The Revolutionary Origins of Contemporary Philosophy

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In the decades after World War II, a revolution swept the universities, taking as its task to free academe from the grip of traditional philosophy, which it pronounced defunct. Analysis, phenomenology, positivism, symbolic logic, existentialism and the various other forms of this movement differed superficially from one another in thesis and method, but they were at one in the conviction that philosophy must embark upon a radically new course, understanding its mission to be quite other than what had always been supposed. It must above all turn away from the preoccupation with eternal verities and conform itself to a new outlook for which truth, so far as one can speak of it at all, resides neither in a realm of ideas, nor in the inner man, but in the ordinary worldly experience of the individual here and now.

Contemporary philosophy, as the various forms of this movement came collectively to be known, was not "contemporary" in the usual sense in which events are spoken of as current or concurrent. Rather it signalled opposition to all that is "un-contemporary", that is, otherworldly, in traditional speculative philosophy. It expressed a commitment to temporality as against eternity; to immediate actualities as against the transtemporal continuities of culture, history and the universality of thought. It was this orientation which gave the term "contemporary" its special import; it was an appellation accepted by most recent schools as befitting their self-conception and it acquired in practice, indeed, the force of a credo in which the devotee of the new realism could feel a certain superiority to all the worn-out "spiritual nonsense" of the traditional literature.[1]

Contemporary philosophy was not defined by its contemporaneity with anything, then, but by the outlook it espoused. It took as its thesis that because the whole of past philosophy rested upon a fundamental error, all its familiar claims and conundrums can now at last be revealed as nothing more than illusions and be set aside. It is a tradition long dominated by a wholly spurious ideal: that it is possible and desirable, even necessary, to "think" the world,

1. Ayer: "No statement which refers to a 'reality' transcending the limits of possible sense experience can possibly have literal significance; from which it must follow that the labours of those who have striven to describe such a reality have all been devoted to the production of nonsense." (*Language, Truth, and Logic*, London, 1936, p. 34.)

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and that only the world as it is for thought is the true one. From the new perspective this is seen as a perversity, one that long concealed from view a simple fact of existence that should be obvious and available to all: that the only "real world" is the practical, time-bound one that is the ordinary individual's everyday concern and experience. The great crime of traditional philosophy, therefore, is to have corrupted concrete human consciousness and installed in its place the mystifications and paradoxes that are the natural products of speculation. It is the business of the revolution in philosophy to break the power of speculative thought and restore to priority the emphasis on the worldly individual and his life.

Yet in spite of its claim to have stepped forever out of history into an absolute practical-existential present, contemporary philosophy nonetheless now recedes into it as a movement whose time has passed. Doctrinaire Marxists are hard to find anymore; the cult of *Dasein* has mostly disbanded. The search for the perfect analytical or phenomenological technique or for adequate surrogates for philosophy like anthropology, economics or linguistics — objectives pursued only a decade or two ago with great enthusiasm everywhere — has now largely been give up. Even the existential terrorism which instilled a nameless anxiety in the minds of a whole generation now reads like so much boring moralism. What currently passes for philosophy is something far less electrifying, namely a kind of indiscriminate activism addressed to what are called "contemporary issues": particular dilemmas of the day ranging anywhere from nuclear defense to female employment, from traffic to birth control. The logical and ethical tradition is preserved for the most only as an intellectual attic; one might still find in it, with a bit of rummaging about, some old distinction or bit of sophistry that may be of use in some on-going popular debate.

In this lapse of philosophy from its august traditional occupation with first principles into an uncertain intellectualizing over passing particularities, there is exquisitely expressed the fundamental contemporary theme: really all that matter are the concerns of individuals here and now. In the wake of this fully realized revolutionary scepticism which questions the very relevance of philosophy and its universal themes and methods, it turns out that even contemporary school-philosophy itself has had to close up shop. Current philosophical scholarship no longer lives in the faith that there are fundamental principles to be understood in philosophy or even doubts to be raised about its value. One is satisfied with maintaining a formal "research productivity" in an industry whose market has dried up and whose capital is spent. A new scholasticism has taken over, devoted to sorting and resorting the spoils of a

ruined philosophical literature with the aid of hermeneutical and electronic devices.

This turn of events is much misinterpreted, however, if it is thought to mean that the once vigorous schools of contemporary philosophy have borne no fruit. On the contrary, the current collapse into sceptical activism is the completion of their stated aim and program. The exposing of philosophy's search for timeless truths and essential realities as a spurious enterprise has been, after all, the principal agenda of contemporary criticism from the beginning. Its typical technique was the employment of dogmatic formulae whose effect was immediately to neutralize the validity of all thinking through concepts, in short to suspend rational thought, thereupon proceeding to reinterpret all the problems of philosophy in the light of this imposed limit, giving them thereby a thoroughly finite meaning.[2]

But this procedure entailed a paradox which would ensure the contemporary schools could not survive. For, though optimistically representing themselves as "philosophy to end all philosophy", their project had no roots in any stable principle, nor could it have, for it was just the discrediting of any appeal to universals that formed their principal aim. If now contemporary thought has become itself passé, it is by no means because its initiative has failed but because it has succeeded. And if philosophy has achieved by its own demonstration the assurance of its utter futility, then the next step for sensible people is to forego it altogether and turn to more practical questions: i.e., to "contemporary issues".

This allows for an unprecedented opportunity now to begin to speak of contemporary philosophy as a totality — as a "phenomenon" —; to plumb its origins and assess its accomplishment. From this viewpoint what directly is clear is that though we think of it as a 20th century manifestation, contemporary philosophy is really the final phase in a development which began after the close of the 18th century. For it was with the radical writers of that era that the revolt against the speculative standpoint and the traditional moral-spiritual view of man was begun in earnest and the absoluteness of the finite individual affirmed. Though ostracized in their own time as outrageous extremities, the principles announced in these times acquired popular acceptance in due course and by the 20th century had formed themselves into explicit philosophical movements with leading figures and literatures —

2. The political revolution was not an overthrow of some particular political order, but of 'political order' — of the state as such. Likewise it is not some system of philosophy the revolutionary philosophy aims to undermine but the speculative consciousness itself; to destroy the world for thought.

existentialism, positivism, Marxism and the rest. This whole movement from the eclipse of systematic philosophy in the early 19th century up to and incorporating the more recent contemporary schools, we can conveniently designate as "revolutionary philosophy".

Earlier revolutionary philosophy being largely extra-academic, "contemporary philosophy" may be used to refer to the later formalizations of it which effected the conquest of the universities. Appealing to the innovations of a new breed of "scientific" philosophers popular after the turn of the century — Russell, Husserl, Frege, Lenin, Freud *et al* — there began everywhere to be advocated a "final solution" to the ancient issues of logic, ontology, politics and the rest. In academe a struggle soon began between this view and that of the "reactionary traditionalists" who still dominated the intellectual as they did the political world. By mid-century this struggle had escalated into a near-total rout that altered radically the teaching of philosophy and its prestige and influence within the academic curriculum.

