

**Einstein's Quandary, Socrates' Irony, and Jesus' Laughter:**  
**a 'post-modern' meditation on faith, reason, love,**  
**and the paradox of the One and the Many**

**Richard Oxenberg**

Let us begin with a brief quotation from Emmanuel Levinas, which will serve as our theme for the following reflections:

**Being is produced as multiple and as split into same and other; this is its ultimate structure. It is society, and hence it is time. We thus leave the philosophy of Parmenidean being.<sup>1</sup>**

**I. Einstein's Quandary**

In a small book presenting his theory of relativity to the layperson, Albert Einstein suggests that the reason many people have trouble grasping his theory is not so much that it is difficult to understand as that it is difficult to believe.<sup>2</sup> He is referring, specifically, to the theory's prediction that as one approaches the speed of light time slows down and space contracts relative to a stationary observer. We are accustomed, of course, to supposing that time and space are universally constant and not subject to such variation. But Einstein suggests that this supposition is a mere prejudice arising from common experience. If, for instance, each time we boarded a train or plane we found that our watches slowed such that we always had to adjust them upon arrival at our destination, our expectations would be different and the theory would not seem so strange. What is strange about the theory is that it defies assumptions we have come to make on the basis of common experience. But these assumptions have not been rigorously grounded in reason.

On the other hand, the theory is not really that difficult to understand. That is to say, its conclusions follow directly from its premises as a matter of straightforward mathematical reasoning. Its premises, also, are fairly simple. Indeed, the premises of the theory of relativity are but two: First, that the laws of nature are the same everywhere, or, as it is put, the same in all 'frames of reference.' Second, that the speed of light is invariant and independent of the speed of the observer. It is this second premise that is the surprising one, but is confirmed by experiment, and entails that space and time themselves be variable so as to account for the invariance of the speed of light. Given the premises, the conclusions follow with logical necessity. Common sense belief, built up from common experience, may be baffled, but reason is satisfied. The results may be difficult to believe, but they are not difficult to understand.

One might think that Einstein's willingness to 'go where no mind has gone before' in pursuit of physical truth would have made it easy for him to accept the also surprising results of quantum physics, as they began to appear in the mid 1920's. And yet, as is well known, Einstein spent the greater part of his life resisting the probabilistic theories of the quantum physicists, declaring, in an oft quoted remark, that 'God does not play dice with the world.' It is generally conceded that Einstein lost the debate with Quantum physics, which remains, to this day, a bedstone of contemporary physical theory. And yet Einstein went to his grave denying that it could possibly be true.

Why? What was the difference between the theory of relativity and quantum theory such that the former was acceptable to Einstein and the latter so repugnant? Had he simply lost his youthful capacity to challenge common sense belief? Was the mature Einstein inflexible in a way that the younger Einstein was not? I don't think so. Rather,

the difference had to do with the rational intelligibility of the universe disclosed by each. To put it simply; whereas the theory of Relativity was difficult to 'believe' but not to 'understand,' quantum theory was, strictly speaking, *impossible* to understand. And it was so because it defied certain rudimentary principles of reason itself. To see this clearly we need to look at some of the core claims of Quantum theory. I am no physicist and so I can only present these claims in the most general terms; but I think this will suffice for our purposes.

At the core of Quantum theory is the idea that matter, at its base, behaves probabilistically rather than causally. That is to say; given an event, W, one of any number of events, say, X, Y or Z, may follow. And although it is possible to say with precision which of these events is most likely to follow, it is impossible to say with certainty which one will. This impossibility, furthermore, is not simply a result of our not knowing all the conditioning factors involved, such that, were we to learn them, we could then predict with certainty which event would follow. No, according to the Quantum theorists, probability goes 'all the way down'; it is the final word, or, perhaps more aptly, the first word, of material actuality. We live in a probabilistic, rather than in a strictly causal, universe, and no increase in our knowledge will alter this.

