

1. "At times the truth shines so brilliantly that we perceive it as clear as day. Matter and habit then draw a veil over our perception, and we return to a darkness almost as dense as before. We are like those who, though beholding frequent flashes of lightning, still find themselves in the thickest darkness of the night."  
Moses Maimonides

## Passing Through the Kingdom of Darkness

### I

Since the dawn of time, the human being has, naturally, been afraid of darkness. Though some more eccentric natures love the depth of the night, humans are ultimately creatures of the day, workers under the sun which is the ever-lasting source of life. So, naturally, light and darkness have been placeholders for good and evil as well as the higher and lower faculties of human nature.

Light is often employed as a metaphor for truth, in the most pragmatic sense: Humans get lost in the darkness, but find their way home in the light. We can see here that usefulness, i.e. pragmatism, has been the root of this concept of truth. To be right about something means to find your way home – and you really only can tell that you are wrong when you get lost, stumble or fall down. Many ancient people believed that vision works by light coming out of the eyes. This is the proper image of a pragmatic perspectivism which acknowledges the variety of perspectives in human knowledge. To speak metaphorically, everyone has to find his or her own way home, through various landscapes; and everyone should have his or her own lamp with him or her.

It was only when the Christians and the gnostics appeared that light became the metaphor for a quite different concept of truth as it is used by Moses Maimonides in the quote above: truth not as a guide in the practical matters of life, but as something beyond all these matters. In the gospel, Christ says: "I am the light, the truth and the life. Those who follow me shall not get lost in the darkness." A claim which ultimately denies the value of any form of truth which has been known before, of 'earthly wisdom'. And Augustine takes this even further when he compares God to a source of light and the world of evil to mere darkness without actual existence.

Light has been not only a metaphor for truth and wisdom, but for intellect and consciousness as well – which really is a whole different thing. It was in this sense that Arthur Schopenhauer said that the will-to-live has, in the higher animals, flicked on a light for itself: the intellect. The intellect might be said to be the potentiality of truth: it is what enables us to recognise truth – but it is also what enables us to fall prey to various errors.

For the fourth book of his magnificent work *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes chose the title "The Kingdom of Darkness". What he described in this book is, as he points out, not the absence of knowledge, science and thought – but *wrong* knowledge, science and thought (as turns out, mostly Aristotelian philosophy and catholic dogma). Plain ignorance, Hobbes explains, is harmless compared to mistakes in the higher orders of knowledge. We can observe this best, I think, in animals, who live without reason, i.e. the capacity of abstract thinking, and are limited to their immediate perception and sensual memory. While they are not able to plan for the future, establish controlled spheres of culture, or construct wheels, they are also free of the errors of human life, such as superstition, misconstruction and accidents. In much the same way, humans before the arrival of empirical science and industry were far less powerful in the face of nature we are today; but were also free of the ecological problems which arose out of the erroneous use of technology. Generally, the more powerful the intellect becomes, the greater the advantages as well as the disadvantages become. The wisdom and the foolery of the human race are two sides of the same progress. To put it

into the metaphorical terms: The brighter our light shines, the more we see: but we see much which can distract us from our way home.

As we concern ourselves with the challenging questions of the highest order, concerning philosophy or, for example, future technology, we often find ourselves confused. After a while, it is only natural to become skeptical about finding meaningful answers at all. We feel, as Maimonides writes, lost in the night, like passengers in the Kingdom of Darkness, and, naturally, are afraid. Therefore, some scientists assert that the human mind should humbly step back from philosophy and restrict itself to the questions of hard scientists. Similarly, some thinkers, most notably Guenther Anders, assert that it would have been better for the human race not to get into science and technology in the first place, as it is not able to use these tools responsibly. And most radically, pessimists like E. M. Cioran assert that consciousness really was a mistake in the first place.

It is always easy being a pessimist. And it is true that we all are passing through the Kingdom of Darkness, through the deepest night. But as Maimonides observes correctly, lightnings of truth break through the darkness, and we must not ignore them, but watch. Now that we have entered this course, there is no turning back. We cannot choose to forget what we have learned; we cannot resist the power over nature which we have tasted; we cannot give up our consciousness. We have eaten from the tree of knowledge, and we have to take the consequences. Instead of returning from the Kingdom of Darkness to where we came from, we have to pass through it – to the other side.

## II

Nature is, generally speaking, unconscious: Everyone of us was born out of a darkness to which he or she will some day return. Conscious life is, as Schopenhauer writes somewhere, just a lightning in the night, an illumination of the cosmos fading as quickly as it appeared. As we know today, this applies to the species just as it does to the individual. Billions of years have passed before the arrival of life on earth, and billions will pass when it will be gone. Cosmologically speaking, we are just using a rather short window of opportunity to understand what is going on. Why, the universe is nothing but a glimpse between two timeless states of eternal nothingness.

