

Transparencies: Philosophical essays in honor of J. Ferrater Mora, ed. Priscilla Cohn, Atlantic Highlands, N. J., Humanities Press, 1981

The Individual and the Continuum

by Grace A. de Laguna

Ferrater Mora's thesis that philosophical concepts are "limiting concepts" is an assertion about thought, but it also reflects an ontological thesis concerning "Being." In treating, or calling, concepts "limiting," Ferrater Mora is using a mathematical analogy although he does not accept all the implications of the analogy with the theory of "limits." It is, I believe, his position that Being is such that it cannot be exhaustively conceptualized or confined within the limits of a conceptual system, that it inevitably escapes the net of conceptual thought, however fine its meshes. In saying this, I am trying to express my meaning by metaphors rather than analogy, and this is rather significant. Ontological thinking must make use of concepts but use them so as to make manifest their inadequacy to the full being of what is.

Ferrater Mora once criticized my notion of the individual (as ontological) on the ground that the 'individual' or 'individuality' is a limiting concept. On this occasion he argued, as I recall, that individuality was never completely exemplified, but only approximated in the beings we find or encounter in the world of our experience. This sounds like Plato and can hardly be Ferrater Mora's position for it seems to imply a sort of dualism between the realm of Being and the changing and indistinct realm of our human experience. He means, if I understand him correctly, that our concepts are "limiting," not in their inadequacy to the human world, but in relation to Being. Ontologically, his position is just the opposite of Plato's, although like Plato Ferrater Mora seeks to approach ontology through epistemology—he views Being as manifest in its relation to thought. So, however just his criticism of my notion of the individual may be, it cannot rest on a direct appeal to experience. He must distinguish both the human world from, and show its ontological relationship to, Being. Perhaps my own notion of the individual was not as clear as it might have been for I would agree that no "concept" of individuality can express ontological understanding. I shall say something

more about a possible ontology of the individual presently.

In saying that our philosophical concepts are "limiting concepts" Ferrater Mora is making use of a mathematical analogy, but I think he would agree that this is merely an analogy and hence inadequate to express his ontological understanding. For clearly since the mathematical theory of limits is designed to apply to the mathematical continuum, it can be applied to Being only if, or insofar as, Being is itself a continuum—that is, by accepting the concept of the continuum as ontologically adequate or ultimate. But I think Ferrater Mora would agree that the concept 'continuum' is itself, *as a concept*, "limiting" in the non-analogical sense he means.

If Ferrater Mora means that, on the one hand, Being is such that it cannot be exhaustively expressed in terms of concepts and that, on the other hand, our ontological thought itself is not formulatable in terms of concepts, then I must agree with him; although I admit that I express this meaning only by the use of metaphors which suggest but do not formulate philosophical meaning.

Perhaps Ferrater Mora might say that we have a concept of Being and that it is an ontological concept precisely because it is a "limiting concept" in that it is the "concept of the unconceptualizable"—but this is a paradox. Being can no more be conceptualized in negative than in positive terms. There can be no *concept* of Being because it is in some sense the source of conceptual thought. It supplies a necessary condition for conceptualization.

An ontological understanding of Being must include, or at least lead to, an ontological understanding of the individual. Or perhaps I should say that an ontological understanding of the individual offers an approach to an ontological understanding of *what is*. I have spoken of a "concept" of the individual, but there can be no concept of the individual, as there can be no concept of Being, for the being of an individual, as individual, must escape formulation in terms of concepts which are ineluctably *general*. One may indeed conceptualize the individual, as one may conceptualize Being, in negative terms, as *unrepeatable, unduplicatable*, but this leads to paradox, for the individual could not *be* if there were not "something rather than nothing." We must, moreover, understand the being of the individual positively as providing a necessary condition for conceptualization. (There can be no thinking except by individuals and the concepts used by individuals are themselves applicable to the individuals of, or about which, one thinks.)

