think to have identified when we speak of "individuals" and "universals."

*Individuality* and *universality*, it seems to me, actually refer to relations, or to what I called modes of being related in *Individuals*. When we speak of the individuality of this or that, we really mean to point to its resistance with respect to the very categories that we use to describe it when thinking of it as an instance of a universal. While there may at first appear to be a conflict here, there is actually nothing particularly unusual about thinking of the same object in both ways. We typically suppose, for example, that the fact that persons can be described in terms of various universal categories, physical, psychological, social, and so forth, does not in the least mean that they are reducible to those categories. Neither does the fact that the categories

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offer rather less than a “complete” account mean that they should be abandoned as inappropriate or useless. The persons whom we encounter in ordinary experience are both individual and universal in the sense that they participate in both unmediated (dyadically structured) and mediated (triadically structured) relations to what they are not. Problems arise only when we begin to insist from some reflective vantage point that one or the other of these manners of being related must be given pride of place. As I argued at some length, there is no reason whatever for doing so, unless we suppose that there is something unshakeable about our modern presuppositions concerning the character of intelligibility—but of course, if we suppose that, philosophy comes to a halt.

Unsettling as that thought might be, however, there is something even more nervous-making about so radical a shift in our thinking as to imagine that relations might be prior to the things described in terms of them. For centuries now, we have been accustomed to assume that *things* occupy a status both ontically and epistemically prior to that of *relations among things*. If it is possible to speak intelligibly of relations per se, it has seemed reasonable to suppose that there must first be things that stand in relations and that such things at least from a logical point of view can be considered the bases of the relations we are trying to define. We move from relations like “being next to,” “on top of,” or “between,” to being “similar to,” “different from,” “identical with,” and so on. The things that are seen as standing in such relations are taken to be self-identical givens that the relations simply help to describe. But when we examine this sort of description, we encounter a difficulty logically similar to that which arises when we try to describe individuals using universal terms. Everything that we say about the objects that we had initially taken to be prior calls our attention to the relations in which those objects stand to the other objects around them. We find ourselves having to describe these “prior” *things* by means of relational frameworks of one kind or another, and in the process, the possibility of seeing the relations themselves as prior emerges as a serious one.

What could it mean to think of relations as prior? At first the suggestion seems counterintuitive; and while many of the “givens” of common sense expose themselves on closer examination to lead to unacceptable logical consequences, others appear so fundamental to our ordinary modes of thought that calling them into question seems tantamount to calling intelligibility itself into question. If, for example, we tried to suggest that the spatial relations of direct experience occupy a position either logically or ontologically prior to the things we are accustomed to think of as sustaining these relations, we would end in making some very curious claims. Surely, my computer and the table on which it rests are prior to the relation between the two. (Now we are not speaking of the sort of self-sustaining individuals with which we began; but by beginning with individuals in the sense of individual

objects in ordinary experience, it will become possible eventually to show how some simple claims made in this context hold even more clearly in the case of such complex and full-bodied individuals as, say, works of art.) We naturally think of the computer and the table as prior to the ordinary spatial relation "on top of" in the sense that the computer and the table do not stand in any necessary relation to one another. That is, the computer would obviously be what it is if put in other places—on top of other tables, in the closet, on the floor, and so forth. It would still be the same object in the sense that it could be placed on a table and used in the way that it is being used now. To assign a certain independence to the thing, then, means at least that it has a meaning independent of the particular place in which it is situated at the moment. And, of course, it is true that its relation to this table is coincidental. The same sort of thing can obviously be said of the table, and it seems to follow that the relation between the two is something, far from being that on which they depend in any important sense, that depends on the objects for its meaning.

But if we continue to reflect on the apparent independence of the objects, it turns out that while this relation may be coincidental to what they are, it is not in the least clear that it would be possible to hold intelligibly that they are what they are independent of *any* relation whatever. Yet it is this that we often take ourselves to mean when we assert that the objects are prior to their relations to one another and to whatever else there may be. It is certainly true that most of the things we confront in ordinary experience (though not all) are independent of this or that set of relations, but can we really hold that they are ever independent of—here in the sense of being the sort of thing that can be thought separately from—relations in the more general sense? Think again of the assertion of the independent meaning of the computer. Are we really saying anything more than that it is possible to think of the object in terms of some set of relations other than the ones that currently apply to it? Well, if the only relations we consider are those that describe its connection with the other physical objects around it, of course we are. But review the other possibilities. Suppose we were to describe it as a unique collection of molecules. No matter how one tries to think of molecules, it is impossible to do so without becoming involved once again in a framework of relations, both internal and external to the structure of the entities. In fact, here the framework becomes even more complex in that it necessarily entails a reflective assessment of experience to the extent that molecules are obviously not a part of direct experience, and such an assessment carries along with it the usual set of presuppositions, categorial structures, and so on. When we turn from the theoretical back to the experiential and try to describe the computer in terms of the colors, shapes, textures, that seem to apply to it, we find ourselves once again confronted by a series of relations. Attending to its function will lead us, if anything, more directly

down the same path. Its function distinguishes it from some objects, but does so only by drawing it into relation with others: keyboards, monitors, human hands, needs, abilities, and so on.

