

CHAPTER 2

CONTINGENCY AND THE INTUITION OF THE ABSOLUTE: *LE CHOIX*

Grenier's studies of Renouvier and Lequier have provided him with themes and a method of approach to them, but alongside these and chronologically prior to them is a basic intuition which is the key to the whole world of metaphysical consciousness.

Nous ne sommes pas au monde, telle est la première pensée qui donne le branle à la philosophie. Pas au monde et pourtant dans le monde, vivants, heureux de vivre, agissants, heureux d'agir. Ce n'est pas que le monde nous apparaisse mauvais, c'est qu'il nous apparaît *autre*. Le pessimisme n'est pas forcément au point de départ de la réflexion philosophique, et ce n'est pas toujours la considération du mal, de la vieillesse et de la mort qui nous incite à nous poser les questions qui nous importent le plus. C'est un sentiment plus général, un sentiment d'étrangeté. (C, 3 (7))

In this opening passage of *Le Choix* Grenier is indicating that the problem of evil and the treatment of it that he found in the works of Schopenhauer and Renouvier were not the only factors to have stimulated his philosophical reflection. They were rather channels into which his consciousness, already awakened by a more general sense of the otherness of the world, was directed.

Grenier continues: 'L'état philosophique est un état de rupture avec l'état de communion où vit l'enfant et l'homme qui jouit innocemment de ses sens' (C, 4 (7)). Despite its appearance of objectivity, this whole passage is intensely personal. It may be read as a commentary on other, more obviously autobiographical passages in the novels and lyrical essays. The essence of the experience which Grenier is describing and analysing is the realization that the apparent coherence and stability of the world is an illusion. The individual has a sense of lostness instead of a sense of belonging. He perceives *le vide* or *le néant* where before he simply accepted the *plénitude* of what was experienced as the real world.

The most striking account of such a moment is found in 'L'Attrait du vide'. The experience is linked with Grenier's childhood, and indeed there are similar descriptions dating from much earlier.

J'ai peur de ces moments qui ouvrent une porte sur le vide — quand la nuit montante cherche à t'étrangler, quand le sommeil t'engloutit, quand au milieu de la

nuit tu fais le compte de ce que tu es, quand tu penses — à ce qui n'est pas. Le jour t'abuse mais la nuit n'a pas de décor. (1929) (*LI*, 16–17 (37))¹

Frêle décor, pouvait-il faire illusion à cette minute, à un esprit trop détaché de son corps, pour parvenir à croire? J'évoquais cette fin d'après-midi lointaine où, adossé contre un mur, je vis l'arbre que je regardais fixement (un pommier) disparaître comme une tache qu'on enlève, m'entraîner avec lui et m'engloutir. (1933) (*LI*, 24 (43))

In 'L'Attrait du vide', which belongs more to the period of *Le Choix* than to that of the earliest lyrical essays, there is more philosophical interpretation:

Allongé à l'ombre d'un tilleul, contemplant un ciel presque sans nuage, j'ai vu ce ciel basculer et s'engloutir dans le vide: ç'a été ma première impression du néant, et d'autant plus vive qu'elle succédait à celle d'une existence riche et pleine . . . Je n'avais pas devant moi une faille mais une lacune. Dans ce trou béant, tout, absolument tout, risquait de s'engloutir. De cette date commença pour moi une rumination sur le peu de réalité des choses. (1946) (*LI* (2), 12, 25))²

