

BERGSON AND THE HORROR OF THE VOID

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This commentary on Bergson's essay 'The Possible and the Real' does not directly refer to the vast literature on Bergson. That is, I have written as if the essay had been published a month ago and no one had commented on it so far. At the end of my contribution, I do refer to some texts on Bergson that I find significant, although, in my opinion, they have no relevance to the argument I develop in this text.

A brief essay by Henri Bergson, 'The Possible and the Real' (published 1930)¹ is enjoying particular success today, especially in Italy. I don't agree with Bergson's approach, but I am interested in analysing the text to understand this success, the persuasive power it wields on so many.

Bergson basically attacks the idea, which he thinks is widespread both among common individuals and philosophers, that if something happens in reality it does so because it was always possible; that everything that happens already existed virtually and that reality only adds a plus of existence to mere possibility: 'there is the idea that the possible is less than the real, and that, for this reason, the possibility of things precedes their existence' (location 1488). According to Bergson this is an absurdity, because 'the possible is simply the real with, in addition, a mental act that casts its image into the past once it has been produced' (loc. 1493).

¹ This was first delivered at Oxford University on 24th September 1920. It was later rewritten and published in Swedish translation as 'Skapandet och det nya' (*Nordisk tidskrift för vetenskap* N.S. 6: 441-56, 1930) and later, in French, as 'Le possible et le réel' (*La Pensée et le Mouvant. Essais et Conférences*, Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1934); and in English as 'The possible and the Real' (trans) M. Andison (*The Creative Mind* 73-86, New York: Philosophical Library, 1946). References are to the eBook in the original French. An English translation is also available as a web page at this link [http://bergsonian.org/the-possible-and-the-real/Bergson, H. \(1930\). Skapandet och det nya Nordisk tidskrift för vetenskap N.S. 6: 441-56](http://bergsonian.org/the-possible-and-the-real/Bergson, H. (1930). Skapandet och det nya Nordisk tidskrift för vetenskap N.S. 6: 441-56).

Bergson also tells us an anecdote of when a journalist asked him how he conceived the future of literature, in particular the great dramatic works of tomorrow, to which he replied: ‘If I knew what the great dramatic works of tomorrow will be, I would write them’ (loc. 1499). In other words, the future is unpredictable because it is inscribed neither in the past nor in the present. Therefore, it doesn’t even exist as a possibility, for every real event is something completely new, an act of creation, not of mere fabrication. ‘As reality creates itself, unforeseeable and new, its image reflects behind it into the indefinite past; it finds itself having been, for all time, possible. [...] The possible is thus the mirage of the present in the past’ (loc. 1510).

Now, it so happens that the category of the possible is treated as part of so-called modal logic, the logic of modes of being. Bergson called the essay ‘The Possible and the Real’, but his real is actually what modal logic calls the contingent. The other two modes are the Impossible and the necessary. Here Bergson evokes the impossible, when he concedes that something ‘was surely possible before it was realized, if you mean by this that there was no insurmountable obstacle to its realization’ (loc. 1526). ‘In this particular sense, we call possible whatever is not impossible. Therefore, it is a tautology [*truisme*] to say that something’s possibility precedes its reality: you simply mean by this that the obstacles, having been surmounted, were surmountable’ (loc. 1531). In fact, we take the impossible in the pragmatic sense of something insurmountable: making a circular square presents insurmountable difficulties. But then, I could say, the problem arises of knowing why something is insurmountable (impossible) like the circular square, whereas, for example, the realization of a centaur is possible in the sense that it can become a contingent being. Would Bergson concede that the existence of a centaur is ultimately possible? He could perhaps say that somehow the centaur does exist, as it lives in literary and artistic history; but our question regards the possibility of a centaur’s biological existence. Now, to admit in logic that the existence of a centaur is possible is equivalent to saying that there could be a world in which centaurs exist, in the sense that this possibility cannot be excluded a priori. If you think that something that came into being was always possible, you also think that many more things are possible that will never de facto come into being.

Bergson does not talk about the necessary, yet what he argues implies a thesis that is under certain aspects quite unique: that what we call possible is always necessary. In fact, if everything that becomes contingent, a thing of the world, is ipso facto conceived of as possible – will have been possible, in the future perfect – everything that exists is necessarily possible.

If instead we imagine something that will never come into being, like a centaur (but who can vouch for that?), we have to conclude, following Bergson, that it is necessarily not possible, necessarily impossible.