To be known as a this or a that, the computer has to be considered in terms of this or that set of relations. After only a brief reflection of this sort, one becomes less and less inclined to see those sets of relations as coincidental to the meaning of the object, but the notion that the object is something prior to all of them lingers still. What then? Perhaps an individual. That is, while all of the things that we think about the object entail its relation to things that it is not, isn't there still some sort of thing about which we are thinking, something that is independent of the things we think about it? The computer is not only *a* computer; it is also, and importantly, *this* computer. To say this, however, turns out to mean simply to point to another of the relations in which it stands to other things. This relation, as I have shown elsewhere, stands significantly apart from relations of the sort described earlier, in that its foundation is negation as opposed to difference, but it is a relation all the same.<sup>3</sup> What I am more interested in at the moment, though, is the way that the apparently determinate relations that detail the universal dimensions of our ordinary experience of the computer are connected to the indeterminate ground out of which they arise, and what that means with respect to the relation between indeterminacy and intelligibility in more general terms. Using the term *ground* may be misleading. I should like to make it clear at the outset that in doing so, I do not mean to present indeterminacy as having a more fundamental status than determinacy. However, I do want to insist that a certain indeterminacy surfaces in any reflection on determinately structured relations as something without which they would not make sense.

Imagine describing the computer to someone unfamiliar with objects of this sort, but familiar enough with the culture of which it is a part to make sense out of the various determinations (spatial location, molecular structure, physical characteristics, function) mentioned earlier. The relation between those determinations and what I have just characterized as their "indeterminate ground" might be drawn into better focus by considering the mistakes people might make if left to their own devices. Say we choose to develop our description of the computer primarily in terms of its function. To do so successfully, we should have to separate from all the possible uses to which one might imagine such an object being put, the use to which it actually is put. That is, we should have to take into account, either implicitly or explicitly, the various mistakes that might be made concerning its use. Doing so, however, does not eliminate the other possibilities in either a prac-

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3. Ibid.

tical or theoretical sense. The computer could conceivably be used in a variety of other ways (stopping a door, say), or, to put the point (which is hardly a new one) more broadly in practical terms and more directly in logical terms, its definition depends as much on what it is not as it does on what it is. It is in this sense that the rationalists are right. The thing is tied to a larger set of things than it appears to be from the point of view of sense-certainty; and even if we deny the claim that it can ultimately be resolved into some determinate set of such relations, we cannot deny the importance of the discovery that we have made. It depends on what it is not in a fundamental way. But the rationalistic tradition has consistently neglected the extent to which the indeterminacy of what it is not enters into the determinate characterizations that we ordinarily provide in our attempt to come to an understanding of the thing.

The point I mean to emphasize is that when we examine the determinations that seemed from the point of view of naive consciousness to isolate the object in the sense of uncovering a meaning that it has for itself (i.e., that is independent of our reflection on it), we find that those determinations, far from separating the object from the larger context of which it is a part, draw it into closer and closer connection with it. So far we seem to be with the rationalists, and one of the possible conclusions available at the stage we've reached is theirs. We could expand our original notion of the determinations that structure not only the object in question but any object whatever, as they structure the Whole. But to do so involves an unsatisfactory reduction of the experience with which we began just to the extent that none of the possible descriptions mentioned earlier, theoretical or experiential, can be seen as in and of itself determinate. Even if we are willing to make the difficult move toward accepting the notion that the relations that emerge as the primary meanings of those descriptions are more fundamental than the *relata* appropriate to the respective contexts, various conflicts appear that seem to refuse the completely determinate character of a rationalistic superstructure.

There is a real difference, for example, between describing the computer as a collection of molecules, on the one hand, and in terms of its function in a human world, on the other. For one thing, the first sort of description presupposes an analytical approach to the world of ordinary experience, whereas the other certainly need not rest on such a presupposition and on some accounts might be seen as standing insistently against analysis. (If the computer really is its use, to think of the thing in terms of a collection of molecules is to think of something other than the computer.) Ignoring for the moment the wide variety of disputes that might arise within the camps of adherents to either view, imagine an argument between a committed materialist and an equally committed rationalist. Although such people seem ready to claim that the opposing view is "wrong," what they mean when