What was previously thought to be a presence is realized to be an absence, or at least to mask an absence. There is no longer any permanence. This revelation inspires a sense of *inquiétude* or of *étonnement philosophique*, stemming from what Grenier, quoting Schopenhauer, calls 'cette claire représentation que la non-existence du monde est aussi possible que son existence' (*C*, 51, n. 7 (19)). It is, in fact, a revelation of the radical contingency of the world. Grenier makes no claim for the originality of this, indeed he argues for its universality (*C*, 5–6 (9)). His treatment of it, however, is far from standard. At first sight it appears to share many features with the 'existential' experience that underlies the philosophy of many modern writers. Robert Campbell has drawn attention to the parallel with Sartre,³ and certainly the accounts already quoted do have some features in common with the passage in *La Nausée* which describes Roquentin's experience in the *jardin public* of Bouville. However, Sartre's interpretation of that experience, and the lessons he draws from it, are quite different from Grenier's. In the experience of contingency, what is important for Sartre is what is there, not what might have been or what is absent. Indeed, it is existence itself, as an undifferentiated kind of raw material, that is experienced by Roquentin's consciousness: and he, as an existent, seems to be inextricably involved in it. The justification of *individual* existence is not to be found latent in the metaphysical structure of the universe, but is rather to be affirmed, chosen by a free act of will. The individual consciousness, threatened by 'les choses', chooses to affirm its own contingent existence at all costs. Grenier, on the other hand, although his starting-point in the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté* will be not dissimilar, is concerned in *Le Choix* to arrive at a satisfactory metaphysical framework which will be the logical conclusion of the acceptance of a truly radical contingency, and in which the individual has no necessarily privileged status. For him, indeed, it is not so much the contingent

individual or even the contingent world that is thrown into relief, but rather that underlying reality which he claims to be the Absolute: an ultimate value in relation to which all other values are relative, indeed all existence is relative. This is very different from Sartre's understanding of the responsibility of creating value in a contingent world that is deprived of an absolute reference. It may, indeed, be misleading to approach Grenier's thought with a mind that is too heavily conditioned by 'existentialist' concepts. Robert Campbell is one critic who has succumbed to this danger.

On page 694 of the article already mentioned, Campbell misunderstands Grenier's point about being 'en deçà du choix' or 'au delà du choix' (C, 128–29 (109–10)). He sees it as being a distinction between the common herd, the *ἄκριτα φύλα*, living 'comme ça', following their actions, and those on the other hand who create themselves, who precede their actions. It is the well-known distinction between authentic and inauthentic existence. The first category of people is 'au delà du choix', the second 'en deçà'. But this is not Grenier's point at all. Grenier is in fact not concerned with authentic and inauthentic existence at all. Both categories of people are admired by him. The mistake Campbell makes is to attempt an interpretation of the passage in question in terms borrowed from elsewhere in Grenier's work, from the episode of the Gare de Milan, which occurs at the beginning of the *Entretiens sur le bon usage de la liberté*.

What Grenier is doing in the passage from *Le Choix* is to hold up for admiration two classes of people who show themselves able, in two different and opposite ways, to maintain the all-important distinction between 'ce qui vaut en soi' and 'ce qui vaut pour nous à l'instant donné': between 'l'Inévaluable' and 'ce qui est évalué'. There are two possible attitudes, Grenier claims, which both succeed in maintaining the distinction. One is that of the sage who is absolutely indifferent to everything, untouched by good or evil, pleasure or pain, desire or repugnance. The reason for such an attitude is that the sage 'se retourne vers l'Absolu' (however that Absolute may be conceived). In comparison with what alone is, and has, value, everything else becomes indifferent, in the double sense of undifferentiated and unattractive, and the sage abdicates his power of making choices. He is truly 'en deçà du choix'.

But the opposite attitude is equally possible, and equally satisfactory in so far as it preserves the distinction already mentioned. It is that of the hero, who 'se décide sans délibérer', not at all because he belongs to the mindless, uncritical tribe, but because his *élan* carries him on into action 'par-dessus la délibération'. The hero is concerned exclusively with 'l'achèvement de l'œuvre', just as the sage is concerned with 'le perfectionnement intérieur'. Neither of them encroaches on the domain of the Absolute or enters into competition with it through the value-judgements that are necessarily involved in an act of choice,

for neither of them comes to, or rather passes through, the point at which a choice is made. Evaluation is side-stepped by them.

Both the sage and the hero have an 'attitude singulière', an expression that is evidently to be understood in a mathematical sense in view of the following gloss on it: 'La seule manière que nous ayons d'imiter l'unité de l'Absolu est en effet de devenir nous-mêmes *unifiés*.' In their single-minded self-expression, the two types of person analysed by Grenier are achieving precisely this unification, while yet presenting a spectacle not of uniformity, which would be to 'vouloir introduire l'Absolu dans le relatif', but of what Grenier calls *le style*, corresponding to the 'diversité infinie du monde'. That in itself is 'un hommage à l'unité suprême'. Both types represent 'des états . . . sublimes'.⁴