When we put it this way, the night was before we came and will return when we will be gone, but it is day now. But Maimonides seems to say the opposite, when we take light for consciousness. From the gnostic point of view, humans have lost the light of God when they were born in sin, and can only return to it in resignation and death. Humans are like children who ran into the night and lost their way in the darkness, and only see a light of hope in the distance to be guided by back home. What is the end of life? – Death. Is it also its purpose? If it were, we should get there as quickly as possible, right? But it would be like thinking that the purpose of a game is winning. The purpose of a game is playing. In the same way, the purpose of life is living itself.

This is why a strictly pragmatic concept of truth is problematic. The intellect is not a function of life in the sense that it must serve life's primitive purposes. It is just another mode of living, a comparatively young expression of life. If Darwinian pragmatism was true, one should think it better indeed to abstain from the higher stages of knowledge, as not to endanger the satisfaction of our primitive desires, i.e. finding the way home. Why, it would be better to return to the darkness of unconsciousness as quickly as possible so that no new desires appear.

The quote from Maimonides could as well be from Schopenhauer, who asserted that humans are prisoners in a world of desires which can never be fulfilled. Yet rare moments show us the possibility of resignation, of giving up all desires. Schopenhauer wants to get home quickly: He is tired of walking through the Kingdom of Darkness and needs to rest. But those who do not feel tired

of life must respond that the way home itself is the purpose of life. Poetically speaking, we are dancing towards home.

### III

There are two ways of reading Maimonides here. Maybe his point is just that our scope of knowledge is very limited, and that we often forget abstract knowledge in the face of everyday life. That is correct, but also not a very remarkable point. But it seems that he wants to say even more: That the whole sphere of everyday life is keeping us away from the truth, that the truth is somewhere 'behind' it, and only shines through sometimes. In the metaphysical sense of the Christian-gnostic tradition we must reject this thesis, as well as in the sense of platonism. A realm of the pure spirit is hardly to be thought, let alone to be proven.

But it is true in another way, maybe a different way than Maimonides thought of it, but probably still accounting for what he felt when writing it. When the intellect emerged, it often did so by a break in which the contact to its roots, to the more primitive part of our nature, suffered. Thus the conflict between instinct and morality, emotion and reason, practice and theory. As we develop intellectually, we experience this conflict, becoming divided creatures. Our everyday consciousness is often out of touch with our inherent nature. We are not listening to our body, for example. We ignore our feelings to obey an absurd rule which has been pushed into our conscience. We buy something we did not even want because we were told everyone needed it, and so on. The truth – i.e., what really matters to us, what we really feel like – then is hidden behind a darkness of knowledge.

In our day and age, we experience this more than ever. The internet has made tons of information available to the masses, which is great. But it can also distract us from our true interests. It is, however, possible to escape it: Sometimes one just has to put away one's phone for a while, do nothing and one starts to have new insights into one's self which are like the lightnings in Maimonides's night.

### IV

In the end of this essay, we arrive at two concepts of truth, and therefore two kinds of Kingdoms of Darkness we are passing through. The first is a strictly pragmatic concept, truth defined as helpfulness in the satisfaction of desires. This is the notion to which the Christian-gnostic tradition adheres as well, though in a supernatural way, when it offers final redemption. I am a pragmatist in the sense that truth proves itself in acting within the world, but not in the sense that it must serve a purpose. Acting in the world, living is ultimately something playful, something without purpose outside itself, even though the Kingdom of Life is hard and painful. "One has to take some things seriously, to have any amusement in life," as Oscar Wilde says; it is essential to the game.

I therefore adhere to the second concept of truth which concerns the connection of more primitive and more intellectual parts of human nature and culture. When we are missing it, we are passing through the Kingdom of Darkness Hobbes has talked about: not just ignorance, but wrong knowledge. It constitutes the greatness of the human being and the interest of life to try and console the parts of our nature by art, science and, most importantly, philosophy, instead of withdrawing from higher intellectual enterprises.

It is in philosophy (and, indeed, religion) that we find most wisdom which reconnects us to our own true nature, and, naturally, ideas which separate us the most from it. The former is good philosophy, where we find the lightnings; the latter is bad philosophy, which is the deepest night. It is only great

philosophy which brings together all parts of life, all spheres of existence, asserts the most primitive and the most intellectual parts of human nature not as counterparts, but as forming a whole being.

As we are passing through the Kingdom of Darkness, things might seem hopeless sometimes, and indeed, it might be that human nature will always be divided, that philosophy can only offer short days after long nights. But it is great to keep going, not be afraid of the darkness and to do one's best instead of withdrawing into another kind of darkness, into the night of the unconscious, the resting place of tired souls, which is so much deeper.