It is this that Einstein could not accept. And he could not accept it, I would suggest, because such radical probabilism defies one of the fundamental principles upon which all rational understanding rests: the principle of sufficient reason, which itself is an implication of the principle of identity. X, Y or Z *might* each follow from W, and if one now asks why, on some one occasion, X should follow as opposed to Z, or Z as opposed to Y, no reason can be given. The conditions giving rise to X are not wholly to be found

in W. Then where are they to be found? Nowhere apparently. Between W and its consequence there is a gap, a contingency, irresolvable in principle. At the base of material reality is a radical contingency; a something, apparently, conditioned by nothing. And yet all is not wild and random. Probability governs this contingency such that, in the macro world of our experience, regularity prevails, making life as we know it possible. But the *principle* of this regularity is, so it seems, an unresolvable mystery.

What this implies is that the universe is not perfectly predictable, and it is not perfectly predictable because it is not perfectly One. To the extent that we posit a one to one correspondence between cause and effect, it is possible to understand an effect as a mere continuance, a mere unfolding, of its cause. The effect manifests what is already latent, already implicit, in the cause itself; just as the conclusion to a deductive argument merely expresses what is already implicit in its premises. Where strict causality prevails the principle of identity, upon which all rational thought rests, is not violated. Cause and effect are ontologically One; dispersed through time but united in substance. Time itself is simply a 'stretching out' of this essentially changeless One, making it appear to be many. But its manyness is, strictly, illusory. Time is the moving image of a *timeless* eternity. And eternity is ultimately One.

But the radical probabilism of Quantum theory suggests something quite different. If we cannot know whether X, Y or Z will arise from W, then we cannot give a full account of X, should it occur, on the basis of W. This implies that there is a gap between W and its effect that must remain unaccounted for in principle. X is not simply the continuation of W. X is something different, something discontinuous. Thus, Reality is Many. But reality is not *simply* many, as if it were simply a plurality of *disconnected* Ones. For a

relation of probability obtains between W and X. Given W, one can say with what probability X will occur, which means that X is not wholly unrelated to W. W and X are related, but such that there is no perfect continuity between them. X, in some sense, emerges from W, and yet cannot be wholly accounted for on the basis of W. Given this gap between W and X, we cannot say that Reality is absolutely One. But given their relation, we cannot say that it is absolutely Many. It is, in some reason-defying way, One *and* Many, same *and* other.

And this, it seems, is what Einstein could not abide. "God is subtle," he wrote on one occasion, "but he is not malicious." And to the rational mind, set on deducing all of reality from eternally constant first principles, such mysterious contingency at the base of things can only seem like malice. It is almost as if Reality were thumbing its nose at Reason: 'Think you can figure me out? Think again!'

## **II. Socrates' Irony**

This is not the first time Reason has been stymied by empirical reality. Indeed the battle lines between Reason and Experience were first laid down some 2500 years ago by Parmenides, and its terms haven't changed all that much since. If one were to try to identify the epicenter of this conflict, one might suggest that it lies in what has been called the problem of 'the One and the Many,' which might more aptly be called: the problem of the One *as* the Many. It is, at its most general, the problem of *relation*.

In order for there to be relation there must be at least two terms *in* relation. The relation must be such that it both connects these terms and keeps them separate. If separation were to be eliminated the terms would collapse into One, and relation would

cease. If connection were to be eliminated the terms would dissolve into Many, which is to say, a plurality of isolated Ones, and again relation would cease. For relation to remain the *paradox* of the One and the Many must be preserved. The relation must hold apart what it holds together and hold together what it holds apart; without thereby becoming a term unto itself which would then, itself, need to be related. But such defies rational understanding. Ever since Parmenides, Reason has tried to resolve the paradox of relationality into either the One *or* the Many (which it can then understand as a plurality of Ones). Speaking broadly, the tendency toward the former might be called Parmenidean and the tendency toward the latter Heraclitian. And yet these seemingly contrary tendencies are not as dissimilar as they appear; for both have the effect of resolving the paradox through a denial of relationality itself.