The interest of the episode in the *Entretiens*, termed an 'anecdote' by Grenier, is that it illustrates one particular case in which Grenier is led to reflect on his metaphysical status. That reflection is still very general at this early point in the book. Grenier sums up the point he is making by emphasizing that 'le vertige qui saisit l'homme devant la multitude des possibles est donc fait à la fois d'angoisse et d'ivresse'. He insists that such an experience is not exceptional. Of course every being has a situation, a kind of mould, but as soon as it is a question of 'un choix fait en connaissance de cause, c'est-à-dire avec une hypertrophie de l'intelligence', as soon as the consciousness of the human subject is actively brought into play, then 'le hiatus qui constitue le fondement initial de l'acte', from being almost negligible,

devient considérable à mesure que la conscience présente un plus grand écartement sur l'avenir et que son horizon tend vers l'infini. Les questions éthiques prennent le pas sur les questions pratiques, le pourquoi faire sur le comment faire.

The problem of what is best will naturally lead on to that of absolute value, but that is not Grenier's concern at the moment. In the first chapter he is simply sketching

une phénoménologie du vertige mental, de l'homme au bord de l'action qui ne peut s'empêcher d'avoir en même temps l'intelligence la plus aigüe de la multitude des futurs et le sentiment le plus désespéré de l'*impuissance* où il est d'exercer intelligemment sa *puissance*.

In view of the fact that Grenier, like Lequier, is a thinker for whom the mode of his argument, even the digressions and pseudo-conclusions, are at least as important as the actual main line of argument itself with its formal conclusions, it is clear that Campbell is doing him a grave injustice by thus arbitrarily bringing together texts so widely separated. It is necessary, instead, to consider carefully the movement of Grenier's thought, and to consider it in his own terms.

From an early age Grenier had what he calls 'le goût de l'Absolu' (*MIX*, 71, 95). He was unable to define exactly what he meant by that, but it involved an

instinctive aspiration towards 'ces réalités transcendantes dont je croyais avoir l'intuition' (84–85), towards some kind of 'principe d'unification' (78). It was natural to identify this transcendent reality with the traditional metaphysical concept of the Absolute.

There were several factors, however, which combined to keep him from being convinced by the Idealism or the more specifically Christian metaphysical systems which represented the Western understanding of the Absolute. These factors were his own experiences of 'disparition du monde et de la personnalité', his reflection on the problem of suffering and evil, and his growing acquaintance with Indian thought.

Grenier gives yet another description of his childhood experiences in the posthumous *Mémoires intimes de X.*

Je m'amusais souvent, étant enfant, à m'allonger sur la terre pour contempler le ciel: je suivais des yeux les nuages de toute forme et de teinte diverse qui avaient l'air immobiles, et qui en réalité, lorsqu'ils étaient fixés assez longtemps, se déplaçaient très vite; j'imaginai des terres inconnues, des royaumes fabuleux dans ces nuages et toutes sortes d'existences fantastiques qui pourraient y être vécues. Puis, insensiblement, ma rêverie faisait place à un état de contemplation à vide qui ne devait pas durer en réalité plus de quelques minutes, mais à moi me semblait occuper un temps infini. Alors les choses perdaient leur apparence, les nuages leur contour, le ciel sa couleur; tout se brouillait et devenait uniforme. A la fin, j'étais absorbé parce que moi-même, je ne me sentais plus exister, je n'étais plus rien et ne voyais rien au-devant de moi. Cet état n'était pas joyeux, il n'était pas douloureux non plus. Cette disparition du monde et de la personnalité présentait quand même un attrait, comme tout ce qui paraît être un repos absolu. (73–74)

He offers no definitive explanation or interpretation of these 'états'. Even when suggesting their metaphysical nature, he is chary of attaching any label to whatever reality is encountered in such 'états'.