they do so is always rather puzzling. The problem appears, of course, when one side or the other insists that they have identified what the object *really* is. If the object is really (i.e., at the most fundamental level) a collection of molecules, then its place in a world of intersubjective meanings and activities takes on a secondary role with respect to an understanding of the thing. Bugles sound, and the other camp is up in arms. What do you mean by suggesting that . . . ? But isn't it equally as unreasonable to try to hold that the computer is not really a collection of molecules as that it is? Or that one or the other of the two possibilities we are considering must be seen as secondary? That the physical objects of ordinary experience can be described in terms of their molecular structure is obvious. We do so. Moreover, we have been doing so with extremely impressive results for some centuries now. To argue that it is a mistake to describe the thing in these terms is simply ludicrous. But it is just as ludicrous to insist that on offering such a description we have come somehow closer to the real meaning or being of the thing than we do when we think of its place in ordinary human experience.

If a child walked into my office just now, pointed to my computer, and asked "What's that?" I should scarcely respond by telling him about its molecular structure. Nor, on describing its operations and functions, would I understand myself to be reserving the real truth about the thing until he was old enough to understand it. In fact, it seems to me that to tell him that it is a collection of molecules would be to make a mistake. That is not the sort of thing he was asking me about. To genuinely understand the object is not only to understand that both of these descriptions apply to it, but also to understand the context within which each becomes useful and meaningful. Each description can, from a certain point of view, be seen to conflict with what the object means and is when considered from other points of view. For example, its place in the world of intersubjective human experience does not quite come apart into discretely meaningful pieces in the way that its molecular structure does. And to assume that there must be some complete and thorough resolution to such conflicts is to ignore the indeterminacy that enters the picture with the contextual variety that has emerged as fundamental to the meaning of the object. Not only is it the case that some of those contexts are themselves indeterminate, but likewise that the relations between those that are determinate and those that are indeterminate must remain itself indeterminate. But this is a sort of indeterminacy that we are ordinarily inclined to accept quite happily. Actually, it never occurs to us to think that the indeterminacy of our experience stands in conflict with the claim that the world is intelligible until we start doing philosophy. Quite to the contrary, in fact, indeterminacy figures strikingly in a variety of experiences that we should never dream of characterizing as unintelligible. Let me try to develop this claim by turning to a context in which it is not only dif-



difficult to hold that intelligibility is fundamentally tied to determinacy, but clearly a mistake to do so.

## II. INDETERMINACY AND INTERPRETATION

Not long ago, while still searching for a context particularly appropriate to an exploration of the relation between indeterminacy and intelligibility, I appealed to a friend who is a professor emerita of English literature. It seemed a good idea to settle on some single literary example as a method of attack, and she suggested Yeats's familiar poem, "Among School Children." Of course, this is not an example that came to mind entirely without reason. In the poem, Yeats is reflecting on his own experience, thinking about the relation between youth and age, what it means to have come to a new way of seeing the world, comparing it to ways in which he had once seen it. The poem has to do with just the sort of issue we had been talking about. That is, its images awaken in the reader a sense of returning to a beginning, considering its shape and texture not only in terms of the end that has in fact issued from it, but likewise in terms of those alternative ends that might have done. But the primary reason for considering this poem would apply just as well to any other good piece of poetry. That is, we are presented with something that must be seen as indeterminate in that it can be interpreted in not one but several perfectly reasonable ways. Furthermore, while the range of available interpretations is not without limits (since it is certainly possible to make mistakes), neither are its boundaries entirely determinate. What is particularly to the point here is that this is ordinarily seen as strengthening rather than weakening the claim that the poem is meaningful.

With that much said, let us take a more direct look at "Among School Children" itself. I hope that the poem is familiar enough that quoting the last stanza will be sufficient to recall its tone and imagery to mind.

Labour is blossoming or dancing where  
Body is not bruised to pleasure soul,  
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,  
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.  
O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?  
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,  
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

At the opening of the poem, Yeats finds himself in a schoolroom surrounded by a group of children involved in the elementary stages of education. He is naturally drawn to some reflection on the relation between his own youthful experience and the developed perspective of a "sixty year old smiling public

man." Out of that reflection emerges a series of ideas concerning the passage from youth to age, the consideration of the early stages from the point of view of the later, the relative weight of this influence or that as it is considered from either the beginning or the end. Depending upon the reader's focus, the meaning of the poem might be seen to move in either direction or in both. Consider the lines just quoted. One might interpret the last two lines as meaning that the dancer is actually identical to the dance. For the "scarecrow" whose dance is nearly completed, the return to a schoolroom calls to mind the progress from youth to age, conjuring up images and relations that have become part of him in an internally necessary sense. He *is* his relationship with Maud Gonne (who is usually taken to be the woman of stanzas two through four), he *is* his early fascination with and later departure from the world-view of the classical Greeks, he *is* the spirituality both sacred and secular that enshrouds the images of the "nuns and mothers" of the seventh stanza. At the same time, he remains in some sense identical to the infant on the mother's lap, full of potential crying out for realization, though not necessarily for the particular realization that was to come. For the dance is not yet complete, and the dancer not after all identical to the dance. In fact, if he were, there could be neither dancer nor dance, and the image would collapse into meaninglessness.