Bergson's entire polemical argument is actually based on criticizing the conception according to which possibility exists before reality. But the point is: which philosophers maintain such a theory? Significantly, Bergson doesn't mention any. He considers this idea part of common sense. But is it really? When in common speech we say, 'it's possible that it'll rain tomorrow', do we mean that rain pre-exists as a possibility? Only a quirky philosopher could say this. What would the sense of pre-exist be here? That of possibility of existence, i.e. its existing is confused with its being possible: one doesn't presume a possible beforehand and then its existence as the only possible possible. The only relationship being a possibility has with being contingent is one of homonymy.

Of course, when we say that something is possible we simply mean that its realization is not impossible. Is this a tautology? But if we look at the purely logical sense of a concept or category, we always find ourselves before tautologies. This is what Wittgenstein (1922) pointed out in the *Tractatus* – published nine years before this Bergson essay – when he said that logical truths are tautologies. The fact we use logic, and the logical instrument that is mathematics, to describe the world doesn't take away the fact that logic doesn't tell us anything about the world directly, and so that it doesn't tell us anything about what exists. Now, modal categories find their sense insofar as each category is definable in relation to the others in a circular way. We can define the possible as something non-contingent for which it is not impossible to become contingent in the future, though it will not necessarily do so. As we can see, we define the mode of the possible through the other three modes. And we could give analogous definitions of each other mode. We can define the contingent as the non-impossibility that comes into being but not necessarily. By saying this we are not making any ontological statements on being, we are not saying that something exists first as possible and then as contingent, we are only saying that its contingency logically implies its possibility, but not its necessity. In the same way, we can define the possible as a non-impossible that is not and never has been contingent. And so forth.

After all, logic formalizes – militarizes, Gilbert Ryle said – common language. When we say 'it's possible it'll rain tomorrow' we are implicitly defining an uncertainty on the contingent

appearance or non-appearance of rain. And, if the following day it really does rain, we can say, pleonastically, without contradicting ourselves, that if it is raining it is because raining was possible. Uncertainty on the realizability of possible things is part of the shared meaning of the term possible.

Now, Bergson claims his use of the term ‘possible’ is different from that of common language, and hence of logic. He implicitly proposes a definition of the possible according to which it is only given retroactively starting from contingent events; in this way he excludes – arbitrarily – the fact that something that does not come in to realization is possible. If I say ‘it’s possible that it’ll rain tomorrow’ and then it fails to rain, according to the language we’ve used since we were children, the raining does not cease to have been possible because of this failure. Now, this restricted sense of the possible Bergson proposes inevitably turns the possible into something pleonastic, a plus, as he calls it, or the retroactive effect of all that is contingent and of what is contingent alone. But his critique invests his eccentric conception of the possible, not the logical conception or the common.

It is true that this purely logical foundation allows us to build ontologies, and we know full well that in philosophy there are several ontologies that employ logic modes. Ontologies diverge because, as we’re aware, some consider that everything that exists necessarily exists, because anything unnecessary would never have existed. On the other hand, there is an ontology according to which everything that is contingent is never necessary, because necessity is exclusively logical (this is the position of logical positivism). But these theses are ontological elaborations of a merely logical distinction, which distinguishes between contingent, possible, impossible, and necessary leaving the problem of their intersecting open. We can therefore logically say that all that is contingent was possible too, because, if it is contingent, it means that it was not impossible. These are formal attributions, not ontological ones.

In short, Bergson gives the possible an ontological sense, interpreting it as an inferior mode of being to the contingent. But the possible, as we’ve seen, is above all a logical mode. We can say that what occurs was in any case possible as a corollary of the definition of possible in itself, in the same way as the fact that Pythagoras’ theorem on squares constructed on the catheti and on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is a merely logical (necessary) consequence of the very definition of right-angled triangle. This was not properly a discovery, it was the recognition of a logical consequence. There is no need to say that possible things are a form,

albeit a belittled one, of existence, because here it is the very sense of existence that teeters, so it becomes futile even to challenge this statement. For instance, is the probability of a particular event – that, for example, when we launch a die there is a probability of 1 out of 6 that one of its sides will end up on top – a form of existence that precedes the real event, the real launch of the die? Even if we never will launch a die, this probability would always exist, because it calculates the expected results of us actually launching a die. The existence of a probability, which is a calculation of possibilities, is neither a physical nor a mental existence, it is a purely symbolic existence connected to certain expectations we have.