S'agit-il alors d'une prise de contact avec l'Être? avec le Néant? Je l'ignore. Ces mots sont équivalents d'ailleurs dans ces expériences. On va du néant de l'expérience sensible vers un Absolu dont on a une expérience nouvelle. Savoir ce que représente cet Absolu serait une question tout-à-fait oiseuse. On ne peut le savoir puisque toute connaissance suppose une relation et que la relation est abolie dans l'union de l'individu avec l'Absolu. Ces termes d'individu et d'Absolu sont d'ailleurs susceptibles de bien des définitions ou plutôt ils sont en dernière analyse indéfinissables. (77–78)

Western philosophy seemed to him to be too ready to define the Absolute and then to build a whole system upon that definition. For Grenier it was, for a time at least, the experience of release from the world that was important, rather than the term towards which his *esprit* moved in such an experience.

The problem of suffering reinforced this attitude. Between the ages of sixteen and twenty-four he was dominated by it, so that during those formative years his admiration went not to the philosophers of the school and university

programme but rather to Schopenhauer, who was deeply concerned with the same problem (*MIX*, 96–98). It was through Schopenhauer that Grenier became acquainted with Indian thought, with the Buddhist tradition to begin with, and later with the Brahmanic.⁵

In both those traditions there is a close connection between release from suffering and the experience of union with the Absolute. The first significant mention of the Absolute in Grenier's published writings occurs in the context of a series of articles which appeared in the *Nouvelle Revue française* in 1930 under the title 'Sur l'Inde.'⁶ All through the 1930s the Absolute continued to be linked by Grenier with India. In 1938 came the announcement of a forthcoming book to be entitled *Essai sur l'idée d'absolu*.⁷ When it was eventually published in 1941, as *Le Choix*, there could be no further doubt that the idea of the Absolute was inseparable in Grenier's thought from the Indian philosophical tradition. As the Orientalist Masson-Oursel noted in his review of Grenier's book, 'L'Inde fournit bien plus que des cas parallèles.'⁸ The Indian approach to philosophy was integral to Grenier's argument.

The idea of the Absolute belongs to the Upanishadic tradition, as Madeleine Biarreau makes clear:

à travers le langage encore mythique et très lié à l'univers rituel qui est celui des *Upaniṣad*, apparaît la croyance à une réalité absolue, permanente et qui, si l'on parvient à l'atteindre, nous délivre de la nécessité de remourir. Cet Absolu, on l'appelle le *brahman* . . . Il est le fondement dernier de l'être, il est l'Être, c'est lui qu'il faut atteindre.⁹

Later tradition emphasized the concept even more strongly, until, for the orthodox Vedānta school represented supremely by Śāṅkara, the Absolute or Brahman was the only reality.¹⁰ It was this exclusive concentration upon the Absolute that moved Grenier to claim in 1930 that India had a unique spiritual heritage to offer the West:

elle a représenté l'effort le plus héroïque que l'homme ait fait pour dégager la pensée de tout ce qui n'était pas purement elle et s'élever vers ce que l'on est convenu d'appeler un absolu. (art. cit., p. 55)

The Indian thinkers had indeed faced the same fundamental questions as the Greeks, and had come to a significantly different conclusion. Both perceived the dilemma of the human mind:

L'intelligence adhère immédiatement à l'éternel; et il se trouve que non seulement elle ne peut se définir que dans le temps, mais qu'elle y est plongée par sa nature même (art. cit., p. 338)

but the Greeks gave more weight to the realm of time, of change, of human values, while their Indian counterparts refused to compromise the purity of the eternal Absolute:

un Grec ne peut s'arrêter à l'absolu: il a trop souci de la forme humaine. Seuls les philosophes indiens ont considéré l'opposition dans sa nudité. (art cit., pp. 338–39)

The sheer intellectual ambition of this attitude could not fail to attract Grenier, just as he was attracted by the ambition of Renouvier's 'hypothèse suprême' or Lequier's affirmation of his freedom. He was prepared, at least in the first instance, to accept the dissociation of the intellectual and ethical spheres. That does not mean to say that there is no place for ethics. It simply means that, as he will claim in *Le Choix*, 'il est impossible de passer de la pensée à la croyance et de la croyance à l'action' (C, 30 (34)). The Indian tradition preserves a distinction which has been frequently obscured in the West, and particularly in the twentieth century. Grenier is determined to 'séparer les deux ordres et voir jusqu'où l'on peut aller dans la voie de la pensée avant de s'engager dans la voie de la croyance' (ibid.).¹¹