Contemporary philosophy thus completed the destruction of the philosophical-theological tradition begun in and after Hegel's time. The recent schools — phenomenology, logical positivism and the others — formed the penultimate phase in an overall course of development through which the revolutionary standpoint gained ascendancy over speculative thought and finally obliterated it. If the arguments of the contemporary schools appeared to give the revolutionary position philosophical respectability and a basis in demonstration, rather was their tremendous influence and appeal rooted in the opposite thesis: that philosophy is at best a "second order" discipline and that the idea of a philosophical demonstration is in any case quite meaningless.[3]

What underlies this revolutionary destruction of thought and its discipline is the conviction that the radical freedom of the

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3. Contemporary philosophy is distinguished by its defense of the primacy of pre-reflexive immediacies: 'raw data' impervious to thought. As examples: sense-data (Ayer), protodoxic consciousness (Husserl), logical-linguistic facts (Russell, Wittgenstein) and so forth. Philosophy is to have no content of its own, but be employed as a 'tool' (i.e., technique) for justifying and enhancing the free play of the forms of 'first-order' knowledge descriptive of these immediacies: the positive sciences primarily. In this literally thought-less function philosophy becomes their handmaid; an advocate for the revolutionary standpoint in the courts of intellect — i.e., in the universities.

individual demands it. Where the individual is thought absolute in his immediacy and subjectivity, his is the only reality that counts.[4] The whole idea and enterprise of the traditional "spiritual" disciplines must be judged inimical to this position, for in the religious and philosophical consciousness is directly implied that the finite perspective of individuals is anything but absolute. The claims of subjective freedom cannot accordingly be indifferent to the competing traditional forms of the "absolute consciousness", philosophy and religion particularly; it must destroy and replace them with its own revolutionary, contemporary outlook. This was precisely the position of Stirner, Feuerbach, Kierkegaard and all the others: they were aware that the very orientation of traditional thought did not merely differ from their revolutionary thesis; it ran distinctly contrary to it.[5]

The early writers were by no means equivocal on this score. As Marx put it, there is only one absolute premise: that individuals exist.[6] That any other *a priori* be accepted implies some wish to limit freedom. As it is religion and philosophy particularly that deal in realities that transcend the ordinary individual self-consciousness, these disciplines preeminently are to be suspected and their influence undermined. Nietzsche's or Freud's view is no different. The exuberant conquest of the spiritual-speculative outlook as such was, indeed, the common goal to which most of the significant writers of the 19th and 20th century addressed themselves. It is the rhetoric of a joyous "return to earth" out of the stagnant otherworldliness of the tradition — the return to life, nature, impulse, practicalities — that gives their writing its peculiar vividness. The quality of vivacity springs from the extremity of the position: for the new outlook meant not just an advance beyond some older outworn doctrine or idea; it signalled the rejection of *all* "doctrines", all "ideas" as such; in short the overthrow of all speculative consciousness, and hence philosophy and religion themselves.

4. Sartre's well-known syllogism is briefest: "If God exists, I am not free; I am free; therefore God does not exist." But it is far from original; it is the argument also of Nietzsche's deicidal madman and Dostoevsky's inquisitor; indeed of all revolutionary literature.

5. That the destruction of western thought as a whole is not just a corollary comes out clearly in Heidegger, where the "destruction of western ontology" becomes an essential systematic moment in the argument. *Being and Time*, Intro.II.6.(eng. tr. Macquarrie/Robinson, 1962.)

6. "The premises from which we start are not arbitrary . . . They are the real individuals, their actions, and their material conditions of life . . ." "The first premise of all human history . . . is the existence of living human individuals." *Ger. Ideol.*, in *Writings of the Young Marx*, (Easton/Guddat, Garden City, 1967, pp. 408-9.)

The carrying out of this destruction of the speculative-spiritual consciousness took a definite historical course, beginning with the enthusiasms of the early revolutionary writers and ending in the current collapse of the movement as a whole into scepticism. It is important to see that this impasse is no different than that reached by general culture at the present juncture; for the philosophical revolution has been but the inward, intellectual form of the outward cultural-political one. The principle of both is subjective freedom, the existing individual as ultimate value and *kriterion*. The inward vision is of a consciousness free of all gods, objective categories and universal ethical ends; the outward vision is of a life liberated from all outward social and legal authority as well as the restrictions imposed by nature — the first through political, the second through technological revolution. To be free is in these terms to know oneself, even as finite in a finite world, as complete and fully reconciled. If an inner consciousness of personal completeness is incompatible with the idea that freedom requires the mediation of religious or philosophical awareness, no more is the outward ideal of a revolutionary society in which all are liberated from law, the family, morality or the state compatible with the traditional doctrine that it is just through the discipline of these ethical objectivities that freedom is brought about and sustained.[7] Who would be free in his immediate, natural subjectivity must therefore repudiate these incompatibilities by rejecting the traditional arguments which form the other side. It is this one-sided resolve that fueled the enormously powerful world- and mind-changing passion for "liberation" that has been the driving force behind the whole course of history since the close of the 18th century.

The collapse of the objective revolution in the present time is one in which that humanistic enthusiasm finds itself paralyzed between the expectations of paradise and of total cataclysm. The panaceas of a world order perfected through revolutionary socialism, of therapeutic emancipation from all inner "guilt", of a brilliant technological utopia that would substitute man-made environments for nature's caprice: these visions have largely faded or become intensely problematical. No bright millennium glows on the horizon, only the mushroom cloud. Revolutionary activism, its ends become

7. In the traditional view, as summarized in Hegel (*Encyc.*, s.386; *Phil. Right*, ss.27-28), freedom is first the individual's self-conscious nature, also the real substance of his objective social life, and again the consciousness of the absolute truth of freedom as the common ground — spirit. In the revolutionary view these distinctions are obliterated, so that the inwardness of personality, the authority of institutions and the spiritual consciousness are alike denied in the monism of the existing individual who is thought to subordinate all these to dimensions of his own finite freedom.

confused and compulsive, has degenerated into a defense of the most absurdly particularistic rights, to be enforced through the cultivation of mindless solidarities or through the exercise of unconstituted, terroristic power. It is by now clear to all that the enthusiasm which feeds technology's bright promise of a human-material kingdom of heaven is at once the very impulse that threatens the integrity of nature and the safety of the species. Likewise the psychology that was to liberate personality from its darker side has presided over a widespread degeneration into its more mechanistic, narcissistic and violent dimensions.

But it would be wrong to think the great issues and enigmas of the time are only technological or political in character. Parallel to the outward ambiguity is an inward, spiritual one. Like nuclear fission, the principle of subjective freedom has unleashed an unprecedented intellectual force in the world with its own all-obliterating potentiality. The doomsday weapon may be the deadly technological *non sequitur* of the nuclear age; but as terrifying as the prospect of a nuclear wasteland and the end of the race may be, perhaps more so is the nightmare of a communal life made chaotic and irredeemably evil through the domination of an illimitable subjective will, justified in a humanistic religiosity that preaches the sanctity of self-feeling.[8] Where thought is overruled and ethical life drowned in cynicism, it no longer much matters what happens to the planet.