Before thematizing the relationship between possible and real (or contingent), Bergson thoroughly criticized what is considered the quintessential metaphysical question: ‘why the entity rather than nothing?’ In fact, Bergson formulates it not as a question but as the statement of a possibility: ‘there could have been nothing’. In his opinion, when we deal with this problem, we virtually accept an absurdity. Nothing has actually no meaning here, because in common language “nothing” designates the absence of whatever we were looking for, or wanted, or expected’ (loc. 1440). Here Bergson identifies nothing with the void, which is something after all, but there is no void because we perceive and conceive only fullness. Conceiving nothingness is equivalent to suppressing everything that is. But for him to suppress merely means to replace. (I suppose that for him to suppress someone, in the sense of killing them, means to replace them with someone else. With what? With a corpse?) In his opinion, when we say we have suppressed something, it means that we focus on the part that has been replaced, the one that interests us, and not on the part that has taken its place. Now, ‘if the idea of suppression² is only the truncated idea of substitution, then talk of the suppression of everything is talk of a substitution that isn’t a substitution, a self-contradiction’ (loc. 1456). So doing, first we laid the whole, then we made each of its parts disappear one by one, without allowing ourselves to see what was replacing it. Totalizing absence therefore amounts to rearranging the totality of presences into a new order that we find, however, unsatisfactory, it amounts to ‘having vowed never to consider anything but the emptiness of its own dissatisfaction, rather than the fullness of things’ (loc. 1462). The idea of Nothing then implies as much matter (?) as that of All, with an added thinking operation. The error, according to Bergson, consists in believing that there is less in the idea of void than in the idea of fullness; and this error, he says, becomes generalized when we think that the possible is less than the

² In the English translation I refer to suppression is rendered with disappearance.

real, and that for this reason the possibility of things precedes their existence. The All, he believes, enriches the Nothing in the same way as the real (the contingent) enriches the possible.

Now, Bergson's entire argument is based on one axiom: on the negation of absolute suppression, which for him is always uniquely a substitution. An axiom, however, that we are by no means obliged to accept. Why should we rule out that something can disappear without being replaced? I gave the example of someone's death: can we say that dying is a mere substitution because the molecules of the body will take on a different shape? This is true at the physical level, but we are justified in saying that something – that person – has disappeared. To Bergson's metaphysics I frankly prefer that of common individuals.

That nothing is really suppressed and that everything is merely replaced is indeed the premise not of modern physics but of how modern physics thinks of itself. Physics believes it is based on the postulate of the conservation of energy, which in the universe (assuming that the universe isn't closed) never increases or decreases in its totality. According to physics nothing is created and nothing is destroyed, everything is transformed (but the insolvable problem of explaining why everything is transformed remains). This is not something based on empirical data, but a postulate, an epistemological challenge, I would call it. If something, i.e. some energy, seemed to disappear and come into being beginning from nothing, then physics could not accept it: it would have to trace the apparent creation or destruction back to a transformation of energy. But this goes for physics; philosophy is not obliged to axiomatize something of this kind. Because the philosopher's job is something different from the physicist's. There is no reason why we should exclude a priori that an absolute event, a creation, can exist, in the same way as an absolute disappearance. The philosopher cannot say that an absence, which is in any case something, has replaced something that has disappeared, because absence is in fact a relative term: it denotes that something is absent, but without implying that absence exists in its place. Bergson's entire argument is therefore based on an ontological premise – that there is only fullness, never the void – and we have to take it or leave it, without evidence. I would rather leave it.

Rejecting Bergson's argument is by no means equivalent to saying that the metaphysical question 'why the entity rather than nothing?' is a real question, in the sense that an answer is possible. Of course, there will never be an answer to such a question. A similar question could

be ‘why is the world thus and not otherwise?’ This question implies exactly what Bergson excludes, i.e. that other possible worlds are conceivable; and nothingness is just one of an infinite number of possible worlds that are not our world, the real world, the contingent world. Nothingness is the extreme case of the world’s being otherwise.

