



The Heart of the World

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**We'll fall into a well without
parachute or compass and be the first
twin love in the world**

Metaphysics was meant to have died a long time ago, to have been awarded an esteemed position in the philosophical cannon but ushered off the stage of world-history with the King's head. But it is still to be found lurking persistently in the most public of places, hiding in the broad daylight of everyday speech and accepted ideas, in court rooms and the great offices of State. Metaphysics by definition concerns that above and beyond (*meta*) the coarse corporal facticity of everyday realities (*physics*) but paradoxically seems most comfortable propping up some form of political or social Order very much within the everyday sphere, embedding itself in their all-too-earthly foundations. Indeed, it is the very question of foundations to which Metaphysics addresses itself – *fundamental* questions that *transcend* fleeting everyday realities. Precisely by rising above the contingencies and finitude of vulgar physical existence Metaphysics occupies a more fundamental unchanging realm beneath the surface of everyday change. It is characterized therefore by a metaphoric flip flop where the realm of the *above and beyond* appears in a supporting role *beneath* – a strange movement of *transcendence* into more *foundational* level. This vertical *volt-face* from *above* to *below* has made Metaphysics a good friend to power. It has a much revered record in providing a ground for Order, a ground that is beyond question, or rather a ground in the question of the *beyond* that usefully avoids the pressing problems of the *here and now*. Indeed, Order frequently finds its legitimacy in a Metaphysical sleight-of-hand whereby the *beyond* is rendered *present* in the foundations of Order, here and now. Whether we look to God's representative on earth,

the People's representative in a suit, the Nation's destiny in the State or the sovereign Subject that bares universal rights we can find Metaphysics providing a *transcendental ground*, propping things up from above – *topping from the bottom* so to speak.

One particularly interesting aspect of this strange (topo)logical loop through which Metaphysics grounds Order is the reliance on metaphors of materiality – metaphors which bring the *out-of-the-world* back down to *earth*. The grounds that Metaphysics provides for Order are of course purely metaphorical given that Metaphysics concerns a realm beyond (*meta*) everyday reality (*physics*) and can appear only indirectly. Metaphor then provides an alchemic medium through which Metaphysics can appear in everyday reality – a kind of figurative ectoplasm. However, Metaphysics provides a foundation for Order only in so far as it is conceived as stable and unchanging, above the contingencies of everyday realities. It is at this point that metaphors of materiality play a crucial role. Perversely the unchanging and stable nature of the Metaphysical realm can only be expressed through material surrogates from within physical reality. We need only think here of the fundamental role that metaphors of ground and materiality play within the discourses of modern political Order. Through much of the Modern era Order has been *grounded* in the Nation State – *rooted* in an understanding of *territory* that bases Order upon *land* and *embeds* it within the *soil*. The history of the Nation State is soiled but also bloody. Historically the material space of the *body politic*, the collective body of the *population*, came to bear the transcendental categories of the Nation and the People on which Order was said to be founded. Today as the plates of State power are shifting the individual human body is considered the bearer of universal rights and becomes the nascent Subject of an emergent

form of Order. Likewise, contemporary cosmopolitans who herald a 'global age' of 'world unity' and 'common humanity' and proclaim that old *blood and soil* nationalisms have been transcended, ground their claims in relation to the supposed *unity of the globe*. In this logic the technological realization of the earth as a *planetary object* provides a *global foundation* for a new form of politics based upon the universal rights of a sovereign Subject freed from the Nation State. Try as it might to take flight of material contingencies Modern politics again and again re-inscribes itself within a metaphysics of ground in each new attempt to lay radical foundations for Order.

The manner in which Metaphors of materiality are mobilized in the Metaphysical grounding of Order has thus changed over time and often involves conflicting and competing accounts of where the transcendental is embodied within the brute facticity of finite existence. In every case however, the appeal to materiality is symptomatic of the need for Order to provide itself with some form of stable ground, an *arche*, on which meaning can be built and can refer back to; a foundation that provides both origin and horizon, secure roots and a sense of direction. Those material elements that are considered to have a stable integrity within everyday reality (ground, earth, land, the body, the planet, etc) come to stand in for the Metaphysical realm – called upon precisely because it provides a stability above and beyond this reality. Materiality operates through metaphor here as a kind of prosthetic Metaphysics. Thus, ironically whilst Metaphysics is marshalled to provide a transcendental ground for political Order it is in turn forced to ground itself on metaphors that reference the very material reality it is meant to transcend. The (topo)logical loop grounding political Order in Metaphysics operates through a metaphorical short circuit that

earth's power in the material contingencies it was designed to bypass. It is a loop full of holes.

The attempt to ground Order in Metaphysics, and hence escape the contingencies of everyday reality, would seem therefore to undermine itself in the need for Metaphysics to ground itself on metaphors of materiality – that which is very much of this reality. The viability of casting the transcendental as foundation would seem to hinge on whether or not materiality really can provide a stable rooted ground for Order? The answer it seems would clearly have to be no, it cannot. Such a grounding of Order in materiality would first of all imply a confusion of categories between the social and the natural, the political and the environmental. Whilst these categories are necessarily entwined in a variety of ways the former is never reducible to or fully determined by the latter, and conversely the former never has full mastery of the latter despite the techno-industrial hubris of the Modern era. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, there are many instances from epidemics to earthquakes, from nuclear disasters to environmental change, where materiality precisely creates the conditions for social and political instability, for the *ungrounding* of Order. These *ungroundings* inherent to materiality could be traced for example through the registers of the body, the atomic and the geological, to name but three. We need only think of the infinite fragility of the human body, its susceptibility to damage and disease, its vulnerability to violence and virus, its frail tissue of finite extent and duration and its capacity for mutation and hybrid relations with the non-human. These are conditions which clearly render the body an unsuitable material support for the transcendental grounds of Order, or even for the integrity of a supposedly sovereign Subject. On the other hand we could go straight to the heart of (the) matter

itself, to the very sub-atomic structure of the material universe. Material reality is no longer believed by many physicists to be composed of ever smaller and ever more essential particles that act as the building blocks of 'concrete' reality but rather to be composed of a changing set of relations bound together by an elusive 'non-stuff'. With powerful enough instruments we find at the heart of matter only the traces of its absence.