But the emphasis to be placed on the one view or the other remains open to question. Is Yeats telling us that the view from the perspective of the nearly completed whole is to be taken more seriously than the view from the mother's lap? Less? A reasonable argument might be made in either direction. Or perhaps the most reasonable interpretation of the poem lies somewhere in between. Not "between" in the sense of a diffident vacillation between the two possibilities mentioned, but firmly between, where the meaning of the two directions is to be found in the curious relation between the indeterminacy of the one and the discrete determinations of the other. Perhaps we see the poem most clearly when we allow our focus of attention free rein, looking from end to beginning and beginning to end, recognizing that the play between the two draws us nearer to the truth than a narrowed focus in either direction could do on its own.

Or we might follow some other path altogether. It would not be wholly unreasonable, for example, to interpret the poem as a critique of a certain kind of formal education. There is some evidence supporting such an interpretation in the poem itself—the description of the children learning "to be neat in everything in the best modern way," the characterization of Plato, Aristotle, and "golden-thighed" Pythagoras as "old clothes upon old sticks to scare a bird." Further support for such a view appears on discovering that at the time Yeats was interested in Gentile's ideas concerning educational reform; and still other variations on both themes seem reasonable in light of the note concerning the topic of the poem that Yeats jotted down about three

months before the completion of the final draft: "School children and the thought that life will waste them perhaps that no possible can fulfill our dreams or even their teacher's hope. [sic] Bring in the old thought that life prepares for what never happens."<sup>4</sup>

We might account for variations within the range of possible interpretations in a number of ways but the primary reason for such a range seems fairly obvious: the poem can be and is assessed from a variety of significantly different perspectives. If we cast our understanding of the poem in the mold formed by what we know of the poet and his experience prior to and contemporaneous with the writing of the poem, certain interpretations will seem more reasonable than others, but it would be odd to insist that those interpretations are more accurate than others. Further, even on narrowing our focus by choosing to adopt this perspective rather than others, we find that, although some interpretations are excluded (at least from immediate consideration), no single interpretation emerges as the only reasonable possibility. Imagine the course our reflection would take if we were, say, to approach "Among School Children" using the note quoted earlier as a point of departure. Because the note itself is open to a number of interpretations, we would first have to choose from among those possibilities the one that seems best suited in terms of what we know of Yeats's background, related interests, and so forth. That is, we should have to engage in a sort of second-order interpretive activity before it became possible to apply the note and our interpretation of it to the poem itself. Once having done so, we would find ourselves faced with still another series of decisions concerning the most reasonable application of the interpretation we have elected. Moreover, as many artists have pointed out, there comes a moment in the making of a work of art when the work seems to take on a life of its own, thereafter making demands on the artist that he or she might not have anticipated. To the extent that this is true of at least some works of art (Croce and others notwithstanding) and might well be true of the particular piece under consideration, it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that by the time "Among School Children" was completed, Yeats had departed in large or small ways from his original plan. In short, even after having adopted one of the various perspectives from which the poem might be considered, we still find ourselves offering an interpretation that no amount of argument could show to be the single best interpretation of the poem even from that perspective, let alone others.

So far, in thinking about the poem from the perspective of the ideas and experiences brought to the work by the poet, we have seen that such reflection would eventually produce a range of interpretations including some

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4. A. Norman Jeffares, *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1968), p. 299.

that conflict with one another. Should we turn our attention to the various experience of the poem's audience, that range would obviously broaden enormously. Where the average college student might be inclined to focus on the romantic imagery in the center of the poem, allowing it to color his or her understanding of the beginning and end, that student's teacher, who has perhaps become a "sixty year old smiling public man," will have strikingly different notions about the poem's core. Enough. It is clearly possible to propose a wide range of reasonable and nevertheless significantly different interpretations of a poem like "Among School Children." Likewise, in the case of a genuinely important poem, that is to say one that will "last" and develop a history of its own, that range of interpretations will undergo constant change. That it provides a framework within which this can occur is in fact one of the things ordinarily taken as grounds for referring to it as "important."