It is the paradox of the One and the Many that seems to inform many of Socrates' famous 'what is x' questions. These questions all seek the unity, the essence, the *idea*, underlying the diversity of appearances, and do so because such diversity is seen as a barrier to knowledge, to rational apprehension. Only when diversity is reconciled under Unity will knowledge finally be realized.

And yet Socrates is well known for his irony, and ironically, it is his irony, not his knowledge, that is central to his famed wisdom. We all know the story: Socrates is told by the Oracle at Delphi that he is the wisest man in all of Athens. Knowing, however, that he really knows nothing for sure, he sets out to prove the Oracle wrong by interrogating the prominent citizens of Athens to find one more wise than he. Finally he realizes that he is indeed the wisest man in Athens, because, although he still knows

nothing for sure, he is the only one among them who knows at least this; i.e., who knows that he doesn't know.

Now this itself is an ironic result: that the highest wisdom should be in knowing that one doesn't know, and it is made the more ironic by the fact that others pretend to know and presume to know when they clearly do not. I've heard it suggested that Socrates' irony is really a kind of wise-acreism: Socrates really does know, and really knows that he knows, but he pretends not to know in order to make those he interrogates appear foolish. But such a suggestion does not do justice to the profundity of the Socratic irony. Strictly speaking, it is not Socrates who instigates the irony, but the situation itself that is inherently ironic. Socrates is just letting the irony show. In a sense, it is Reality itself, in being so difficult to know, in being so defiant of Reason, that is having a bit of a joke on everyone, Socrates included, and the only difference between Socrates and everyone else is that he's the only one who gets it. "The truth of the matter...", says Socrates, "is pretty certainly this, that real wisdom is the property of the God, and this oracle is his way of telling us that human wisdom has little or no value."<sup>3</sup>

And yet there is something even more ironic in the Socratic stance. For Socrates never abandons the quest. He does not yield to relativism, cynicism, or despair. He keeps plugging away. Underlying the Socratic irony, it seems, is the realization that something inherently unresolvable, the unknowability of Being, must, nevertheless, be pursued; that the pursuit itself is ennobling. And so, like the trauma victim who must continuously repeat the circumstances of her trauma in order to penetrate more and more deeply into its meaning, Socrates proceeds from person to person in Athens in order to prove, once again, that they and he do not know: "I still go about seeking and searching" says

Socrates, “in obedience to the divine command, if I think that anyone is wise, whether citizen or stranger, and when I think that any person is not wise, I try to help the cause of the God by proving that he is not.”<sup>4</sup>

But what is the cause of this God whom Socrates serves so avidly? The cause of this God, apparently, is to reveal to human beings their essential ignorance. And this, perhaps, is the ultimate irony: that the Socratic pursuit of wisdom, which launches Western philosophy, should have underlying it the realization that wisdom, at least as humans ordinarily conceive it, is not to be achieved. And yet, for Socrates, this is not an occasion for despair. On the contrary, the interminable *pursuit* of this essentially elusive wisdom is seen as the highest human endeavor. One senses that for Socrates the pursuit of a wisdom that can never be consummated is a kind of reverence, an ironical worship, of that which lies forever beyond Reason's grasp.

Thus Socrates' relation to the unknowable differs markedly from Einstein's. Whereas Einstein suspects Reality of malice, Socrates, it seems, is able to appreciate its irony. And this irony itself is valued: for it draws the human being on to ever-increasing but never-consummated self-understanding. It ennobles at the same time that it humbles. The Socratic irony is at once a humility and a nobility; a noble humility, and, hence, an ethical stance, a way of being in the midst of perplexity. For sure, there is *something* to know; and one is called upon to pursue it, but one must never suppose oneself to have finally found it. One must ever remain on the *way* to it.



### III. Jesus' Laughter

And yet something remains unsettled. Though Socrates knows that he doesn't know and even, apparently, that one cannot know, it is never entirely clear that he knows just *why* one cannot know, nor how one is to accommodate oneself to this essential not knowing. And so the elusive ideal of perfect knowledge remains ever in the background for both him and his student Plato; ready to craft the perfect kingdom, run by the perfect philosopher-king, if but given the chance.

