The Beginning of the End of Metaphysics

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I.

The question about the end of philosophy is neither as new nor as radical as the current rash of titles prefixed "after-", "neo-" or "post-" would suggest. It has already had a substantial history of its own. Indeed the end of philosophy has been the central theme of philosophy itself since Hegel.

The major premise of "post-philosophy", as we might fashionably call it, is quite simply that philosophy as universal-speculative thinking is dead, overthrown, supplanted or transmuted into another genus. It began with the revolutionary attack on "idealism" in the 19th century; not an assault by philosophy's enemies, but a palace revolt in which philosophy repudiated the authority of its own spiritual-intellectual tradition in the name of a new anti-speculative humanism and existential realism. Philosophy since has been largely a series of proposals for disposing of the corpse.

This revolt against philosophy's ancient regime was no secret at the time; everyone of note — Feuerbach, Comte, Kierkegaard, Marx, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche — loudly and openly confessed to having a hand in it.[1] The overthrow has been brought to completion through a series of phases which define the history of contemporary philosophy. The first revolutionary philosophers of the early 19th century would break history in two, proposing a philosophy of the future to supplant the philosophy of the past. This phase ends with Marx and Nietzsche complaining that the radical critique of philosophy cannot be carried out within philosophy, but only from a standpoint beyond it.[2]

Accordingly, the twentieth century saw the rise of a number of counter-philosophical schools determined to demonstrate the incompatibility of the universal-speculative perspective with the alleged realities of the human condition, through arguments appealing to history, psychology, language or sociology as a basis for doctrines capable of functioning as para-philosophical surrogates. But the new school philosophies — historicism, linguistic analysis, psychoanalysis and the rest — have more recently suc-

1. An overview in: Jackson, F. L., "The Revolutionary Origins of Contemporary Philosophy"; *Dionysius* ix (Dec. 1985), pp. 127-171.
2. Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*; edited by D. J. Struik (New York, 1964), p. 172. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*;, I,11.

cumbed in turn to the ambiguity that in disavowing the standpoint of reason, they could claim no more than dogmatic legitimacy for their own arguments. Moreover, their anti-speculative principles, if self-applied, made no less nonsense of their own position than of philosophy's. For if language limits thought, can there be philosophy of language? Does historicism have a context? Was Marxism after all ideology, psychoanalysis a rationalization?

This has yielded a new avant garde aware that the attempt to repudiate philosophy from the outside is also suspect; it either leaves it untouched, is itself crypto-philosophy, or is self-defeating. It would appear the only way to set reason aside without prejudice, to go beyond it without residue, is through a skeptical overthrow, that is, a self-suspension or self-termination on the part of philosophy itself. The options open to this "post-philosophical" standpoint would appear to be either that philosophy pass over into a wholly post-philosophical species of itself, or else become a radically self-critical, self-annihilating form of thinking.[3] Through the first, philosophy would accomplish its overthrow by resurrecting itself from its own ashes as some quite other bird; the other commits conscious suicide by taking upon itself the defense of specifically irrational principles. The aim was that philosophy become self-suspending; be given up through not being given up and vice versa.

That the revolutionary tradition has this skeptical result suggests it has somehow run its course; there would seem nowhere further to go with it. This stands in sharp contrast to the heyday of "contemporary philosophy" when the triumph of a new philosophical freedom and realism and the corresponding putrefaction of the corpse of philosophy, in Marx's macabre image, seemed assured. But that heyday is clearly over. The anti-speculative engines of the contemporary schools have done their work; reason has been wholly contextualized, every text deconstructed, the fragile good fragmented, and the last shadow of the absolute dispelled in the centre-less glare of the metaphysics of radical relativism and contingency.[4] The death of philosophy has become integral to philosophy itself; its final negation and overthrow its own explicit, defining moment. What remains is only a kind of

3. In *After Philosophy* (edited by Baynes, Bohman and McCarthy, Cambridge 1987), Davidson, Habermas and Taylor are among those represented as taking the first option; Rorty, Foucault, Leotard and Derrida the second.

4. A prime example is Rorty's *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (Cambridge, 1988), whose neo-nihilistic argument finds unacceptably metaphysical even the most recent critical theories of linguistic and subjective meaning.

memorial reflection as to whether there is life after philosophy; no longer hopeful of philosophy's viability, but arguing nonetheless for the continued pursuit of its ideal in some after-the-fact sense: a "neo-" or "post"-philosophy. It is much like a wake where some bluntly speak of the deceased as dead, others as passed on to an altogether different life.