Now, the question ‘why is the world thus and not otherwise?’ is the question at the root of all scientific research. We do science because we feel it is our duty to explain (?) why the things of the world behave as they do and not otherwise, why they are what they are and not something else. We call this need to explain the world a search for the causes. There can be several types of causes, and hence various types of explanations. Aristotle, for instance, distinguished between four causes (material, formal, efficient, final). One may object: science aims at explaining things and the processes of the world, not the existence of the world as a whole. But explaining the world in its totality is nothing but the hyperbolic generalization of all scientific questions, ‘why this and not that?’, and for logical reasons we know there is no answer to this question. But it is a question that remains implicit to every philosophical query. At one time it was an explicit question, so entire metaphysics were developed with the aim of explaining the reasons why the world is necessarily what it is, perhaps even resorting to God, or, as Leibniz did, to purely logical instruments. With Kant philosophy gave up on wanting to answer this question, but it still emerges, despite Bergson’s arguments, in a way I would define oblique.

In his conference on ethics, Wittgenstein states that describing the essence of ethics is not a philosophical task because ethics lies outside the limits of the world, and hence of signifying language (Wittgenstein 1966). But he evokes certain sensations, which, though they clearly state nothing on ethics, try help us gather his logical, I would call it, placement. Among other things he evokes his sense of wonder at the existence of the world. From where does this wonder arise? Does it not imply that very metaphysical question ‘could there be nothing’? Wittgenstein doesn’t formulate it, but he seems to leave it lying in the background, otherwise it would be hard to understand his sense of wonder. Wittgenstein would certainly agree with Bergson that the metaphysical question should not be posed, yet at the same time it seems to be in the wake of that illogical, irrational, sentiment that Wittgenstein connects to the ethical dimension. The difference is that while Bergson mocks the wonder for the contingency of the world, Wittgenstein takes it seriously as an *unheimlich*, uncanny, sentiment, as Freud would have said (Freud 1919). The uncanny means sensing a distressing foreignness in what is actually the most intimate part of ourselves. The wonder Wittgenstein speaks about means

sensing a sort of illogical impossibility in what is our contingency, i.e. in our home, *Heim*: which is the world. The philosophical question is uncanny because it problematizes what cannot be problematized, the entity which is.

For Aristotle philosophical enquiry stems from *thaumazein* (Met. 982b) from wonder itself. He mentions puppets and solstices as inspiring wonder. But he also adds that wonder is only the beginning of enquiry, its impulse: the sense of wonder before a puppet show or a solstice eventually disappears when it is explained. In the same way, philosophy aims at dissipating wonder. For Wittgenstein on the other hand, it would seem that this wonder should endure, however irrational it may be. It is after all a sentiment, not an enunciation. In this sense we can say that Bergson falls into the error of considering there could be nothing a rational statement that should be explored from the philosophical point of view, while it only has the semblance of a philosophical statement, without being for this reason entirely unjustified or irrational: it expresses an uncanny sensation. The unjustifiable feeling of wonder at the existence of the world. Bergson mistakes for a question that requires an answer a statement that derives from what Wittgenstein (1929) calls ‘the miracle of language’: thanks to language the world appears miraculous. Thanks to language the world ceases to be something to take for granted. Language, and hence modal logic, produces metaphysics as its halo.

Another point dear to Bergson is denying disorder, and hence to reject the question ‘why is the universe orderly?’ In the same way as he denies the existence of the void, he denies that of disorder. For him here too there is no suppression – in this case of order – but the replacement of one order with another: ‘Disorder is simply the order we weren’t looking for’. ‘Disorder thus always comprises of two things: first, external to ourselves, an order; second, internal to ourselves, the picture of a different order that alone interests us’ (loc. 1467).

Now, it so happens that the concept of order/disorder is fundamental in physics. According to thermodynamics the universe as a closed system tends towards a degradation of energy, towards entropy, i.e. an orderly energy turns irreversibly into a disorderly energy, heat. But what does disorder mean in physics? It means that the law, the rule, that describes the organisation of the parts of a whole becomes more and more complex. Heat is chaotic, which means that in a certain sense it is always possible, in theory, to find an order there – Bergson would have been right on this – but an order so complex that no human mind could access it. In other words, order and disorder are anthropocentric concepts, pragmatic ones if we wish:

they have to do with our ability to find increasingly complex rules of distribution. But this means that we can legitimately speak of disorder: as a maximization of a complexity. Order and disorder are a question of degrees, as we all know from our own concrete experiences. A room can be more or less orderly. And in fact, the physical concepts of order and disorder follow the common linguistic usage of these words, which philosophy has no reason to challenge.