And this marks a distinction between Jesus and Socrates; Jesus, whose 'kingdom' is not of this world. Because Jesus, I suggest, does know why. I must hasten to say that the biblical text I have in mind never actually tells us that Jesus laughs. This is my interpolation. What the text says is: "At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, 'I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children. Yes, Father, for this was your good pleasure.'"<sup>5</sup>

Now, we are never explicitly told what 'things' Jesus refers to when he speaks of 'these things' hidden from the wise and learned and revealed to children, but it seems clear from the context that Jesus is referring to what he takes to be Truth itself; the Truth that heals, the Truth that sets free. And the more we contemplate this passage the odder it seems. How is it that the wise and learned, who have made a career of seeking truth, should have failed to find it, and that the little children, who, we might suppose, have spent little time considering the matter, should have had it revealed to them? And why does Jesus praise God for this state of affairs? And why, finally, should all of this be accounted God's good pleasure?

We have here one of those surprising reversals the Bible seems so fond of. The little children receive, without trying apparently, what the wise and learned fail to achieve, for all their effort. But surely, whatever the little children have come to know, it cannot be what the wise and learned have been pursuing. We would not expect the little children to be able to discourse on quantum probability, or resolve Socrates' bemusement over universal terms. Then why bring the wise and learned into this at all? Why not simply thank God for whatever the little children have received and leave it at that? Why *contrast* them with the wise and learned?

The suggestion seems to be that whatever the little children have received is indeed what the wise and learned want, but that it is unavailable to the latter due to the manner in which they are trying to get it. And further, that this unavailability, under these circumstances, is a good thing, such that one might well thank God for their failure. But why? Is there, then, as the Delphic Oracle suggests, something wrong with the human pursuit of comprehensive knowledge, and with it what Levinas has called “the philosophy of Parmenidean being,” which encourages, but also, perhaps, arises from this pursuit?

Levinas and others have suggested there is. Indeed, any consolidation of the multiplicity of the universe into comprehensive unity, into a single system from which all might be predicted and controlled, would entail the eradication of something we do tend to consider rather important: the eradication of the person.

As Levinas has written, to be a person entails that one infinitely elude any attempt at final definition, any subsumption into unity or system. At the core of the person is a concerned freedom which cannot, and should not, be circumscribed by a concept. Such

freedom is the person's perennial disruption to any chain of causal necessity that would reduce him or her to a ripple in the cosmic sea. It is such concerned freedom that distinguishes a 'who' from a 'what,' a 'you' from a 'that.' And it is interesting to note that in such freedom we encounter, once again, the irrepressible paradox of the One and the Many.

In order for the person to have free will, personal state W must be such as to be capable of yielding some plurality of other possible states, say X, Y and Z, as options. But this means that whatever state does emerge from W, say X, cannot be wholly accounted for on the basis of W, for X excludes alternatives, Y and Z, that W itself does not exclude. Then what finally accounts for X? Why X rather than one of the other possibilities? We can supply no answer other than to say: because the person *decided* that it should be so. And in this appeal to *decision* as the final explanation, we encounter the ontological *irreducibility* of personhood.

True, we can attempt to escape this conclusion by insisting that, contrary to appearance, only one personal state, say X again, can follow from W. Then, of course, there is no free will and everything is determined. X follows necessarily from W. And W from V. And V from U, and so on. But even here there is a problem. For if we try to follow this trail all the way back we must arrive at something like 'the beginning.' But can there be an absolute beginning? Not according to the principle of sufficient reason, for what would account for it? How would the beginning itself have begun? We may try to escape this difficulty through positing an infinite regress: Perhaps there is no beginning but an endless series of one thing causing the next. But this doesn't work either, for in an infinite regress everything is dependent while there is nothing, finally, for everything to

depend upon. An infinity of things that cannot account for themselves does not amount to a thing that can. An infinity of zeros does not add up to one. To get around this we posit something that *can* account for itself, something that does not need to be brought into existence because it has *always* been: the eternal, timeless, *One*. But how can temporality issue forth from eternal timelessness, except by some movement, some change, in timelessness itself? How can the One, eternal timelessness, produce the Many, change, temporality? How, without change to the One? But if there is change in the One, then it is not *One*.<sup>6</sup>

There is no getting rid of the paradox. We shift it away from what we are immediately attending to only to find that it bubbles up elsewhere. And it is, perhaps, not coincidental that this paradox we cannot get rid of should lie at the very heart of what it is to be a person.