II

A post-mortem on the death of philosophy takes us back to the beginning of the end, the post-idealist revolution in which the avant garde skepticism of today has its roots. That tale being long and many faceted, we will focus herein on only one chapter of it, the beginning of the end of metaphysics.

The 19th century revolution in metaphysics centred on the romanticist absolute: the claim that in human self-feeling is witnessed the pre-existent identity of spirit and nature, self and reality, subject and object. This principle it set against idealism, perceived as having only incompletely overcome the legacy of enlightenment, in which a residual division remained between a purely subjective reason and a spiritless objectivity, nature, standing over against it. To heal this rift was in fact the preoccupation of German idealism. It conceived the identity of self-consciousness and nature, subject and substance, in terms of a higher unity within which the two sides persist as mere distinguishable moments: Fichte's self-constituting Ego, Schelling's absolute in-difference, the Hegelian Idea. Subsequent romanticism and its philosophy affirmed quite the same principle, but with the significant difference that it judged the idealist reconciliation abstract, an identity of spirit and nature morally or conceptually posited, not the real freedom of actual human life.

The revolutionary philosophers judged idealism uniquely perverse in being content with the mere *thought* of freedom, freedom as the nebulous "absolute spirit" of religion and philosophy, not the concrete, immediate freedom of actual individuals. Hence they resolved to supplant the merely moral-intellectual reconciliation of subjectivity with the world, with an actual reconciliation in terms of the real individual's practical, existential life. It opposed an expressly realist, pragmatic and sensual humanism to the whole moral-intellectual tradition as such, hence to religion and philosophy in particular, establishing in their place new counter-philosophies of the immediately existing individual as the real, self-existent subject-object and God-man which all theory and practice must presuppose.

Far from relapsing into naturalism as against subjective freedom, the new realism only disavowed the one-sided freedom of mere moral or rational autonomy, proposing in its place the naturalized spirituality of a human freedom already accomplished or self-accomplishing. The actual human being as spiritual-natural identity thus became after Hegel a thesis advanced on all fronts at once; theologically by Strauss and Kierkegaard, ethically by Feuerbach and Stirner, metaphysically with Comte and Schopenhauer. Whether as objective humanity or subjective particularity, finite human existence is advanced as the new absolute; a being not just given, but self-given, not just active, but self-active, not just existent, but self-existent.

As the expression and bulwark of a fraudulent freedom still marred by a vestigial subjective-objective diremption, idealism and its speculative spirit must be overthrown. To such "alienated" freedom revolutionary thinking opposes the finite freedom of actual individuals. Yet as freedom itself is the principle set forth in idealism, the overthrow is directed only against its ideal or conceptual status, not against the principle of freedom itself. So in the revolutionary "overthrow of idealism" it is at the same time important that idealism's principle not be lost in the overthrow; only the want of concreteness is renounced.[5]

That the overcoming of idealism must also preserve its principle gave rise from the start to an ambiguity and division that has vexed revolutionary philosophy ever since. Two main strains develop, one proclaiming the overcoming of the abstractness of idealistic freedom through its concrete realization in a self-liberating human praxis, the other viewing this objectification itself as a falling into abstraction, to be repudiated on behalf of freedom defined in terms of the radical self-existence of the particular individual. The first would replace the older metaphysics with a new ultra-metaphysics affirming the finite human world as the sphere of freedom's realization; the second would subvert it through a new para-metaphysics of being, construed as precisely the *Nichts-sein* of this objectified humanity, thus an utter nullity in itself.

In seeking so to transmute idealism's principle of self-conscious freedom into finite, human terms, revolutionary thought condemned itself to this dualism from the start. Both radically demanding an end to speculative metaphysics, these two new

5. The common argument of all the anti-Hegelians that idealism is more than merely mistaken or incomplete, but *perverse*, derives from the acknowledgement that it did indeed enunciate freedom as the absolute principle, but only in the form of a religious-philosophical ideal. This standpoint must therefore be repudiated as the last obstacle to an actually realized freedom. Feuerbach was perhaps clearest on this.

counter-metaphysical positions, namely positivism and nihilism, have dominated ontology since Hegel, from the initial bold statements with Comte and Schopenhauer, through the various forms of the 19th and 20th century stand-off between analytical and existentialist schools, to the current dilemma of the post-philosophers as to how finally to be rid of all "metanarratives" as such.