Now, the poem is certainly intelligible in the ordinary sense of the term. It is open to meaningful interpretation. Its meaning, however, remains indeterminate at least to the extent that a variety of interpretations are available and choosing among them involves further interpretation. It is equally important to note how strange it would be to suggest that we approach the poem with a determinately formulated goal in mind. If we think of ourselves as seeking the "truth" about the poem at all, it is certainly not in the sense of hoping to ultimately identify the most clear and distinct of all the possible interpretations that might be offered. We seek, if anything, to constantly enrich our understanding of the poem by considering new ways of thinking about it in relation to the poet himself, his audience, the complex relation between the two, the history of its imagery, the extent to which its metaphors reshape ordinary conceptual links of this sort or that, the peculiar perspective it affords for a reconsideration of the past out of which it has emerged and the future at which it hints. At the same time, none of this is to suggest that any interpretation whatever would do. It is quite possible to make mistakes. In fact, one of the most obvious ways to do so would be to attempt to treat the poem in an overly determinate fashion, as if, for example, it were made out of parts in the way that a machine is. One imagines (if only with a shudder) some hard-bitten analyst zeroing in on the lines:

O chestnut tree, great-rooted blossomer,  
Are you the leaf, the blossom, or the bole?

and trying to figure out which one it is. To attempt a formal analysis of the poem would be as silly—and a silliness of the same sort—as telling the child in the preceding section that the computer is a collection of molecules.

The poem seems to present us with an instance of something undeniably meaningful, but whose meaning has the character of being in one sense bounded and in another quite open. Or, to put the point in the language of

the first section, the meaning of the poem appears to be at once determinate and indeterminate. And this raises once again the question of the relation between determinacy and indeterminacy. In the last section of this chapter, and in the chapters that follow, I shall explore the possibility that far from being an unusual case, the relation between the bounded and the unbounded uncovered in the meaning of the poem points to a logically necessary reciprocity between the determinate and indeterminate dimensions of the entire range of our experience.

### III. DETERMINACY AND INTELLIGIBILITY

In the first section, I suggested that we would do well to reconsider the prior ontic and epistemic status we have been accustomed to accord to "things," on the grounds that some of the most perplexing problems with which we have struggled throughout the history of the Western tradition, and in particular during the modern period, appear to discover their logical roots in this presupposition. When we try to consider "things" while neglecting the significance of the relations in terms of which we describe them and by which they are structured, we doom ourselves to an unnecessarily restricted view of our own experience. At the same time, certain uncomfortable consequences seem to appear as soon as we shift the balance between things and relations in favor of relations. For it is not possible to raise doubts concerning the fundamental logical and ontological status of "things" without at the same time raising doubts about the pivotal ontological position of determinacy. The notion that determinacy should be taken to have such a status is so firmly lodged in the tradition that it seldom occurs to us even to raise questions of this kind, let alone to take them seriously. Yet, as I tried to show in general terms at the end of the first section and in particular terms in the second, it turns out that intelligibility does not always depend upon reaching a completely determinate conclusion. It is quite possible to reflect seriously, that is, to make intelligible claims, within and about contexts that are fundamentally indeterminate. And if this is the case, still another reassessment is called for. Something is amiss with the criteria we have been applying in making judgments concerning what is and what is not intelligible. Let me try to prepare the way for the following chapters with some general observations concerning the relation between determinacy and indeterminacy, and the importance of that relation for the structure of intelligibility itself.

Two or three years ago, a colleague asked me to make some remarks about the development of the scientific method as an introduction to her seminar in physiological psychology. Describing the roots of the method primarily in Cartesian terms, I was struck by the curious tension between determinacy and indeterminacy to be discovered with the method itself. There

is scarcely any need to draw attention to the extraordinary success that we have had in learning more of the world and of ourselves as we have drawn this method into play in contexts both theoretical and practical. At the same time, I found myself anxious to convince my audience that while I had no interest in degrading either the theoretical structure or the practical efficacy of the method, it was nonetheless important to be wary of its hidden presuppositions.

To the extent that it is a method whose core is analysis, it is one that leads toward a view of human experience that can generate any number of significant misconceptions. For one, if we assume that we can learn most about things by analyzing them, we have to assume at the same time that the things about which we can learn are things that give themselves over to analysis; we must assume that they are things that come apart into pieces. Now of course, in ordinary experience, we confront almost nothing that can't be broken into pieces, but the further and more important underlying assumption here is that the pieces that are the necessary byproducts of analysis have independent meanings. Whether the pieces in question are molecules or natural laws, sense data or logical principles, they are invested with discrete meanings understood to stand independent of their relations to one another and to our experience of them. Nor is this in the least an unreasonable view when one considers the general character of our day-to-day experience. The things around me in the room as I write are things that certainly have meanings independent of those I am inclined to attach to them, and it is reasonable to suppose that they are made of smaller bits of which the same thing can be said. Here the move toward reflection on *my* world and the ways in which these objects have special meanings for me—my grandmother's violin, my friend's book, my parents' gift—seems to be beside the point. One thinks of learning to ask "But what is it really?" where of course the question directs one's attention away from the world of idiosyncratic tastes, familial sentiment, even some larger sense that grows out of a kind of general human sympathy, toward a world that has some meaning of "its own." This is the world of the "things" we considered in the first section. It is a world that we imagine transcending the merely personal and that, in becoming universal, becomes likewise more complete, more true, more real.