Still, it is quite as foolish to suppose that the now universal certainty of subjective freedom is something that can or should be simply suppressed, as to suggest that nuclear fission should be uninvented. No more can the consciousness of their subjective freedom be driven from people's heads than can the telephone, plastics or the microchip be returned to their elements; indeed perhaps less so. It is the phenomenal success, not the failure of technical genius that now threatens civilization; it is the success of the revolutionary-democratic idea that now propels the world into political and ethical confusion. It is the achievement of contemporary philosophy, likewise, to have brought about the collapse of the speculative spirit. This is our dilemma, suffered with increasing intensity on all fronts. There is no turning back, yet the way ahead seems infinitely treacherous, since the only route we know is the one that has led to the abyss.

8. A similar image in Nietzsche: *Geneology of Morals*, 3-15. The culture of subjective freedom reaches critical mass when the counterbalancing sense of ethical reason has been annulled. The contemporary inability to check the helpless drift into ethical-political anarchy or the destructive frenzy of technological-economic praxis is rooted in the unrestrictedness of the conviction that the absolute right of individuals is the whole of freedom.

The collapse of philosophy through the "triumph of subjectivity" is the direct consequence of the doctrine that it is the particular individual's conscience and judgment alone that has value. It is a holding fast in the most literal way to this dogma that has produced a world in which it is all but impossible any longer to say what thinking or reason is. It is a world in which, for example, even the most subtle minds are given over to such semi-phrenological notions as that thought is an electrical or organic phenomenon.[9] The substantial meaning of theological-philosophical concepts can barely hope to fare any better where all appeal to reasons and universal ends has been largely given up and where even to define man as a thinking, ethical being nowadays evokes sceptical smiles.

The revolution in philosophy has thus also produced its own peculiar impasse; thinking has been thoroughly subordinated to the subjectivity of individual self-consciousness, and in this lies the great intellectual stumbling-block of the age. Where the authority of rational thought itself has been denied, the triumph of freedom is the same as the affirmation of this thoughtlessness; freedom and anarchy — absence of principle — become the same. Yet it is in this subjective, anarchic form that contemporary freedom has established itself and it is this that makes it seem impossible to advance any further. To remain fixed in the impasse, however, is to be satisfied to think nothing and thereby to accept an intellectual and moral end of the world.

But neither is there an alternative in going back to camp out in some older, pre-revolutionary certainty — traditional Christianity, say, or Plato or Hegel — on the grounds that only so can rationality be preserved. The impasse must rather be got beyond and this has now become possible as never before. Through the utter ambiguity that has now finally been revealed in it, the concept of absolute subjective freedom can at last be known as the abstraction it always was. The revolution has implanted the concept of subjective freedom in general consciousness and fixed it there, but in the process a whole other side of the concept of freedom has been thoroughly repressed, specifically its objective, that is, its logical, ethical and historical mediation. The condensing of the whole of the considerable traditional knowledge of freedom into a single dogmatic presupposition, the taking hold of it exclusively

9. Thus in recent interviews, Ayer reports he finds no grounds for distinguishing thoughts from bio-electric discharges while Minsky, a leader in the field of 'artificial intelligence', finds nothing peculiar in saying that computors, though inert man-made devices, represent a new evolutionary form which supercedes the human species (Toronto *Globe*, Oct., 1984). Thus ultra-positivists revert to that pre-scientific barbarism of mind which cannot tell a thought from a thing or a man from a fabricated idol.

in a subjective form and holding this to be absolute freedom itself, has yielded in the end only a compulsive individualism either without content or with a content arbitrary because without universality and necessity — "radicalism".

It is the literal equation of freedom with particular, existential self-consciousness, the revolutionary principle, that underlies its collapse finally into an assertoric and unutterable subjectivity. To recognize this as what the full realization of that principle comes to is to recognize that the revolutionary movement has reached its term and can itself go no further. To go beyond it requires in the first instance that the movement itself, so understood as complete, be grasped in its fundamental ambiguity and given up. But there are many obvious impediments to taking this step, not the least of which is the inertia that will not easily accept the judgment that the revolutionary standpoint of contemporary thought is now, in its turn, the defunct tradition to be critically rejected. The pronouncements of Russell, Heidegger or Husserl concerning the impotence of traditional philosophy will not readily be set aside, even if no one much reads their books any longer, or only for purposes of "research". Their claims — that there are no absolutes, that the reason and faith that made the west what it is are wholly spurious, that the judgment of the particular individual is inviolable in all matters and without need of a ground beyond itself — these have become ingrained.

There is the further difficulty that the very capacity for speculative inquiry has itself become corrupted. Ideas which, in Feuerbach's time, were considered extreme, dangerous or foolish — what could be more satanic from the traditional point of view than the doctrine that finite humanity is God? — have since become generally accepted certainties. To establish this perspective required the total eclipsing of the spiritual account of man, and this contemporary philosophy has in fact achieved. But the cost is now to be counted. The edifice of the older intellectual tradition lies in ruins, like a demolished temple, under the hammerings of such as Nietzsche or Popper, and we, accustomed now to viewing it as the handiwork of an obsolete mentality alienated from that freedom whose invention we think to be exclusively our own, find it most difficult to imagine it as it once stood and was inhabited, constructed by architects as wise or even wiser than we. But this is now the great challenge: to overcome just that prejudice that has mutilated the philosophical understanding. If that understanding is to be restored to health, it can occur only where the limits of the revolutionary standpoint of subjective freedom have been fully laid bare and comprehended.

II

The progress of revolutionary culture since the 18th century has followed several parallel paths, the most familiar being the development of ideas of radical and social individual freedom that have utterly altered the world's political landscape and by now achieved virtually universal acceptance. Coincident developments in logic, theology and philosophy generally have had no less significant an impact, having effected a corresponding revolution in ordinary consciousness and in the way we think about the world. If the central theme of the political revolution has been the subordination of institutions to the requirements of subjective freedom, so the main thrust in logic and theology since Hegel has been the subordination of the authority of thought to the same principle.