According to the 'Avertissement' of *Le Choix*, 'l'idée d'Absolu . . . selon nous, constitue le fondement même de toute pensée (C, v (6)). In one sense, then, it requires no demonstration. As Grenier had written in 1930, 'l'intelligence adhère immédiatement à l'éternel'. In the paper he presented to the Ninth International Congress of Philosophy, the 'Congrès Descartes', in 1937,¹² he quoted, via Grousset's *Histoire de la philosophie orientale*, from Śāṅkara: 'L'atman est le lieu (condition première de toute démonstration), donc il est prouvé avant toute démonstration'.¹³ Neither Śāṅkara nor Grenier can doubt the existence of an ultimate reality, but equally neither of them can avoid expending considerable energy in elucidating the concept, in order to show up the misunderstandings of other thinkers. Śāṅkara felt that the possibility of release from *samsāra* was jeopardized by the teaching of false knowledge: the Vijñānavāda school of Buddhism and the Śāṅkhya school of Hinduism taught a salvation that was ineffectual.¹⁴ Grenier, in his turn, found himself confronted with religious and philosophical systems which promised liberation, but without clearly distinguishing between the purely intellectual realm and that of belief. The Absolute was invoked to justify complete systems of values. Grenier therefore had to show just what the intelligence could be held to reveal about ultimate reality, and what could only be affirmed by an act of faith.

Grenier's main point in the first two parts of *Le Choix*, as in the two papers which prepared the way for the book as early as 1936–37,¹⁵ is that while the mind adheres immediately to the Absolute, it can offer no indication whatsoever of the nature of that Absolute. Any attempt to define, characterize or qualify the Absolute simply reduces it to the level of a contingent being. It cannot even be said to be given, for its very givenness would constitute a limitation. Rather, it is *realized*, in the sense that the mind is gradually cured of the illusion and ignorance which made it appear that the individual mind was

essentially distinct from the Absolute. The Absolute is then experienced as the only true reality, at the expense of the phenomenal world: and the result is an attitude of pure indifference.¹⁶

This is a disconcerting argument for the Western reader, although it has affinities with the thought of Spinoza, Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and indeed Bradley and other modern Idealists.¹⁷ It appeals constantly, as do some of them, to the Indian tradition and in particular to that of the Vedānta. However, Grenier is at pains to point out that there is not such a fundamental difference as might be supposed between the Western and Eastern traditions. He shows, for instance, that the Cartesian Cogito is not, in its essence, significantly different from the Vedāntist reasoning concerning the existence of the Self. The important divergence comes only at a secondary stage, where Descartes moves from the realm of pure thought to that of belief. His argument from the existence of the individual thinking self to that of the ultimate Self, which Descartes calls God, would be perfectly acceptable in Indian categories. It is only when he feels the need to endow his 'God' with qualities, for instance that of veracity, that he exceeds those categories. The 'malin génie' is rejected by an act of faith, whereas the cosmic *mâyâ* is retained by the Indian tradition on purely intellectual grounds. It is perfectly possible for the purity of the Cogito to be preserved, and Grenier quotes an experiment made by Gobeineau which demonstrated that possibility:

Gobeineau ayant fait lire le *Discours de la Méthode* à des Persans, remarque que la vive impression qu'ils en ont reçue ne tient pas tant à la formule fondamentale *Cogito ergo sum* et à sa suite, qui leur est extrêmement familière, mais au 'parti modéré auquel les Européens ont la prétention de s'arrêter' à partir de cette formule. 'La conséquence qu'ils en tirent est celle-ci: que Dieu étant l'existence par excellence, l'existence unique, il est en même temps l'unique pensée et l'unique parole, ce qui ne va pas au résultat cherché par Descartes'.¹⁸

Grenier is therefore not so much adopting methods of reasoning peculiar to the East as using the Oriental tradition to correct errors of perspective which, in the West, have deformed a common philosophical core.

Intuition is not, for Grenier, opposed to intelligence. Indeed, the process of the realization of the Absolute begins and ends with an intuition. 'L'intelligence adhère immédiatement à l'éternel', and then, after a long period of conscious reflection, the essential unity of the two terms is revealed by a second intuition (C, 36–37 (39–41)). The gulf between the individual and the Absolute is first exposed, and then abolished, but its abolition meets no need unless the scandal of its existence is first fully appreciated by the conscious intelligence. In the same way as for Bergson, the intuition comes only after a disciplined intellectual preparation and search.¹⁹ The same is true for Śaṅkara, although for him the first steps are not simply transcended but actually negated in the ultimate realization of the Absolute.