A hunger for that meaning that stands independent of oneself is typical of the whole tradition of Western philosophy. First gods, then natural phenomena, then ideal constructions, then God, then back to a combination of God, natural phenomena, and ideal constructions; round and round the search goes, always, it seems, with Thales's primary notion in mind: there must be something out of which everything else is made, there must be some fundamental meaning behind the appearances, if we are not to surrender ourselves to the more than just mildly disconcerting thought that the world we confront and try to come to terms with is merely whimsical. It is

simply not acceptable. There must be a meaning. That this search is worthy of our time and effort, respect and sympathy, surely stands, if anything does, without argument. However, it cannot be carried out intelligently without a constant reappraisal of the extent to which the character of the search itself affects what we find.

When we treat analysis as the single most significant method of investigation, presupposing as we must that the world is made up of discretely meaningful bits and pieces, the conceptual structures in terms of which we articulate the relations among those pieces (principles, laws, meanings, etc.) are predestined to take on the same character as the pieces that we set out to look for in the first place. They must be determinate. When determination is seen as the primary model for thought, and likewise for being, that which appears indeterminate is taken to be intelligible (or, in an extreme view to be at all) only to the extent that it might approach some ultimate moment identified by the articulation of a determinate structure. When Descartes speaks of clarity and distinctness, he means to refer to just such a structure, and the frustration with which he repeatedly meets grows out of the sense that little or nothing in direct experience can be characterized in such terms.

The indeterminate comes to be seen now as an incompletely articulated version of the determinate. There is nothing inherently unreasonable in making such a suggestion. Its origins are in fact readily apparent. In both practical and theoretical contexts, success often depends upon becoming increasingly determinate in our understanding of various situations. Determinate forms emerge as the building nears completion, as the machine is further developed, as the mathematical proof is knitted together, even from a certain point of view, as the work of art coalesces; and in each case, the notion of accomplishing the task we have set for ourselves appears to involve more and more thoroughly defined structures. When we turn to reflection on such activities, isn't it reasonable to generalize, reaching the conclusion that human activity broadly defined involves a making-determinate?

But if we consider these activities from a slightly different angle, the apparently central character of this "making-determinate" can be seen to stand in a certain conflict with the notion that the determinations characteristic of the end products have been "discovered" rather than created. If for no other reason than that in each case some other end is possible at least in principle, the claim that the determinations we have come upon at the end of the process are not really ideal structures that were undergirding the process (together with everything else) from the outset seems more and more reasonable. Even in those contexts that seem most highly refined, a sense of the indeterminate lingers stubbornly. We can choose, of course, to put this aside as a function of not having enough control over our instruments and procedures, but in the case of direct experience that won't do simply

because of the problem with the deceptive character of sense experience that has troubled us since the Presocratics. Even in the case of the mathematical system, it lingers penumbally around the imaginary and transfinite numbers that seem necessary to the making-determinate of real numbers. (Or, one might just as well point to the existence of and relation between alternative systems, as specifically in the case of Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometries.)

The point in all of this is that if we shift our focus away from an insistence on the primacy of the determinate in both orders toward an inspection of the pervasive character of indeterminacy, it begins to seem just as reasonable to suppose that the determinate represents an inadequately articulated form of the potential represented by the indeterminate dimensions of experience. From this point of view, the indeterminate comes to the fore as the ground out of which the determinate systematic account has arisen in the first place and into which it will in a sense recede upon having outlived its usefulness. In fact, now the determinate is seen as incomplete. That which stood as the model for and the goal of the complete account is itself as incomplete as a single interpretation of a work of art.

#### IV. THE CONTEMPORARY LANDSCAPE

It may seem that in raising a question about the central place of determinacy, I have been focusing chiefly on the empirical side of the tradition, since it is the empirical branch of the modern tradition that most clearly and self-consciously accords analysis pride of place—and which as a result appears most obviously committed to the notion that being and thought are fundamentally tied to determinacy. But I believe that the same thing holds for the rationalistic tradition. In both of its central traditions, modern philosophy has until very recently continued to assume that intelligibility demands determinacy and that, where we uncover indeterminate dimensions in experience, it is chiefly to be understood as a sign that our thinking has not developed far enough, or that some aspect of the world is by nature elusive.