Theology since Schleiermacher, for example, has been chiefly occupied with the restriction of the meaning of God to a dimension of the individual's belief and practice. With Comte and Schopenhauer began the destruction of ontology; both positivism and nihilism are realisms which have immediacy of subjective self-consciousness as their basis. Again, the two main schools which dominated more recent contemporary philosophy, analysis and phenomenology, grew out of a logical revolution whose aim was to dissociate logic from thought and to base it rather upon "meaning", that is, upon acts of linguistic or conscious reference.[10]

It is important to discern in these various trends a theme which knits them together. In the literature of the early revolutionary writers the theme is stated plainly enough: they spoke of the overthrow of *idealism.* If philosophers today no longer speak much of this matter, it is only because the conquest of idealism is regarded as something already accomplished — who in these times, after all, give the slightest credence to old talk of the thought-world or the reality of the ideal? On the contrary, virtually every major philosophy of the 19th and 20th century has assumed as granted that the error of the traditional philosophy has been just its entanglement with transcendencies; the whole point now is to reject

10. Russell's *Principia Mathematica* (1913) and Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900/1913) are the 'old testaments' of the contemporary movements. Their interest is the same: how to break away from the idea of logic as *thinking* science and 'found' it in (conform it to) an allegedly more primordial prereflexive datum. The foundation of 'analysis' is thus the ideal of an ultra-formalism; of phenomenology, an ultra-transcendentalism.

this perspective and to affirm in contrast the concreteness of worldly human self-awareness and finite experience.[11]

So complete has been the revolutionary overthrow of idealism, indeed, that it is by no means easy to find even the most ordinary appreciation of what idealism has meant historically. The contemporary mind accommodates itself to pre-19th century thinking only with the greatest difficulty and recent commentaries on the philosophical systems of the past rarely display much feeling for them, misconceive and caricature their reasoning in fact, and not infrequently resort to an arrogant patronizing of their genius from an often much narrower and ephemeral contemporary point of view.[12] Typically one is referred back to Kierkegaard, perhaps, or Marx, where the definitive and decisive refutation of idealism is supposedly to be found. But what one encounters there is nothing but the contemporary position itself in a more primitive form, and moreover, instead of a definitive argument, numerous dogmatic schools engaged in a common tirade against idealism but also utterly divided among themselves, even as to what idealism is and why and how it must be refuted. In short, most revolutionary interpretations of idealism late and soon are notoriously biased, unconvincing and, even more telling, far from unanimous. It is worthwhile to try to suspend our by now instinctive assent to these interpretations and consider idealism on its own terms; it is supremely timely, given the revolution's present collapse through its own ambiguities, that we do.

The essence of idealism lies in the idea of a free, thinking existence — the spiritual life — as primary, and the need to conform all understanding and practice to this idea. Ingrained through centuries of Christian culture and reflection, this idea of spiritual actuality formed the moving principle of modern philosophy from its inception, and it is the concept especially of which the whole

11. E.g Jaspers: "It is impossible for man to have transcendence in time as a knowable object . . . The ultimate in thinking is . . . silence." (*Reason and Existenz*), tr. Earle, Lon., 1956, p. 100. Wittgenstein's well-known conclusion to his excursion into logic is remarkably similar. (*Tractatus*, 6.53, 6.54.)

12. As recent examples of the decadence of contemporary understanding of the tradition, see J. Bennett, *A Study of Spinoza's Ethics*, 1984, and C. Taylor, *Hegel*, 1975; both regarded as masterworks of commentary. The giants of philosophy are treated as clever graduate students who have somehow hit upon a few commendable insights but whose work must be judged naive overall. As evidence of the superior 20th century sophistication of the professors, we find Taylor claiming that everything in Hegel really comes down to his belief in the existence of a 'cosmic spirit' (p. 83), while Bennett decides that all that Spinoza really meant by substance was nothing more than 'space'! (c.4, sects. 22-25.)

development from Descartes to Hegel is the unfolding and clarification. Its central interest is the comprehension conceptually of what is set down in the Christian revelation whereby the conformity of the finite world with the infinite divine activity is not something true only for abstract thought, but is so also for the individual's experience of nature and of his own finite life. It is the certainty that nothing can be alien to the consciousness that is raised to the spiritual standpoint.

In modern philosophy this principle first appears as Reason, as much subjective power as objective essence. It is reason's insight that illumines the formerly dark recesses of an alien nature, revealing its perfect conformity with the categories of a human understanding disciplined in and by the infinite idea of the unity of thinking and existence in the one true substance: the idea of God as a being self-original and rational in Himself. This infinite substance in which all things appear and which forms the true object of a clarified and reformed thinking experience comes into view within a rational intuition whose authority is presupposed and in whose inward certainty the self-givenness of substantial being really has its ground. The "substance" of early modern philosophy is thus quite the same as spirit, but in the form of the unconscious product of reason, its own instinctively self-posited reality. In metaphysical idealism as we find it among the Cartesians Spinoza, Locke and Leibniz, however, the form of this identity as spirit has not emerged; there is simply the insight into being as the immediate substantial unity of thought and existence, of the thinking "I" and nature.[13]

That further reflection does begin to emerge in the sceptical and transcendental idealism of the high enlightenment. Enlightenment signifies a critical revolt against the disparity between the thought of this substantial unity and the subjective self-consciousness which finds itself outside it and for which it still appears abstract. This subjective idealism is a rejection of reason as merely intuitive and theoretical, together with its metaphysical world. The movement is hence inward; reason becomes the reflexive activity whereby the meaning of that metaphysical, external content is critically subordinated to the subjective conditions of individual self-

13. The technique of current interpretation of the older philosophies is first to translate them into faulted forms of contemporary individualism and then to correct the 'mistake'. Ryle (*Concept of Mind*, 1949, c.1.) claims that the Cartesian distinction of mind and body is only a "category mistake", thus transposing the whole argument into the context of British linguistic positivism, while Husserl (*Cartesian Meditations*, tr. Cairns, 1960, I.23) describes the 'I-think' as a mere "tag-end of the world": the Cartesian doubt being for him an incomplete phenomenological reduction. Nearly all commentaries take a similar tack.

consciousness and experience, which is now thought exclusively to be the adequate ground for all judgments as to how consciousness is conformed with what is there for it. The Spinozistic substance is spiritual life, but as a purely abstract thing or power in which the element of self-consciousness gets lost. In critical idealism this extraneous unity is transformed into an inward *a priori*, the infinite reflexivity of self-conscious reason: the "I=I".[14]

Finally, in absolute idealism, intuitive and reflexive reason are brought back into relation. Reason again is there, actual in the world, though no longer as an abstract or merely underlying substantial order, for the moment of self-consciousness now belongs also to it. On the other side, it has taken also into account the extreme of reason's infinite self-referentiality, the "I=I" of self-consciousness. But freedom is no longer merely a subjective freedom; it has become the constitutive, sustaining principle of an objective life as well, and this unity of subjective with objective reason is the principle of spirit that is central in the Hegelian philosophy, where it is explicitly spoken of as the latent idea behind the whole argument of modern philosophy, whose development it is.[15]

It is this idea of the infinitely self-actual spirit, which in Hegel appears as the conclusion of a logical, phenomenological and historical mediation, that is the inspiration for the revolutionary standpoint which both brings the classical era of modernity to a close and inaugurates a new one. In the new standpoint the emphasis is upon an actually realized free life; the existing, self-conscious individual is said directly to be this real, concrete freedom. But in it the form of pure subjectivity is by no means relinquished; indeed the revolution's reality-principle consists just in the dogmatic affirmation of the subjective itself in which it acquires a

14. The idealist I=I is the logical formulation of self-consciousness in which is to lie the ground of all worldly understanding (reason) and all morality (freedom). On the political side it is the principle of bourgeois revolution, the "absolute freedom" Hegel speaks of in *Phen. of Spirit* BB.vi.b.iii.