But perhaps it is most interesting to take the metaphor of ground literally and turn our gaze downward towards the earth. The solidity of the ground beneath our feet seems to present itself to our intuition as a fundamental fact but we need not journey far in time or space to find it opening beneath us. We can call to mind the many geological 'events' from volcanoes, earthquakes and tsunamis to avalanches, landslides and sink holes, or those instances of 'liquid ground' such as polar ice-caps, quicksand, oil reserves and so on. There are countless instances both dramatic and mundane where human structures are revealed to be built quite literally on *shaky ground*, a ground wholly indifferent to the Orders of human life. Although we are rarely attuned to its movements the earth is in a condition of constant change in restless 'deep time'. Under the drifting continents and shifting plates lies the molten core at the heart of the earth – continually enfolding itself within its own blazing dynamism. There is no solid planetary nugget to which order can be pinned, no stable ground on which unchanging lines can be traced, no rooted foundation available for permanent Order within the measure of the earth. Indeed, a growing body of scientists argue that human activity has altered the earth's ecological systems to such an extent that we are living through a new geological age defined by human-earth relations, the anthropocene. This is not however evidence of human mastery over nature but rather indicates our

capacity to affect environmental conditions without controlling them. The anthropocene might yet come to represent the return of the repressed for a technological civilization that has sought total control over nature. What it certainly does reveal is that the earth is not a stable ground for human Order but one of the key conditions of its contingency, that human Orders themselves actively undermine the ground *as* ground. The world is full of holes through which the edifices of human Order may slip at any point like the sands of history through an indifferent fissure in nature.

Returning then to the question of the Metaphysical grounds for Order we find that materiality does not provide *ground* but rather *gives ground*. By grounding its Metaphysical foundations on metaphors of materiality Order is rendered unstable, subject to the tectonic tides of change transcendence was meant to dam. The failure of Metaphysics to provide a transcendental ground for Order leads to a double *ungrounding* – a Metaphysical ungrounding that throws Order back onto material realities and a material ungrounding embedded in the vital fluctuations of materiality itself. This ungrounding presents us with a fundamental crisis – a crisis of meaning. From the collapse of Metaphysical grounds into the bubbling magma of contingency emerges the question of nihilism. Nihilism presents us with the stark problem of negotiating a world without any necessary grounds for meaning. What is solid melts, what clear muddied, what mapped lost, what grounded ungrounded. Further, the question of nihilism delivers us into a political crisis. What form of politics is possible without a stable ground, without an arche? If politics is the realm of decisions on what do we base our decisions without some form of necessary grounds? Two responses seem to immediately present themselves.

On the one hand we could accept the lack of meaning and choose to slump into the individualistic pursuit of personal pleasures, whether through a passively ironic relativism that shies away from all commitment or an orgiastic ‘war of all against all’. On the other hand, we could see this crisis as a threat and retreat into the security of a self-consciously artificial Order that would at least provide protection where it cannot provide meaning. Indeed, the contemporary age might be considered a noxious brew of both but the response to nihilism need not be a passive or destructive withdrawal into individualism or an aggressive retreat into false security. Rather the loss of grounds might be understood to be the conditions of freedom, to release us from the straight-jacket of necessity, dogma and subjection. What is lost in necessary foundations is gained in a foundational freedom. Nihilism is not something that we should passively accept or retreat from in fear but embrace in the name of freedom and of love. A romantic nihilism is possible.

A romantic nihilism would not be that romanticization of nihilism found in the juvenile heroism of the alienated ‘last man’ or the vacant fetish for human abjection. Rather it would embrace the possibilities of freedom opened by the very groundlessness of our existence and its clamorous entanglement within the world’s becoming. It is fully aware that its embrace reaches across a void that sucks in every certitude bar the necessity of contingency and finitude. But a romantic nihilism would not self-destructively celebrate finitude as an end in itself, anxiously repress it or seek to overcome it once again with some new Metaphysical or technological prop. This is because for a romantic nihilism finitude does not mark our relation to the tragedy of an imminent closure but opens our existence always onto the middle of a world of becoming, to the multiple paths

and strata of mobile finitudes in which we are enmeshed. As arche subsides beneath our feet we can passively sink into the earth and let its sands fill our gapping mouths or we can bury ourselves alive with gnashing teeth in the violent fight to hold on to grounds that are already dragging us under. But feeling the pulse of tremors we can also leave the false dawns of the earthy horizon behind us and take flight into the play of the world. A romantic nihilism chooses to flock from earth to world. But the freedom of the flock is never experienced alone. The world of romantic nihilism is a world that exists *without grounds* but a world of *being-with*, of *being with the world*. It orients itself towards becoming worldly. Not worldly in the *earthy* knowing sense of a crude coupling with cynicism but as the embrace of a world that is forever unknown but through which we experience freedom in being-with, in opening our finitude into play with others. To become worldly is not to flee from the Other towards the mirage of foundations but to hold close the risk of the Other – to embrace the groundlessness of love.

Let us lay no more transcendent foundations in the desperate attempt to escape finitude as they ground themselves only in death and make a graveyard of the world in search of the earth. Let us rather take flight with each other, free from the fantasy of earthy foundations and release our finitudes into play with the material becoming of a world full of holes. Let us not fear the void – for above it we can fall into love.