The basic 'sentiment métaphysique', according to Grenier, is of a 'surprise en face d'un abîme' (C, 6 (9)). There is a *manque* or *vide* at the centre of conscious existence, which is implied even in its denial by some philosophers. Philosophical and religious systems undertake to substitute for that *vide* some form of *plein*, 'l'idée d'un Tout éternellement nécessaire ou d'une totalisation jamais finie' (C, 11 (16)). The problem is not that of an initial creation, which is not even envisaged in some well-established traditions such as the Hindu and the Greek (C, 14–15) (21–23)); nor is it that of 'une nécessité derrière les contingences' (C, 16 (24)), at least in the sense in which that is usually understood in the West, with the 'nécessité' being equated with 'de soi-disant vérités éternelles' (C, 25 (29)). Idealism and realism, rationalism and empiricism, all depend on a belief in static forms, whether objects or Ideas, in which knowledge is apprehended. The Indian conception is quite different:

Pour l'Inde, aucune opération de l'esprit n'est fixe; toute chose, quelle qu'elle soit, n'est qu'un résidu de l'action: pas d'états de conscience mais des survivances du passé ou des anticipations de l'avenir. (C, 22–23 (26–27))

It is therefore out of the question to appeal to 'le sens commun' to establish any kind of philosophy of Being, since what is thereby demonstrated is cultural conditioning rather than universal truth. The attitude of pragmatic realism stands self-condemned as far as truth is concerned. The temptation to provide a ready-made solution must in fact be resisted in the name of truth. 'Ce qu'il faut c'est prendre conscience d'un vide; mais ne pas le combler tout de suite n'importe comment' (C, 29 (33)). The most that Grenier will allow is that, while the mind is less a 'reflet d'une réalité préexistante' than an 'agent créateur et transformateur' (C, 27 (31)), yet the creative part it plays in the realization of truth is only possible in response to a certain gleam of light: 'cette clarté ne peut venir que de l'Esprit' (ibid.). *Réalisation, formation, création, relation, continuité* . . . : these are the terms in which Grenier is restating the problem of 'l'Absolu et la pensée'. Attention is drawn away from the objective reality of the phenomenal world, and real existence is predicated of the mind only when it turns away from the world and so escapes from the status of a mere *relation*. It is then easy to point out that the mind is made rather to 'devenir Un' than to explain or possess 'le Tout', and that this is achieved by a *dépouillement* or *détachement*, in which the mind must 'se mettre en mesure d'accueillir par un travail intérieur la vérité qui doit sourdre au fond de lui' (C, 39 (43)). That truth is, in Indian terms, that Atman is Brahman. The identification results from a suppression of consciousness:

c'est une libération de la connaissance en tant que celle-ci est une *relation*. Les liens sont coupés, c'est une ab-solution ou une dis-solution, mais en tout cas c'est un état qui se rapproche de celui de non-relation. (C, 38–39 (42))

The individual achieves deliverance, and the world remains as it is, neither justified nor abolished but ignored.

Grenier's purpose in undertaking this heterodox investigation of the basis of metaphysics is twofold, having a negative and a positive aspect. The negative purpose is to criticize the two main solutions adopted, in the Western tradition, to explain or justify contingent human existence. They are, essentially, philosophies of Being and philosophies of action. As to the former, Grenier comments that 'La plupart du temps ce que les penseurs ont appelé "l'Être" n'était que le résidu nominal de leurs abstractions' (C, 39 (43)), with no justification in the realm of pure thought. 'L'Être n'est qu'un mot comme le Néant' (C, 40 (43)), and the reality represented by both words is not susceptible of definition. Śāṅkara, indeed, laid particular stress on those Upanishadic texts which refer to the Absolute only in negative terms, and his system is known as 'non-dualism', *Advaita*, rather than as monism (C, 42, n. (44); 72 (56)).²⁰ As to the philosophies of action, Grenier finds that they fail to do justice to the yearning for truth which is a 'besoin de l'intelligence'. Truth is the perfection towards which the human mind tends: but there is no absolute truth apart from the Absolute itself. The adoption of provisional principles of conduct does not rule out the existence of an absolute standard; and the elevation of such provisional principles to the status of a metaphysical absolute is simply an abomination. At the same time Grenier has a positive purpose, which is to point out that there are other viable and respectable systems of thought besides those usually recognized in the West, and that in some ways they may have superior insights. He is conscious of the limitations, and in particular of the lack of ambition, of European metaphysics, and he is genuinely enthusiastic about the Indian alternative, just as he will be about the extreme doctrines of Taoism. The love of truth for its own sake will not necessarily lead the metaphysician along traditional paths, and indeed in an article published in 1940 Grenier suggests that what is usually regarded as belonging to the European tradition has been heavily influenced by the East, so that movement between the two even today is by no means unthinkable. Śāṅkara and Rāmānuja still have many lessons to teach.²¹