III

In their original form, positivism and nihilism opposed to idealism a new metaphysics of the phenomenal world based on the romanticist principle which made feeling the ultimate criterion of the real. On this common basis they elaborated two directly conflicting accounts of the status of the objective world.

Comte is the author of "positivism" explicitly so named.[6] He pronounced it the successor to traditional metaphysics and the "natural science" grounded in it. Metaphysics rests on an unresolved disparity between objective and subjective; between Nature as the objectively real in itself, and the abstract subject whose knowledge is a problematical correlation of itself and the objective. Positivism flatly denies this separation of reality from cognition, claiming that in the phenomenon of immediate givenness-to-self, to which all human beings as such bear witness in feeling, what declares itself directly is precisely their identity. If in theoretical or practical consciousness this identity is posited as beyond the subject, knowledge of it thus mediated through appeal to transcendent causes or ends, in affective awareness, one exists immediately as object for oneself as subject; I and my feeling are one and the same.

This real identity I directly encounter in feeling is, however, no different from what everyone feels; it is simply the universal experience of our human-being. This "feeling of humanity", Comte says, is the only legitimate foundation for all human knowledge and practice, since it provides direct, unmediated access to the real in itself. For since all givenness is givenness for a human consciousness, knowledge of the objective world is necessarily an extension of this human presence to self. Reality and feeling, being and human-being are thus indistinguishable; objectivity and phenomenality, fact and datum the same. The reality-appearance distinction of metaphysics springs from the inability of theoretical ob-

6. The later Schelling spoke of "positive philosophy", but it was Auguste Comte (1798-1857) who first developed an explicit counter-metaphysical system under that title. References herein are to *Cours de la philosophy positive;* in Lenzer, G., *Auguste Comte and Positivism* (New York, 1975).

servation to acquiesce in phenomenal givenness, which it is bound to explain in terms of grounds and causes. But once feeling has become the criterion of reality, once man discovers in his own self-feeling the positive identity of object and phenomenon, "explanation" can be abandoned; science becomes pure description of phenomena, and metaphysics philosophy of science, namely "positivism", whose chief task is to expose and explode the theoretical-empirical assumptions behind all metaphysics, the true basis of scientific certainty being the "subordination of the intellect . . . to the heart".

Practical consciousness, says Comte, sees reality as the product of some agency, theoretical consciousness as a reality already "out there". But for positivism, the world is neither "Creation" nor "Being", but "Datum", the true concern of science not God or Nature, but Man. To go beyond the sheer givenness of the phenomenal is thus illegitimate, and since historically religion and metaphysics rest on just such a transcendent reference, they are humanly self-alienating positions to be supplanted with a new "worship of humanity" and a new "sociology" which will found the authority and certainty of science itself in the direct self-evidentiality of human self-feeling.

Now, Schopenhauer's metaphysics is the direct inverse of this position.[7] The originator of modern nihilism, his pessimistic polemic epitomizes the negative form of the rebellion against idealism in and after Hegel's day. His account of the utter finitude and fatality of phenomenal existence is reminiscent of ancient stoicism and hinduism, but with the difference that the irredeemable senselessness of existence does not point to some implacable, divine necessity underlying, but is described as the direct manifestation of what reality is in itself, namely a thoroughly nihilating, self-relative, cosmic subjectivity Schopenhauer calls Will.[8]

As the mere outward aspect of this absolute being-in-self, the world for human thought and experience has a purely negative status, having no real existence in itself, but only as the phenomenon of the negatively self-assertive Will, indifferently positing the world in its apparent rationality and purposiveness, but just as inevitably abrogating it in the re-assertion of its own abso-

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7. Schopenhauer (1788-1860) is acknowledged as intellectual patriarch by a wide variety of 19-20th century figures — Wagner, Freud, Ibsen, Shaw, Mann, Yates among many others — while his nihilistic metaphysics is, through Nietzsche, the great-grandparent of existential ontology.

8. C. Taylor, in his *Hegel* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 83 refers to Hegel's philosophy as "expressionism" and his absolute spirit as "cosmic subjectivity", notions distinctly un-Hegelian, but descriptive of Schopenhauer's pan-psychic doctrine of the world as the objectification of Will.

lute self-existence.[9] In this view the very possibility of all objective idealism is, of course, decisively denied and pessimism emerges as the only authentic account of existence.