15. Not only is this "unity of substance and subjectivity" or self-conscious reason everywhere identified as the *telos* of modern thought in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*; the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is nothing else but the logical derivation of this same unity, as indicated in 'Preface', the conclusion (DD.viii: "Das Absolute Wissen"), and throughout.

concreteness, but only one that is willed or intended.[16] In this form it must find itself in opposition to subjective idealism as such, which it accuses of failing so to assert the reality of the subjective, thereby allowing it to remain as a mere "spiritual" inactuality. This claim becomes the standard position of the revolutionary philosophy as against all former thinking. It presents itself as an immaculate conception, a radical beginning anew; yet it is really never free of the principle of subjective idealism from which it in fact emerged and to which it remains tied as the radicalizing of the same. The whole subsequent development, which includes 20th century contemporary philosophy, may thus be described as a corruption into dogmatism of subjective idealism and in that sense a kind of pseudo-Hegelianism.

This is the source of its characteristic ambiguity that proclaims absoluteness for self-consciousness, but as real, natural, worldly existence: the individual who is the revolution's central theme. Certainly the enlightenment critique of metaphysical reason had already brought thinking to bear upon the freedom of self-consciousness, the subjective *a priori* that must "accompany" whatever may be known or done. But the moment this subjective absolute was elucidated, pre-eminently by Hume and Kant, a limit appeared in it. For though in one sense everything is taken to be determined through and through in the spontaneity of self-consciousness — that is, freedom is for a moment ultimate — the abstraction of a substantial other, an "in itself" unpenetrated by reason, still remains. With Hume the ghost of an external world in principle impervious to reason remains to haunt experience. With Kant the metaphysical noumenon still casts its shadow over an otherwise transcendentally illuminated nature; and this in spite of the claim the objective is as such rooted in reason's categories alone.[17]

16. The difficulty revolutionary writers have had expressing this concreteness they would attach to individual freedom is notorious. Early writers referred to the "sensuous" or "natural" individual, Kierkegaard to "existence", Marx to "self-activity", Nietzsche "will to power", neo-idealists to "the absolute" or the "unknowable". Recent writers struggle with "raw feels" or return to Parmenidean "being". The difficulty is that where the ultimately real is subjectivity, it cannot grasp itself determinately or objectively, but 'is' *only* in its affirming.

17. 'Empirical science' and 'moral freedom' are the same outlook, rooted in a powerful ambiguity which says all knowledge and action are determined wholly subjectively (experience, choice) while yet not so (nature, impulse). Hume and Kant gave this contradiction respectability which is why they are still taught as the greatest among the 'classical' modern philosophers. Revolutionary thinking, however, already has hold of a view beyond theirs.

Conscious of this residual dualism, Fichte and Schelling extended the Kantian argument to extreme forms, analogous to the modification of the Cartesian philosophy at the hands of Malebranche and Spinoza. They proposed to begin absolutely from the pure subjective-objective identity of ego, within whose reflexive economy the world for consciousness could be thought reconciled already within the inward infinite of self-consciousness. Within Fichte's absolute ego-relation (I=I) there is distinguished the finite relations of self to nature (consciousness) and self to itself (self-consciousness). Substance or the in-itself is thus taken up as a moment of otherness or impulsiveness within subjectivity itself; its own "not-self". This positivity within the ego's self-activity is the ground of the apparent givenness which nature has for theoretical consciousness; but since it is the ego's own self-imposed limit, it must also always negate it, and this is the ground of the infinite vocation imposed on the individual not to take the world as an extraneously given reality, but to determine it as the material occasion of his own moral and technical activity. As the stimulus of the not-self must also be eternally presupposed in this activity, however,the individual self-consciousness can only find fulfillment finitely in an indefinite yearning after an ideal autonomy; in a process of endless self-realization.

There is here, therefore, still a subjective one-sidedness in which an unreconciled otherness remains, which is now transplanted in self-consciousness itself. Schelling thought to improve on this reasoning by showing that the ego's subject-object reciprocity should reveal itself also on the objective side, with respect to the not-self, or the natural world as given for consciousness. His philosophy accordingly develops the concept of nature as a realm of the "pre-self", whose highest form, organic life, is an unconscious self-consciousness: the finite expression on the objective side of the same unity which, on the subjective side, is the transcendental ego. In this manner both ego and nature can be seen as two finite poles that differ in nothing more than their polarity; a difference, therefore, that immediately collapses into "in-difference" in the intuition of their absolute identity.[18]

Schelling thus gives philosophical shape to the general absolutist equation of romanticism: Self is Reality; Reality is Self. In his *Naturphilosophie* may be found another major ingredient in the later revolutionary mix, along with Fichte's radical moralism. Yet again the Kantian ambiguity remains unresolved; it is merely submerged.

18. Hegel's so-called *"Differenzschrift"* (1801) — *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, tr. Harris/Cerf, 1977 — provides the best inside view by one wholly caught up for a time in these developments.

With Fichte the other to self-consciousness is denied independence at the expense of planting in the ego an inherent limit which it overcomes only "ideally" in an infinite unrequited subjective longing unable to bring itself to actuality. In Schelling's absolute this need would appear to be met; an objective world appropriate to self-consciousness is brought to light. But this world is not really appropriate at all, since it remains an "unconscious" physical and organic nature upon which the categories of subjectivity have simply been forced. Even if this disparity is renounced and the unity of self and nature affirmed in the absolute intuition, it is only to find all subjective-objective distinctions obliterated or manifest only in blurred, para-mystical articulations available only in the exclusive subjective insights of genius.[19]

In neither a fanatical moral yearning nor in an aesthetic descent into pre-conscious depths is the defect of critical idealism overcome. It remains an idealism which, though in it all differences, determinations and categories have been in one sense thoroughly assimilated to self-consciousness, yet in another, has the moment of its real existence still beyond it. For the absolute of subjective idealism is really nothing or no one; it is but the purely endless reflexivity of inward reason, which can do nothing more than to posit its coincidence with reality or conjure it up in imagination. The unity of self-consciousness with actual life, the reality of spirit in Hegel's terms, remains problematical and a mystery for it.

Hegel saw in subjective idealism an extreme that had been developed to its limit as against the simple substantial unity that formed the principle of the earlier metaphysics. For him both were brought together in the idea of spirit which comes fully to light as the explicit unity of subjectivity and substance, reason and actuality. In this idea is comprehended both the distinguishing of autonomous personality, "I", from the externality of nature — the Cartesian principle —, and the taking up of all externality into it — the sceptical-critical principle of subjective idealism. His system has the end of showing how this infinite inward freedom of self-consciousness has its presupposition and objective realization in the substantial realities of spiritual life: the life of family, work, general culture and community, whose constitutive principle is this same freedom. The true subjective-objective difference is thus wholly founded in the infinite self-identity of spirit, which identity is again

19. The political-technological frenzy of revolution is Fichte's moralism concretized, and with the same quality of unrequitable endlessness which J. Ellul so eloquently describes. Schelling's absolute, the "night in which all cows are black" (*Phen. Spirit*, Preface), becomes the existential being=nothingness, the pure subjectivity which yet has finiteness (*Fallenheit*) in it.

nothing but this thoroughgoing reciprocity. The absolute idea is just the concept of spiritual completeness.