I say that this has been true until recently because there has been a movement afoot for the last several decades that seems not only to admit but to celebrate indeterminacy. Following in the footsteps of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, this end of the contemporary philosophical landscape insists on the centrality of difference as against sameness, arguing that the world inevitably resists any attempt to confine it within clearly defined categorical boundaries. I am thinking of course of Heidegger's later work or, more recently, of Derrida and his cohort. I am in one sense quite sympathetic to the insights to be found in these positions, but the view that I am developing here remains importantly distinct from them. As I argued at length in the



first part of this project, it does seem to me that we have lost sight of the importance of difference and of the place of the individual. At the same time, it is possible to get carried away in defense of these dimensions of experience, to become so involved in a focus upon difference that we lose sight of the sense in which the world does also present an orderly face and can, in a straightforwardly traditional sense, be known. We can, after all, legitimately construct categories and principles and laws on the basis of our direct experience inasmuch as that experience includes as much sameness as it does difference. It is no more reasonable to insist on an exclusive focus upon difference than it is to hold that sameness is somehow a more foundational or central notion.

Given my understanding of the relation between sameness and difference, and of its significance for the logical structure of the relation between determinacy and indeterminacy, the position that I shall be developing in this book seems to me to lie between two extremes, neither of which offers an adequate account of these relations. One of these extremes, represented by the sort of position just mentioned, is importantly identified with difference, arguing that difference lies at the very core of things, causing the world to be fundamentally enigmatic, shrouded in the mystery of the individual. Here, the world as a place of individuals and differing perspectives is taken to present a fundamental character that opposes our attempts to know. Heidegger, for example, seems to find in Being itself a natural propensity for difference. As against the Hegelian analysis, difference finally overwhelms identity for Heidegger, retreating into the "oblivion" (*Vergessenheit*) of a Being that remains concealed. Merleau-Ponty takes up a position not unlike this, especially in his later work where the Other both as the disjointed self and as a combination of an unrecoverable past and an unknowable future retreats from the immediacy of present experience and remains opaque to reflection, taunting our attempts to know. And most recently and most strikingly in this part of the tradition, one finds Derrida abandoning discursive analysis altogether, thinking of thinking as a futile enterprise that devolves into a collection of marginalia to a text—a text that he takes as a comic re-presentation of *savoir absolu*—open apparently to any interpretation whatever.

Whereas all of this supposedly grows out of a rejection of the presuppositions upon which the great systems were built, the new focus on indeterminacy that runs through the dialogue at this end of the contemporary spectrum is actually grounded in an obeisance to the oldest notions. It is the bias in favor of sameness, boundaries, and the determinate that leads to the kind of system being rejected, and instead of examining this fundamental presupposition, it seems to me that most if not all of the thinkers who have objected to the hegemony of the Absolute have focused simply upon its conclusions. Those conclusions are discarded because they leave no room for the place of difference, the unbounded and the indeterminate, and re-

placed with a speech that intends to recover the echoes of an unbounded Other. But this leads to the claim that the world is in some fundamental sense mysterious or unknowable only if we accept the notion that intelligibility is necessarily tied to boundaries and determinacy. As I have already said, I am sympathetic to the concerns that animate this movement. I entirely agree, for example, that the sweep of the Hegelian system illegitimately neglects the place of the individual, and does so precisely because of a misunderstanding of the relation between difference and negation. The labor of the negative, as Hegel understands it, is a labor grounded in its opposite, and one that ultimately gives itself over to the identity of identity and difference without allowing for the radical sense of difference that continues to evade the mediation of the Absolute Idea. On the other hand, we cannot afford to abandon ourselves to the negativity of an exclusive focus on difference, the unlimited, the indeterminate, if we are to be true to our own experience. As I shall show, the indeterminate dimensions of experience are ontologically bound to sameness, limitation and determinacy. Hence, it is just as dangerous to deny the place of the general principles, laws, and structures that are grounded in sameness as it is to abandon ourselves to the unrestricted hegemony of an Absolute. It may be that Hegel leaps too quickly away from the immediacy and indeterminacy of Being into the categorially bound schemata of Determinate Being, but there must be a place for the determinate dimensions of our experience in any account that purports to offer a reasonable description of it.

And a concern for the recovery of the determinate dimensions of experience leads to other end of the contemporary spectrum. Here, instead of an emphasis on the indeterminate, there has been a continuing commitment to the establishment of boundaries and definition, an enduring faith that the modern drive toward clarity and distinctness will finally issue in an account of the world unclouded by the ambiguous nature of our ordinary experience. And, the reservations of Hume and the rest notwithstanding, the core of the so-called analytical tradition has continued to assume that if we just examine things carefully enough, experiment extensively enough, we will finally arrive at such an understanding. Although the central view of this tradition still exerts enormous influence on Western thinking, particularly in the natural and social sciences, there has been growing concern, and that from within its own ranks, about some of its basic presuppositions. Questions raised by thinkers like Wittgenstein, Quine, and Sellars, and more recently by Goodman and Rorty, have led to serious debate about whether we can legitimately suppose that there is some objective reality against which our ideas and propositions can be measured. The whole notion of correspondence to such a reality as the fundamental test of the truth has been called into question, and along with it, the place of epistemology in philosophical reflection. While on this side of the tradition, there may not be the same sort of cele-

bration of the indeterminate, there is nonetheless a developing position that seems to accept and even to endorse the notion that there is a certain indeterminacy about our experience that cannot be evaded no matter how cautiously we proceed.