The point is that here too Bergson gives an ontological sense to concepts, such as order versus disorder, that describe a relationship of ours with an understanding of the world. So, he writes that ‘the concept of an order coming to add itself onto an “absence of order” implies an absurdity’ (loc. 1478). But who or what states such a thesis? Perhaps the Bible with the *Book of Genesis*, which describes the divine creation of the world starting from a chaotic mixture; but certainly not any philosophies. At any rate, that we may marvel at the order of the world is not absurd according to modern physics. It so happens that entropy, disorder, is the most probable state, whilst an orderly world – as our one appears to us – is highly improbable. And in fact, physics has a basic difficulty in telling us how it came about that our universe – if it is closed – was born as something highly improbable. More than ever physics makes us wonder at the world.

But why does Bergson care so much about his arguments on the possible, disorder and nothingness despite their fragility? Because, as he says himself in the same article, what ultimately interests him is opposing science’s vision of the world an alternative one, his own. The vision he attributes to science is deterministic, in the sense that it considers the present an effect of the past; to this Bergson opposes his own creationist vision. Essentially, what he developed is a vision of the world alternative to science’s. He probably failed to notice that quantum physics – the most important scientific achievement of our epoch - was beginning to bloom with its fundamentally non-deterministic vision of the world.

The 20th century was the century of the greatest developments in science and technology and never had science enjoyed so much prestige until then. But to balance that it also produced philosophies radically opposed to science. The most important of these is surely phenomenology. ‘The first rule... which Husserl set for an emerging phenomenology is first and foremost the disavowal of science’, (Merleau-Ponty 1945: 8). Because for Husserl the real rigorous science was phenomenology, not ‘European sciences’ (Husserl 1936), i.e. the present-

time sciences. In short, science and phenomenology are simply two different games, two competing conflicting discourses. We can consider Bergsonism too a form – one I consider minor – of philosophy alternative to science. Which is something unique to the twentieth century, because practically no philosophy before then had promoted itself as a refutation of a scientific vision of the world. Certainly not German idealism. It is on a background of wanting to create a vision of the world alternative to the one modern science is based on that we need to place Bergson's thought. He opposes the idea that present and future are prefigured in the past, that time is running a pre-written programme. But he was trying to kick down a door which was being opened just then, that of a non-deterministic science. (quantum physics). Most twentieth century philosophy was a rather *revanchist* reaction against the primacy of science.

Science had substantially gambled on determinism, true, i.e. on the idea that every event has a cause and hence that events occur according to laws of nature. But it was precisely that, a gamble, a premise of the game of science, like that of energy conservation. This gamble – or paradigm, if you prefer – can be criticised philosophically, but it would be like criticizing the fact that the game of chess is based on a set of rules... If you want to play chess, it is those rules you have to follow, it would make no sense to challenge them. Determinism was a rule of the game of science, one that still partially stands today (at the macroscopic level of the world), and one that has produced successful enunciations, i.e. statements that produce accurate predictions and make it possible to produce more and more sophisticated machines. Any philosophical criticism crashes against the practical effectiveness of scientific enunciations. Bergson, who sympathized with a certain American pragmatism (William James), would have agreed.

The deterministic programme is limited by non-deterministic phenomena, true, like the principle of indeterminacy in quantum mechanics (the position and the velocity of a particle cannot both be measured exactly) or Bohr's complementarity principle, but it is remarkable that these limits of determinism, which science itself established, by no means undermine quantum mechanics, from which they derive, precisely because quantum mechanics makes successful predictions. What is important is for science to predict, even beyond a deterministic framework. As long as a game works, areas of exception and even of paradox can be tolerated. In fact, quantum physics allows predictions which are almost miraculously accurate, this suffices to confer prestige to the vision of nature it is based on, which is the vision of science.

Like Bergson, we can of course develop an image of nature alternative to the *Weltanschauung* of modern science, but these will always de facto lose out, because from Bergson's vision, and from all other visions of the world, we cannot formulate predictions nor build machines. This is why a part of modern philosophy has relinquished wanting to construct images of the world alternative to today's science, because it is impossible to compete with science on the metaphysical plain. The image of things science gives us – considering its practical successes – will always be more convincing than any philosophical alternative. I personally prefer scientific ontologies to philosophical ones. I would go as far as saying that philosophical ontologies (not in the Heideggerian sense) don't interest me at all. Building an ontology is by no means, in my opinion, the job of philosophy.