Hegel's works have entirely to do with the concreteness of spiritual life and with its import as the insight of modern philosophy and of the Christian revelation it presupposes. For his contemporaries, however, it is only the result that is seized upon and interpreted; the whole logical and historical mediation by which it comes to light and is justified — the interest which absorbed Hegel himself — simply goes by the board.[20] The actuality of freedom becomes the exclusive starting-point and what is taken to be immediately true for self-consciousness; this was the truth that subjective idealism, as the popular moralism and romanticism of the time, was seen as having grasped only imperfectly.

It thus occurred to the generation that found itself dogmatically in this standpoint that the limit that subjective idealism contained must be swept aside and the actuality of freedom demanded. Were the individual's freedom an ideal sustained only in thought or belief, it would not be an actual or objective freedom. Were it achieved only in some moral or metaphysical universe, it would not be his own, his subjective freedom. Entranced by Hegel's suggestions, but otherwise oblivious to his meaning, the solution was taken to lie in the claim, in spite of its paradoxical nature, that the individual is free directly in his practical and existential particularity here and now, and that it is the appearance that he is not so that is false. By declaring that all philosophies, faiths and moralities in any case have their root and author solely in the existing individual, this new standpoint could be rendered impervious to all objections from that quarter.

In its simplest terms, this is the principle of revolutionary freedom. In its single dogmatic dictum the whole burden of tradition is utterly suspended. In it also there is taken over as its own all that this principle in fact owes to this same tradition from which it springs and against which it now turns in revolt. "Idealism", it is granted, already affirms freedom as true for self-consciousness, but it remains therein an unrealized essence: an elevated thought, an unfulfilled end, the content of some mysterious intuition. For the concretely free individual, idealism thus appears as a radically untrue position,

20. The closest analogy is the fate of the philosophy of antiquity after Aristotle. The Romans took *nous*, thinking reason, as their dogma, in so doing losing all taste or capacity for the speculative genius and labour through which the Greeks brought the principle to light. Philosophy after Hegel likewise becomes utterly blind to the genesis or logic of spiritual freedom, simply because it has made this concept its presupposition. Indeed the revolution is nothing else but the radical, dogmatic affirmation of this principle.

the expression of the distorted self-consciousness of the individual so far as he is estranged and alienated from the actual freedom that really is his life.[21]

The central revolutionary thesis is thus just this: the freedom that idealism affirms only *in principle*, belongs to the existing individual *in fact*. As immediate, it cannot be something to be proved or disproved, yearned after but not found, deserved but not actually owned. It is the individual's immediate nature, his life. As such it must be taken as primordially given prior to all theoretical or practical considerations; the ultimate presupposition and the truth behind the older absolute unities of traditional philosophy. To be established in this truth of freedom, it is only necessary radically to step beyond all mediations that would render it conditional in any way, and reject them as wholly spurious, and this must include, not only all notions of freedom as historically conditioned, or contingent upon submission to some ethical discipline, but also any representation of its truth as the mere conclusion of a logical or ontological argument.

From the viewpoint which refuses to take individual freedom as in any sense hypothetical or problematical, all such conditions must be regarded as mere mystifications which entail the judgment that the individual, though ideally free, is in actuality dirempted, divided against himself, in short, that he is in reality unfree. Unless he affirms his self-determining completeness as an unmediated, absolute fact, therefore, he condemns himself to a merely "spiritual" freedom, an unreal freedom merely in his head. This is the flaw that is thought to vitiate all former idealism: the incommensurability between the individual's self-consciousness as free and his consciousness as finitely existing; between his "spirit" and his "nature". In the subjective idealism of Kant *et al*, there is the claim these are unified in the absolute standpoint, but as such it is merely a postulated reconciliation which does not touch the "real" individual in his worldly relations, in spite of all the claims of morality. The one dimension remains ever outside the other: the individual is "morally" free only insofar as he is "naturally" finite and *vice versa*, and this is the essence of the "alienated" view of idealism of which all the revolutionary writers will speak. The "real" individual, in their view, must be a spiritual-natural identity to which all such dichotomies are subordinate. Where it appears otherwise, this must

21. See Nietzsche on the "will to truth" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, I.i-iv. As in revolutionary politics what is denied is the traditional idea that man is free only within a state, so the ancient claim of philosophy that man must first of all seek truth the revolution regards as the essence of intellectual alienation.

be regarded as a sickness or bondage: a political or psychological corruption of the individual's real freedom which must be overcome.

It is in this context that the uniquely ambiguous revolutionary concept of "liberation" must be understood. The individual is conscious of himself as free, and essentially so, even in his natural-historical particularity. Yet clearly there is everywhere suppression, want and inner diremption. The sense and aim of liberation cannot be, however, to make man free; he cannot be made what he already is. Rather his liberation must mean a practical and psychological purging away of whatever outward or inward obstacles frustrate a freedom already possessed both in nature and as an inalienable right.[22] The position of the older idealism is in this view inverted. It becomes no longer a question as to how a natural or existential consciousness and will may be led out of that conditionedness into the higher spiritual life of freedom, but the opposite: how the individual who is for himself complete and self-sufficient in his natural immediacy is to be released to the unrestricted enjoyment of that freedom; be rid of every limit and compromise. What is foremost to be denied, then, will be that preaching and teaching which would distract man, in the name of higher destinies and obligations, from a fulfillment of what is already available to him in the world; a denial, namely, of the doctrines of traditional religion and speculative philosophy.

III

The revolutionary philosophy thus arises with the collapse of the principle of subjective idealism into literalness and immediacy. Freedom is no longer the individual's infinite spiritual form and end, it is his given nature; this is affirmed as a fact beyond the reach of any mediation. In the existing individual reality and self-consciousness directly coalesce, for what is objective for him is nothing other than his very own world and life. This freedom is no postulate of moral reason or the workings of a subterranean spirit within him; it is the reality of the individual's everyday, concrete relation to himself and to others. That inequity or inner inauthenticity may thwart or limit freedom empirically, they cannot limit it in any essential way, for it is what man in his innermost nature is.

22. This view, again now popular among theologians, stands in the starkest contrast to the Christian doctrine of redemption which, though it teaches that Christ redeems the sins of the world, is far from holding sin to be accidental to a human nature essentially flawless.

This standpoint of radical freedom appeared to those who first espoused it — as it still does to the as yet unsceptical — as possessing great clarity and force. What could be more exhilarating and irresistible than the claim, for those with audacity enough to make it, that we, in our ordinary, "real" individuality, are radically free? It is a counsel of temptation old and familiar enough, long thought of as of the essence of hubris. But here in the revolutionary doctrine it acquires a certainty and moral power never before associated with it, a truth capable of comprehending all others. Setting this its own self-constituted truth against the convoluted historical residue of intellect and custom, it banishes it as a whole to oblivion, leaving the individual completely at home in his purely contemporaneous actuality and worldly life. In this ideal is the essence of philosophical liberation as the revolution sees it.