On this view, it is not so much the place of difference and individuality in the Continental sense that is understood as the root of the problem, but the existence of a different kind of plurality. Given that the tradition has issued in any number of distinguishable and sometimes conflicting frameworks for explanation and description, Kuhn, Goodman, Rorty, and others, ask how we are to distinguish among them. If there is no ultimate or objective truth against which these various schemata can be judged, how are we to decide which is the right one? Must we abandon the notion that there is such a thing as the right one? Of course, there are various answers to these questions, but at the extremes of this end of the spectrum, there seems to be a growing consensus that, because there is no clear way of judging among competing theories, we must accept the fact that part of what has traditionally been understood as one of philosophy's primary tasks should simply be abandoned. Understanding epistemology as the attempt to identify the "right" theory, we are told that such a project must be abandoned along with the notion of correspondence as the fundamental criterion for truth.

The "indeterminacy" to be found in this sort of view also seems to arise from a continuing commitment to determinacy as a basic character of any intelligible account. We are presented with a plurality of determinate frameworks that are supposed to stand independent of one another. When it turns out to be impossible to establish the ascendancy of any single framework, it is suggested that no such determination can be made, and that we should instead accept the notion that there exists an array of alternative frameworks, each suited in one fashion or another to its own context and procedures. Although these frameworks are bounded and defined when considered in themselves, the larger picture is one that lacks definition or determinacy just to the extent that the possibility of transcendent ontological criteria has been abandoned. The indeterminacy of this picture is importantly distinct from that typical of the Continental tradition mentioned previously, however, in that there appears to be no insistence that it arises out of the nature of Being itself, but should be understood as a function of our attempts to understand, or of the relation between Thought and Being. Still, it is an indeterminacy in experience, at least in reflective experience, that is represented as inevitable and as carrying significant consequences along with it, not least of which is the transformation of the philosophical project as already mentioned.

Now all of these views deserve much more careful treatment than I have time to give them here. I believe that important insights are to be gained from most if not all of them and shall take up a more direct consideration of

them in the third book of this trilogy. The point in mentioning them now is to try to give the reader some sense of why I have undertaken the project of the present essay. It seems to me that we have not considered with sufficient care the nature of the crucial ontological principles and concepts that shape this current dialogue as they have shaped much of the tradition to which it responds. It may well be that understanding itself issues in a certain indeterminacy or uncovers such a dimension within being or both, but it is not for the reasons that either side of the "postmodern debate" has offered. There is no reason to abandon ourselves to the notion that the world is mysterious (in the sense of concealing itself from us) any more than there is to suppose that the character of knowing itself lies somehow beyond our reach. Both of these notions rest upon the more fundamental idea that intelligibility must be by definition determinate, and can be seen as functions of the quite reasonable suggestion that there are dimensions of our experience that are recalcitrantly indeterminate. I want to argue that the difference celebrated by one side of the spectrum, and the plurality insisted upon by the other, are both functions of the structure of determinacy itself, and of its necessary ontological relation to indeterminacy. It is quite legitimate to argue that we cannot neglect—much less eradicate—indeterminacy as a crucial and natural part of our experience, but this does not in the least mean that we must surrender ourselves to the idea that the world cannot be known, or that the task of philosophy is futile.

We must simply attend more carefully to the character of our own understanding, recognizing within it echoes of the nature of the world that we seek to know. Indeterminacy is as natural a part of the order of thought as it is of the order of being; and since at the deepest level of reflection, the line between thought and being is at most an artificial one, there is no point in trying to argue that the inevitable play between determinacy and indeterminacy is any more a function of the one than of the other. We must turn to a close investigation of the fundamental ontological structure of the relation between determinacy and indeterminacy if we are to understand how and why our attempts to know the world in an exclusively determinate manner have failed, beginning to see that far from signaling the "end of philosophy," this means only that it is time for another fundamental reassessment of our continuing attempt to know.

I believe that a misunderstanding of the relation between determinacy and indeterminacy has led to a pervasive misunderstanding of the logical structure of intelligibility itself that has infected the Western philosophical tradition from its inception. In neglecting the *ontological reciprocity* of the relation between the determinate and indeterminate dimensions of thought and being, we have consistently led ourselves astray. Throughout most of the tradition this mistake has emerged in the guise of a constant and unquestioning acceptance of the notion that all of our most basic paradigms for