Nor is free will the only place where this paradox proves essential to personhood. We find it at the root of *inter*-personal relation as well; indeed, it lies at the very heart of the *love* relation. In order for there to be love the lovers must, of course, be connected, and yet they must, at the same time, remain distinct. Were connection to override separation the lovers would merge into a unity that would once again be alone. Were separation to override connection the lovers would become isolated. Love depends upon the paradox of the One and the Many, and in a particularly striking way. For it demands of us that we *not* try to resolve this paradox. To resolve the paradox in one way or the other, to try to subsume the other in the self or exclude the other from relation to the self, would destroy the love relation.

This paradox, then, turns out to be far more than a matter of theoretical concern. It is, indeed, the enigma that lies at the basis of personal freedom and interpersonal relation; that without which we could not be. The endeavor to resolve it turns out to be the endeavor to undo something essential to what and who we are. But why, then, have we been so keen on resolving it, on undoing its terms; these terms that are the basis of our very existence?

Perhaps we gain the deepest insight into this through a review of yet another version of this perennial paradox; that presented in Jean-Paul Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre recognizes in both personal freedom and interpersonal relation a 'nothingness' that threatens. He writes: "The being of consciousness qua consciousness is to exist *at a distance from itself* as a presence from itself, and this empty distance which being carries in its being is Nothingness. Thus in order for a *self* to exist, it is necessary that the unity of this being include its own nothingness as the nihilation of identity."<sup>7</sup> This nothingness intervenes between me and myself, separating me from my next moment, and between me and my world, separating me from others, to leave me at some distance, at some remove, from my own being. And yet, as Sartre also notes, this nothingness is the very condition for my freedom, my consciousness, my relations, and, hence, my personhood itself. Without it all would congeal in dead solidity, and life itself would cease. What Sartre calls 'nothingness,' then, turns out to be that very medium of relation which both separates and connects, without, thereby, becoming a term unto itself, which would itself need to be related.

But all is not well. Sartre's work reveals to us a new dimension to the paradox of the One and the Many, a darkly disturbing dimension. For in this paradox the person

encounters an absolute threat: the threat that he or she may be overwhelmed by the nothingness that separates; may plummet into this nothingness as into an abyss. This nothingness, this contingency, this gap, which is the very condition for my personhood, is also the possibility of my isolation, my rejection, my abandonment, my demise. In separating me from my next moment it places that next moment, and, thus, my life, forever beyond my firm grasp. In distancing me from the world on which I depend, and from the others with whom I must commune, it threatens to isolate me. Thus it places me in a perpetual state of risk: Perhaps I will be unable to bridge the gap; perhaps I will lose my connection; perhaps I will be abandoned, finally, to myself, my aloneness (my 'all-one-ness'); an 'all-one-ness' which, precisely because of the *need* for relation, cannot subsist in itself.

And another threat arises from this one: that in my endeavor to overcome this separation I will attempt to assimilate all otherness *into* myself – to dominate, control, and possess the other – and thereby violate the integrity of both self and other, and destroy the very possibility of love.

Sartre sees much of human life as the futile endeavor to overcome these threats by undoing the separation that threatens, an endeavor that is futile precisely because that which threatens me is also that which *allows* for me; my own being is threatened by the conditions for my own being.

Thus the paradox that may not be resolved is also a threat. But the threat itself is paradoxical: In the face of an ordinary threat one can achieve security by destroying that which threatens, but that option is not available here, for that which threatens is also that

which sustains. To undo the paradox would be my own undoing. Thus, it appears, there is no escape from the threat.

Or is there?