But though tempting in its dogmatic simplicity, this revolutionary ideal of a radical return to an immediate freedom is, as its fate in our time has shown, only an aspiration after all; it might well be affected, but never fulfilled. For it conceals in it the greatest ambiguity; partly the same that plagues all dogmatic philosophies that would be rid of all mediations and dependencies and pretend to begin utterly anew from declamatory principles,[23] but partly also an ambiguity peculiarly its own. Getting hold of this ambiguity is the key to understanding the revolution itself and its alleged "overthrow of idealism", for this is not understood at all if it is supposed that, in a quite literal sense, the whole of traditional thought has actually been proven erroneous, has successfully been refuted and is now supplanted forever by an entirely new vision of things impervious to criticism. Such a notion is, of course, central in revolutionary mythology itself; even the most eminent contemporary scholars, indeed, still wax naively enthusiastic on the point.

But the revolutionary standpoint is not at all the immaculate conception it takes itself to be. It is precisely what it is: a revolt; and a revolt specifically against subjective idealism, and against traditional philosophy and religion conceived as subjective idealism. It thus acquires all its force and significance only in the context

23. "Dogmatic" makes no reference here to any discredible attitude, but to a typical inference drawn from the reflection that if a principle is truly 'first', it cannot be proved but must be given, self-evident or revealed — made the absolute starting-point. Hegel points out that dogmatism is a perennial dimension of all philosophy (*Encyc.* s.32. with Addition and s.80). But when the dimension is made the whole, dogmatism breeds opposing schools which give rise in turn to scepticism, Roman philosophy being the classical instance; see *Lect. Hist. Phil.*, eng. tr. Haldane/Simson, 1892, c.iii sec.ii.

of this polarization. This is its content; it has no content of its own otherwise. The representation of the alleged fallacies of subjective idealism is thus the often suppressed but yet thoroughly necessary premise in all revolutionary thinking. It is itself, indeed, nothing but subjective idealism; a corrected, revolutionary, "realized" idealism.

The "correction" entails the inversion of what is taken as the standpoint of subjective idealism, the distinction between freedom and the individual's natural existence. These are identified: "free" is what the existing individual is as such. This confers upon him a thoroughly enigmatic sense and value, for, where the existing individual is now literally absolute, the whole relation between himself as a self-conscious being and any universe or totality to which he might be thought to belong is completely turned about. The latter must now be, in the language of Feuerbach, "predicated" of the former; it is only in relation to the self-conscious life of the finite, natural individual that any transcendent, universal or objective context has significance. In short, the existing individual acquires in revolutionary idealism the role of the ultimate being and subject, traditionally assigned to God or some equivalent philosophical absolute.[24]

From this point of view traditional idealism stands accused of conferring fixity upon the division in the individual between freedom and existence, thus rendering the actuality of that freedom dependent upon some transcendent or speculative mediation. Whatever this mediating agency be — God, unconscious nature, the state, or the moral imperative — the individual in making this the priority of his own self-consciousness, alienates himself from himself. There can now be for him nothing but division: subjective-objective, eternal-temporal, spiritual-natural disharmony. But it is only for the individual to affirm himself as in his very nature immediately self-reconciled for this dirempted view of the world to be seen for the spurious consciousness it is; all need to speak of reconciliation through transcendent mediations will simply disappear as a mere symptom of a disease now cured. If, then, subjective idealism will say only a moral freedom is possible due to a inevitable disparity between human means and ends, then the revolution answers that, as pure self-activity, the individual is in himself already both agent and end. If idealism declares the individual's spiritual inwardness to be inevitably limited by an

24. E.g Feuerbach: "This [his] philosophy has for principle, not the substance of Spinoza . . . not the ego of Kant . . . not the absolute spirit of Hegel, but . . . the true *ens realissimum* — man." (*Essence of Christianity*, tr. Eliot, p. xxxv).

ineradicable natural particularity, the answer will be that in the true self-consciousness spirit and nature are the same: the individual in his freedom is just this identity of universality and particularity, a God-man.[25]

The thesis that the thought of the past is the corruption of the simple truth of the individual's practical-existential freedom, and that in its overthrow this freedom is rescued and restored: both are essential premises in the argument. But revolutionary thinking cannot itself recognize the former premise to be its own; to do so would be to admit to being, after all, a "reasoned" position. It simply finds itself in this polarization and merely sees itself as its final resolution. It appears that a supremely simple secret has somehow escaped the grasp of millennia. History itself, in Marx's words and also Nietzsche's, appears "broken in two": before is an age when freedom was stifled, finding a sorry satisfaction only in speculative-religious dreaming and obscurantism; coming up is an age when individual freedom is the universally acknowledged basis of all theory and practice. God sundered from man, freedom from reality, self-consciousness from what is true in itself — such images of diremption idealism perfected and perpetrated. This mentality the revolution will overcome; for it is not the truth about man but only the symptom of his failure heretofore to recognize and act upon his true practical-existential freedom.

The leap into this practical-existential immediacy thus generates simultaneously the counter-image of a vision of things for which freedom has only an abstract life in a spiritual thought-world separated from the sphere of the individual's "real" existence. The annihilation of this spiritual account of the world, and the tradition which supports it, is therefore essential to the justification of the revolutionary standpoint. The twilight of the gods, the eclipse of all *logoi*, is the shadow cast by the rising revolutionary sun. In this lies the reason for the notorious but inevitable disparity between what the actual tradition has to say for itself and what revolutionary reconstructions make of it. "The tradition" for the latter is but its fiction of a cultural standpoint inverse to its own, the subsequent re-inversion of which is the revolutionary truth. This "counter-revolutionary" standpoint is then read back into history, reducing the whole of the philosophical-theological culture of the past to caricature. Everywhere are found "fatal flaws", "fundamental errors", "mystifications", "secret meanings" for revolutionary

25. The 19th cent. fascination with the God-man is wholly at odds with original Christology. There it means simply the divine is the human nature — (Feuerbach, *Essence* pp. xxxvi-xxxvii), or that God is really the human God-consciousness. For the Fathers it meant that the utter distinction of man from God is yet reconciled in God Himself; in His infinite love.

thinking to expose; in other words the whole must be undermined if its radical principle is to stand. This total negative reconstitution of the tradition for the point of view of the revolutionary principle amounts to nothing more than the typical technique of dogmatic tautology.