The thesis that ultimate reality is pre-rational cosmic subjectivity is for Schopenhauer far from being a conclusion of speculative metaphysics. On the contrary, he saw it as the decisive inference to be drawn from Kant's critical distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal. He went beyond idealism, however, to a much more radical denial of the assumption that the rational is somehow grounded in the real, insisting that since the categories of reason have as their sole function the objective determination of the phenomenal, then reason has no application whatever to reality in itself. The objectively constituted world is thus phenomenal in the extreme sense that it is nothing whatever apart from our consciousness. Hence the notion that in the world for objective science we know something real is the greatest illusion: "All that exists for knowledge . . . is only object in relation to subject . . . *Vorstellung*. All that belongs to the world is inevitably conditioned through the subject, and exists only for the subject."[10]

Thus Schopenhauer affirms the same identity of consciousness and world as Comte, but with completely opposite intent. He does not mean to say the phenomenal is the real but the reverse: that the objective-phenomenal world is a total unreality, an utter nullity to be distinguished radically from the real in itself. As all object-for-subject relations belong to perceptual-theoretical consciousness, the latter in principle can have no access whatever to the real; to attempt to discover the real in the objective is like "going round a castle seeking in vain for an entrance, sketching the facades". Identity with reality is found in a quite different order of fact, namely in that the individual is more than a consciousness, "more than his brain". "He is himself rooted in that world; finds himself in it as an *individual*". To objectively represent a phenomenal world I must first exist as a bodily subject, for "representation is always given through the medium of a body, whose affections are . . . the starting point."[11] In affect I encounter myself in an wholly different way than in objective consciousness, where my

9. The term "Will" is misleading; Schopenhauer means self-expressive affect, as made copiously clear by his disciple, Nietzsche (e.g., *Beyond Good and Evil*, I, 19), who elsewhere speaks of will-to-power as the "instinct for freedom". Schopenhauer's Will as "negative self-assertiveness" is never given as it is in itself, but in the manifest unmitigated nullity of all its phenomenal expressions.

10. *The World as Will and as Idea*, Tr. Haldane and Kemp (London, 1883) I,1. Usually translated as "representation" or "idea", *Vorstellung* of course has the more distinct meaning of something objectively posited.

11. Ib. I,18.

own body is given to me no differently than is anyone else's. But in bodily feeling I exist uniquely for myself, but pre-consciously, affectively; as impulsively self-given, not as object, but as "will". "What as a representation . . . I call my body, I call my will so far as I am conscious of it in an entirely different way . . . my body is [but] the *objectivity* of my will."[12]

This reality is nothing positive, however. On the contrary, in existential self-feeling human existence is given as a pure negativity; as irrepressible egocentricity and an insatiable because eternally unsatisfied yearning and lusting, nothing more.[13] In this fundamental egoism is to be found nonetheless the principal evidence of what reality is. For human self-existence is itself but a particular expression, as are also the blind forces of nature and the unconscious urgings of biological life, of the absolute negativity and self-assertiveness of Will. Where reality is a senseless, endless, all-annihilating striving, there can of course be no objective redemption. The only recourse is the limited ascetic and aesthetic freedom possible through abnegation of life and will and dispassionate brooding upon the relentless contingency of all existence in a meaningless world. Schopenhauer's pessimism forms the crude prototype of the later sophistications of existential philosophy.

IV

What is remarkable in these early dogmas is how precisely they inversely reflect one another; how they reach diametrically opposed conclusions from the same premises. Both would overthrow idealism in the name of a real, finite individual freedom, one objectively and positively, the other subjectively and negatively. Both judge the moral and intellectual views of the world spurious, claiming a prior, immediate awareness of the real in the purely affective feeling of self. Yet this same testimony of human self-feeling, as the direct clue to what reality is in itself, leads the one to define this reality as Humanity, the other as Will. From this alleged immediate identity of subjective and objective, one draws the inference that the real is the positive moment in the phenomenal, the other, that the phenomenal is the negative moment in the real.