I think that today the function of philosophy needs to change, in the same way as the function of art, especially of painting and sculpture, had to change after the advent of photography and the cinema. We went from the figurative arts to an art that no longer depicts anything. Rather than opposing to the metaphysics of science an alternative metaphysics, philosophy ought to ask, for example, what scientific practice really consists of, how it structures itself, what its limits could be. In other words, investigate the constituent choices of the scientific gamble with respect to the real. And it ought to dwell on other matters that science doesn't deal with at all.

Why then do some prefer a vision such as Bergson's – creationist evolution, the *élan vital* – to the vision on which science is based? Not on the basis of philosophical arguments, which can always be overturned, as we saw, but because it is the vision of the world they prefer. Some find more pleasure in thinking about the world in Bergsonian terms and find scientific determinism unpalatable. They find pleasure in thinking about the world in terms of a continuous creation of new events, rather than as a causal chain, however complex, of events.

Some are attracted to this vision because it allows us to think about nature on the model of human creation. Significantly, Bergson evokes *Hamlet*: he points out that the prince is indeed a pure creation. The play is not the realization of a potential *Hamlet*. Now, we can certainly accept the idea that *Hamlet*, and any human work or invention, are creations, unpredictable emergences. But this by no means excludes that on the other hand science can ponder all the cerebral processes in Shakespeare's head that led him to write just that play. It would be an impossible enterprise, of course, but one that is along the lines of a scientific project.

Let's take the action of flipping a coin: no machine, however powerful, could ever predict the outcome, heads or tails, because there are too many variables at play³. We would need a practically infinite calculator to make the prediction. Yet we by no means exclude the fact that the flip of a coin is a deterministic process, because that's the model for macroscopic events that science offers. Determinism by no means coincides with predictability: we can think of plenty of deterministic processes that are not predictable because there are too many factors at play for us to calculate an outcome. Conversely, quantum physics makes non-deterministic processes predictable. Predictability and determinism don't overlap exactly. So, it would not shock me in any way if a neuroscientist tried to reconstruct all the cerebral processes that led to writing *Hamlet*, despite knowing the endeavour would be doomed to failure. We can therefore say that the work of a human mind is a creation, yet, at another level, we can also admit that it is the effect of a determinism. Are we obliged to choose between these two ontologies?

But Bergson's vision is popular because it rethinks nature as analogous to human creation, as if it were a work of art. A vision that many find elating. In it human beings become so central, so supreme, that nature itself appears in their likeness. Hence Bergson's philosophy too is a sign of the times, i.e. of a growing humanization, in many ways stifling, of the planet. Bergson's creationist fervour appears as the philosophical sublimation of this progressive humanization thanks to which nature itself is conceived according to the model of human activism. And which generated the technological colonization of all of nature, something that, however, terrifies us today.

Personally, I am not fond of Bergson's vision. Precisely because it is based on an exclusion of the void, of nothingness and of disorder, which I think are the salt of our relationship to the world. Paradoxically, this ever new world, this continuous creation Bergson musters up, gives us the image of a dense, solid nature, without the hollows of the void, of the possible, of nothingness and disorder. In Bergson's world beings do not breathe, we are always crushed by an ever new present, but one that leaves no openings for the negative, for the doubt it could not have been. Yet it is precisely the presence of a certain negativity, of a certain emptiness, that's at the root of human creativity.

³ Concerning this problem, see Prigogine and Stengers (1988).

The possible, which Bergson considers an almost pleonastic plus compared to the contingent, is that whiff of non-being that makes beings move. The human world changes precisely because at one point we consider the world we live in just one of many possible worlds, we realize there are other possibilities. It is by imagining other (and not yet real) possible schemes that we can change things, creating something new. It is what history constantly shows. The world had always had masters and slaves, it was something that had been naturalized; then, at one point, someone thought of a new possible world – one that sounded incredible at the time – one without slaves. It had always been taken for granted that women were intellectually inferior to men, but then this was put into question and other possibilities were considered.

In *The Man Without Qualities* Robert Musil described the difference between men of the real and men of the possible. I side with the latter. The possible is the oxygen of the human being's relationship with the world.

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Abbreviations

Arist. Met. *Aristotle. Metaphysics, Volume I: Books 1-9* (trans) H. Tredennick. Loeb Classical Library 271. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933.

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