I have argued for a similarity between the ontological understanding of Being and of the individual. But Being is not to be understood as an individual, nor is an understanding of the individual an understanding of

Being. The understanding of one complements that of the other. One cannot understand Being in terms of concepts because it transcends all generality. One cannot understand the individual in general terms because it also transcends generality (in an opposite direction, so to speak), because the individual transcends the *particular*, i.e., it is a case or exemplification of the general.

To deny the adequacy of concepts to express Being on the ground that concepts are "limiting," as Ferrater Mora seems to have done, is misleading insofar as it relies on a mathematical analogy. Yet I think it represents a deeper and more penetrating insight. Being cannot be understood as a mathematical continuum, as infinitely *divisible* or infinitely numerable but uncountable in terms of any unit of numeration. Being may, I suggest, be significantly thought of as an *ontological* continuum that is infinitely *structurable*. As a continuum, it is itself unstructured; no structuring, however complex, can exhaust its possibility of further structuring. In view of this fact, an ontological continuum is pure potentiality, the realm of infinite and unlimited possibility. (Yet, although it is, or has, no structure of its own, it is such that once it is structured in any way, it is no longer susceptible to certain other forms of structuring; although it is open to further structuring in forms compatible with the structure received. There is, so to speak, an infinite number and variety of possible worlds, and each one has a ground plan permitting infinite elaboration compatible with it, but never constituting a completed structure of Being.) All "worlds," i.e., all *existence* is essentially incomplete.

But if we try to think of Being as an ontological continuum, we meet an impasse. For a continuum is a concept, abstract and general. But Being cannot *be*, or be understood, as an abstraction or even in terms of a transcendent generality. As pure potentiality it cannot *be*, since *what is* must be actual as well as potential. Or, in other words, Being *exists* only as structured, only as a possible world actualized. Since as a continuum it does not structure itself, nor as pure potentiality actualize itself, Being must be thought of as including the *discrete*, the *pure actual*, or the contingent *this*—the "something" rather than the "nothing" of transcendent generality, which is infinite and unlimited potentiality. (If we think of Being as One, a monistic unity, then it actualizes itself from the necessity of its own nature—and we commit ourselves to all the difficulties of a dogmatic rationalism.)

I tend to think of Being as including, or revealing, two opposed but complementary aspects: the continuum and the discrete, the potential and the actual. Being is only in the existent, but is not exhausted by it. We must then admit the individual as at once revelatory and a constituent of what Being is. It is individuals, in actuality as discrete and unrepeatable existents, that

effect the structuring of the continuum of Being. But to think of the individuals as merely discrete is to think in terms of a limiting concept and hence as set over against the ontological reality of Being. But an individual is not a mere abstraction; it exists and *it is*, and in existing it constitutes a particular structuring of the continuum of the Being which transcends, but which also realizes itself in existence. The existence of individuals and the existence of a world are inseparable realities..

If we think of individuals in terms of their discreteness and actuality, as the essential complement to the continuousness and potentiality of Being, they could not exist or have being as abstract generalities. Every individual exists as itself and no other, yet has its being in a world in which its own being is dependent upon the being of other individuals, through their common and correlative potentialities. As we may imagine a material body as "occupying" exclusively its own spatial locus and in its own extensiveness continuous with the limited extension of other bodies, so we may think metaphorically of each individual as embracing in its being its own distinctive and limited potentialities which it alone can actualize, but which, as limited, are limitations of the unlimited potentiality of Being. Metaphorically we may think of the "coming into being" of an individual as at once the coming into being of other individuals and the coming into being of the world that, as a particular mode of structuring of the ontological continuum, manifests, in its own limitations and incompleteness, the conditions to which all actuality is subject.

All of this is ontological speculation and leaves untouched the epistemological problem of the relation of thought to Being. Let me add only this: as individuals, we exist within a world existentially structured by our existence as the individuals having our own distinctive potentialities. Each of us, as actual, actualizes his own potentialities, subject to conditions imposed by acts of others. In actualizing his own potentialities, each individual is also structuring, or restructuring, the world he shares with others. In thinking, he is, in a distinctive and indirect way, at once "realizing" himself and actualizing potentialities of his human world, but within specific limits and incompletely.