At the same time, however, Grenier is well aware of the predicament in which the course of realizing the Absolute lands him. With an Absolute which is the only reality, the problem of the world is properly insoluble. Grenier outlines four possible ways of envisaging the problem, but none constitutes a true solution. Starting from the Absolute, the world may be seen as the product of a cosmic illusion, an apparent modification of Brahman; or as a real modification of a Spinozist Substance; or as a lie for which God is responsible, on the lines of Descartes's theory of the 'Grand Trompeur'; or, starting from the individual, the world may be seen simply as the result of ignorance, of 'un mal guérissable' (C, 74-88 (57-71)). However, although reality may be denied to the world, it is none the less there.

Il faut reconnaître que le monisme le plus décidé, même si on l'envisage comme nous venons de le faire, c'est-à-dire comme une conquête, ne peut entièrement rendre compte de l'expérience globale. L'acosmisme est un pressentiment puis une réalisation; il ne supprime pas l'entredeux. Nous en arrivons à cette conclusion que toute métaphysique est obligée d'établir une échelle de l'être et finalement de reconnaître des différences et des degrés. (C, 88 (70–71))²²

Even Śaṅkara is obliged to distinguish between a higher form of Brahman, without any attributes, and a lower form, 'conceived with attributes for the purposes of devout meditation'²³ (C, 90–91 (74–75)). His theory of transpersonality, according to which Atman is 'plutôt un soi qu'un non-moi', does little to resolve the practical difficulties. The whole system of thought is circular, and never really touches the world. Descartes himself had recognized the problem: 'De Dieu on ne peut aller qu'à Dieu'.²⁴ The system is unexceptionable in itself and none of the eminent philosophers who reviewed *Le Choix* could fault Grenier's argument in the first two parts,²⁵ but it does not provide an answer of the kind that is felt to be necessary by the Western tradition. This is an illustration of the principle that Grenier was to put forward in *L'Existence malheureuse* in connection with the place of freedom in any solution of the problem of evil: freedom belongs more to the original choice of a *cadre* of thought than to the nature of the problem itself and its solution. In *Le Choix* itself Grenier suggests that it is impossible to establish which is the best option to take in any given situation of choice, and that the important thing is in fact to choose oneself, 'se choisir' (C, 119 ff. (98 ff.)). The principle is the same, for the details lose their initial apparent significance.

However, Grenier has recognized that the 'entre-deux' remains, even if it is emptied of significance and indeed of reality by the sheer fact of the Absolute. Later chapters of this study will be concerned with the area of the 'entre-deux', the world which has to be considered as 'presque rien'. It was only intellectually that Grenier could consider the full implications of the principle of 'l'existence irréfragable de l'Absolu' (C, 109 (91)), that Absolute which is described in the *Nouveau Lexique* as 'clair et lointain comme le Fuji-Yama'. (NL, art. 'Absolu') Those implications were not unknown to Plotinus, to Spinoza, even to Descartes, but, as Grenier wrote in 1930 in reply to his own question 'Pourquoi l'Inde?', 'des auteurs comme Çankara ou Vallabha ont au moins le mérite d'être neufs et pas encore travestis' (art. cit., p. 352). With them, and soon with Lao Tzu and the other Taoist fathers, as his guides, he was able to explore the principles and practice of indifference without the compromises and deformations that had crept into the Western tradition.