In Jesus' joyous exclamation is the suggestion that there is another way to overcome this threat, but one hidden from the rational calculations of the wise and learned. What cannot be rationally seized by the pursuers of domineering knowledge, is available, somehow, in the simple faith of the little child.

We must strive to rid this word 'faith' of the dust it has accumulated over millennia if we are to hear what it says anew. By showing us the paradox in its inter- and intra-personal colors, Sartre helps us to do so. The paradox that cannot be resolved is a paradox of relationship. Relationship is itself a One somehow inclusive of many. The One of relationship cannot be reduced to the many *in* relation, for then it would cease to hold the many together and relation itself would cease. But neither can the One absorb the many into itself, for then there would no longer be many and relation would also cease. So the paradox *as* a paradox must be maintained; indeed, from all we have seen, this paradox appears to reflect the deep nature of reality itself. And this brings us back to the quote from Levinas with which we began: "Being is produced as multiple and as split into same and other; this is its ultimate structure. It is society, and hence it is time. We thus leave the philosophy of Parmenidean being."

What Sartre and others have shown is that this ultimate structure of Being, this relational nature of reality – which makes personhood itself possible – poses an existential threat. We are afraid, both, of being subsumed in the One (and losing our personhood) and of being severed from the One (and losing our connection). Any

solution to this threat must be some mode of personal being – of being-in-the-world – affirmative of relationship itself. What must be affirmed is the transparent ground of relationship; that which, strictly speaking, is neither me nor you but stands between us – transcending us, grounding us, separating us, *and* connecting us.

To this unfathomable ground Jesus gives the name *Father*.

I suggest that the *faith* of which Jesus speaks – the faith to ‘walk on water’ – *is* just the radical affirmation and trust in this transcendent and inclusive ground; a ground that is, precisely, not a ground we can ever get to the bottom of, but an infinite and unfathomable depth. To trust this ground is to trust that – despite the nothingness that separates – one remains included, connected, held in love by the One who binds all that is separated together.

In the spontaneous openness of the little child Jesus sees the reality of such faith. In the simplicity of trust and love the little child spans the gap between self and other, and self and self, that no amount of ratiocination can ever bridge, and does so without seeking to dominate, without seeking to control, without seeking to possess the mysterious ground of love upon which healthful relationship rests.

Thus does the little child resolve the paradox that stymies the greatest masters! Surely this is the spectacle that makes Jesus laugh. Of course, there is no resolution here that would satisfy the scientist, or even the philosopher, but it is just this, apparently, for which Jesus thanks God. The wise and learned’s pursuit of domineering knowledge is the endeavor to close a gap that must forever remain open, for it is just this open gap through which life breathes. In the loving trustfulness of the child Jesus sees the power to affirm



what *may* not be rationally resolved, to walk upon the waters of relationality, whose fluidity and depth Reason can neither still nor fathom.

But who can hear such words? Are we not, all of us, in the position of Nicodemus who, upon hearing from Jesus that he must be born again, asked “but can a man enter twice into the womb?” How do we become again so *young*? What must we do, as twenty-first century adults living in a world of vast complexity, difficulty, and danger, to attain to such childlike trust and joy? What must we do spiritually, politically, economically, intellectually, ethically? How does one aspire to a kingdom “not of this world”? I do not profess to have the answer. And yet, with the breakdown of the philosophy of Parmenidean being, perhaps these are the questions we ‘post-moderns’ are now called upon to ask.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 269.

<sup>2</sup> See Albert Einstein and Leopold Infeld, *The Evolution of Physics; the growth of ideas from early concepts to relativity and quanta* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1938), chap. 3, "Field, Relativity."

<sup>3</sup> Plato, "Socrates' Defense (Apology)", trans. Hugh Tredennick, in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Bollington Series LXXI (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961), 23a.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 23b.

<sup>5</sup> Lk. 10:21, NIV (New International Version).

<sup>6</sup> This, it will be noted, is the paradox that led Kierkegaard to designate Christianity 'absurd'.

<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. H.E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, Simon & Schuster, 1956), 125.