The thoroughly inverse relativity of these positions has been ignored. Regarded, as they still tend to be, as parallel streams or

12. Ib. I,18.

13. "Man is at bottom a savage, horrible beast. . . In every man there dwells a colossal egoism. . . a wild beast which waits for opportunities to storm and rage in its desire to inflict pain . . . or to kill". *On Human Nature*; tr. T.B. Saunders (London, 1897) pp. 18-22

rival schools which somehow don't see eye to eye, positivism and nihilism appear as if they developed as more or less independent traditions. But they are two sides of one coin, mutually exclusive versions of the same anti-idealist argument. So grasped, they suggest a contradiction internal to that argument itself. As Hegel says, when philosophy divides into schools, it signals the presence of a profound ambiguity, the anxiety to avoid which takes the form of the development of one side and another of it as if independent, each acquiring the appearance of self-sufficiency only through explicity dogmatic contrast to its opposite number. Accordingly, like stoicism and epicureanism or rationalism and empiricism, one may embrace positivism or existentialism, but never both; indeed one can embrace the one precisely so far as one also rejects the other.[14]

In this manner has been concealed the contradiction inherent in the revolutionary reduction of freedom to finite terms, upon which the radical critique of idealism turns. Positivism and nihilism both affirm the immediate identity of consciousness and being, self and reality, claimed to be manifest in the finite individual's immediate feeling of self, and this is opposed, as an actual or existential freedom, to the abstract freedom of idealism. But it turns out this concept of the real, self-existent individual in and for whom everything is thus somehow already present, is no less productive of abstractions, abstractions like "humanity" and "will". These are abstract precisely because they assert the principle of finite freedom only by suppressing the moment of difference and mediation equally essential to the concept of freedom in its complete or infinite sense, i.e., the moment of subjective-objective *opposition*. This is evident in the presupposition common to all ultra- and post-modern philosophy, namely that the notions both of an objectivity in and for itself substantial, nature, and a subjectivity in and for itself free, spirit, are mere fictions of "idealism" which must be repudiated.

But in declaring all reflexive distinctions such as subject and object or thinking and being null and void, it then becomes crucially problematical how now to characterise the primordial, prereflexive identity into which these have been collapsed. The spiritual-natural distinction remains in fact a suppressed premise within it, reasserting itself as a fundamental ambiguity at the heart of the standpoint of realized finite freedom. On its one side it appears as a positive liberalism committed to an endless overcoming of nature and human particularity through technological,

14. The hidden dependency on these ancient dogmatisms upon their mutual exclusion and specific denial of each other's premises was exposed in the skeptical tropes. The relation of post-philosophy to the conflicting dogmas of the 20th century schools may be viewed as analogous.

psychological and social-revolutionary praxis; on its other, a contrary anarchistic nihilism dedicated to conserving just that human particularity through radical annihilation of all objective, universal meanings and ends as such. Having one and the same root, these two aspects of finite, individual freedom are obliged to assert themselves differentially and dogmatically and in opposition to one another, each seeking to assimilate and subordinate the other to itself. Thus in behaviouristic humanism the moment of subjective freedom and the infinity of self-consciousness is inevitably suppressed, while in nihilism, the possibility of an objectively realized human freedom is obliterated.

The 19th and 20th century has seen the fullest sophistication of these positions, beginning with Marx's and Neitzsche's attempts to effect the radical overthrow of the philosophical stand-point as such, and developing through various subsequent versions of "contemporary philosophy", all seeking more adequate statements of what a truly ultra-philosophical position might be. Positivism bred a whole family of schools with the common aim of rededicating rationality to the service of purely human circumstances and ends by confining the philosophical spirit to their justification through the philosophy of science and social and linguistic analysis. Nihilism for its part gave rise to a tradition of existential phenomenology, committed to the defense of subjective freedom through various attempts at perfecting the destruction in principle of the possibility of any ontological or ethical universality.

In the era of post-philosophy, this work would appear complete, though perhaps with an unexpected result. The belief of the 20th century schools in a once-for-all literal dethronement of speculative philosophy in the name of actual human freedom now appears to have been naive; the question of the "how" of such an overthrow has become more directly a question for philosophy itself. In the current post-philosophical dilemma as to whether philosophy can best bring about its own suspension or demise through radical self-transformation or rather radical self-criticism, the ghost of the original contradiction remains. If the post-idealist philosophy of radical freedom no longer takes the form of earnest confrontations between rival schools, logics and ontologies and has fallen into a generalized skeptical reflection upon language, a conflict is still evident between the commitment to an unredeemed human finitude anxious to exterminate philosophy altogether, insisting on the utter indeterminability of all forms of linguistic and historical meaning, and the commitment somehow to conserve the philosophical tradition in some sort of superceded form, as hermeneutical research.

But there is a third option: the collapse of philosophy itself into these essentially self-negative forms might impel us to raise deeper questions about the whole program and tradition of anti-idealist, revolutionary thought and to question to what extent it may be said to have succeeded or failed in what it set out to accomplish.

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