In this polarization the ambiguity in the revolutionary standpoint is born. It would stand on its own in the immediate, self-constituting truth of freedom, independent of any entanglement with the traditional reflection it has claimed it has overthrown. Yet if that claim is to be more than a purely assertoric one, it cannot simply leave the tradition aside; it must show it to be thoroughly discredited. To do so requires a reconstruction of traditional thought as a whole, such as to reduce all its categories and distinctions to a single contradiction, the resolution of which is the revolution's own return to simple unity. In this manner the revolution seeks to represent its stand as beyond reason while yet true; independent of all precedent, while yet the hidden truth and culmination of all philosophy.[26]

But the necessity of such a reconstruction of tradition and its outlook generates ambiguity in that it condemns the new standpoint to a dependency, if only a negative dependency, upon the tradition nonetheless. There must be this allegedly unfree self-consciousness in order that the liberated consciousness define itself as against it. The whole cycle — the distinction between a free and an alienation consciousness and the overcoming of it — must therefore be taken up into the revolutionary standpoint itself, if it is to appear to itself autonomous. What is formally a need to refer beyond itself to a negated tradition in this way becomes an ambiguity latent in the revolutionary standpoint, and it is this internal contradiction that forces the breakdown of the revolutionary doctrine from the first into contrary forms.

This second division within the revolutionary doctrine is the same as the original opposition between itself and "traditional idealism"; it is that opposition so far as it now belongs within the new context. For, though the revolutionary standpoint presents itself as original, immediate and self-subsistent, it now has mediation in it nevertheless. It is specifically the representation of the alleged contradictions of idealism and their subsequent overthrow that forms the whole of the argument without which the new principle cannot be stated.

26. K. Lowith in *From Hegel to Nietzsche* (tr. Green, 1964) documents the dilemma so strongly felt by those who construed Hegel's themes in a millenialist fashion. That an absolute standpoint should emerge as the result of an historical mediation remains a conundrum for revolutionary thinking: (as example, see E. Fackenheim, *Metaphysics and Historicity*, 1961.) How Hegel himself understands the matter is treated at length in *Lect. Hist. Phil*, Intro.

The concept of radical individual freedom can be given content, indeed, only in relation to those contradictions, which must now be addressed within the new context if it is to be complete. If idealism is said to sunder nature from spirit, existence from self-consciousness, object from subject and so forth, then the new standpoint must declare itself to contain these divisions as nullified in itself. And if this declaration is not to be only an empty fiat, it must moreover be explained just how this nullification is to be understood and carried out. It is in attempting to satisfy this requirement that biases turn up immediately in the way in which the revolutionary standpoint is worked out, for both sides of the polarity — the division between consciousness and existence and also the overcoming of it — must be incorporated into the total argument.

If individual freedom is supposed to be, as alleged, a self-given, supremely concrete truth, the presence in it of ambiguity, let alone of internal contradiction, can hardly be tolerated. As in the classical stoic-epicurean stand-off, the division latent in the revolutionary principle itself is similarly concealed by a polarization into distinct camps, each espousing conflicting forms of the doctrine, both of which nonetheless spring from the same presupposition. Gathered to one side is what appears can be unambiguously asserted in the principle; relegated to the other is all that appears contradictory in it. That which seems to be for the one the essential contradiction of idealism becomes directly for the other the dogmatically unambiguous substance of radical freedom, and *vice versa*. This doubling into mutually exclusive accounts of what radical freedom means plagues the revolutionary movement from the first. Humanism/absolutism, positivism/nihilism and the others: these contesting schools all have the individual's radical freedom as their basis. Yet each regards the other as its own perverted contrary, the very epitome of the alienated consciousness. In this manner the ambiguity latent in their common principle remains veiled, precisely insofar as it is manifest only in the purely assertoric counter-claims of opposing schools.

Far from being the uncomplicated revelation it affects, therefore, the revolutionary doctrine is from the first divided. The main division is between revolutionary humanism and existential individualism, or absolutism. Both answer to what is demanded, yet stand nonetheless in utter contradistinction. Both recognize a fundamental division in self-consciousness, the legacy of idealism; and both at once affirm that in the individual's radical freedom this diremptedness is overcome. With this the whole relation to tradition is left behind, or rather it has been subsumed. Within both forms of the doctrine, each now apparently self-contained, the problem will be how to relate the individual's freedom to his

unfreedom, his liberated to his unliberated condition. For both there will be a disparity recognized between consciousness and existence, spirit and nature in the individual; and for both what is alleged to be immediately given in actual self-consciousness will be just the unity of these poles. The question that now arises is how these, the disparity and the unity, alienation and reconciliation, are to be related. Put abstractly, is the individual's diremptedness essential or unessential to his freedom and in what manner? On this kind of question the schools divide.

The humanist argument takes the side of the natural individual whose diremptedness is viewed as an objective condition, as also is the overcoming of it an objective, practical process. The individual is a fact in a natural fact-world and his liberation depends on whether he is so conscious of himself or not. Where he is not, this is due to some objective circumstance through which the individual's material-practical freedom is in some way unfulfilled. Accordingly his consciousness of self will be of a self divided; a natural dimension alienated from a spiritual and a subjectivity objectively unrealized. Since it is humanism's claim, however, that what is directly given in self-consciousness is just the nullity of all such oppositions, the false isolation of the individual, as particular subjectivity, from the practical, worldly context in which alone his reconciliation is properly to be found, is to be viewed as an unfree condition, precisely the condition reflected and affirmed in the idealist philosophy.

But this worldly account of human freedom forfeits, from the existential viewpoint, just what is essential in the unity that is sought, namely that freedom be immediately the individual's own. The idealist fallacy lies in failing to recognize that the diremption in question is one that belongs to the individual as such, the denial of which condemns the individual to dissipate and externalize his radical self-relation in an endlessness of social and natural relativities. But if freedom is truly the identity in man of self-consciousness with existence, then the individual cannot know himself as free through the mediation of objective conditions, but only directly, absolutely. This absolute freedom must, therefore, form the starting point; finite, objective fact — "the world" — can have significance only subordinate to it. The disparity between consciousness and world belongs to the individual's existence as such; it is simply the measure of his existential particularity and uniqueness. The affirmation of this finitude as identical with freedom nonetheless, is the existential liberation.

These two, humanism and absolutism, form reciprocal sides of the revolutionary idea. Together they form the complete revolutionary standpoint in all its ambiguity. For the individual to be *radically* free is for his unlimited self-relation to have also the

value of a universal, objective fact; but just as much must his factual worldly particularity be at once a dimension of his absolute freedom. On this dilemma the schools divide, though the freedom of individual self-consciousness is for both the crux of the matter.[27] Humanism argues that what is immediately given in the individual self-consciousness is his universal objective nature or *Gattungswesen*: the fact, or positive phenomenon, of his human-being. In subordinating his subjective particularity to this objective natural-spiritual genus and its process — to his "humanity" — the individual finds the completion of his freedom. Absolutism on the contrary takes the testimony of self-consciousness to be the opposite: the individual's radically unique existence for himself as the being who is "already there" before all universals and objectifications. In this infinitely particular self-referential existence which the individual is, indeed, all the categories of the eternal and the external are originally suspended.

These positions do not simply differ; they are thoroughly incompatible. In claiming to have surmounted the ambiguities of subjective idealism through the assertion of a completely actual freedom, what is achieved is only the perpetration of those ambiguities in a concentrated and dogmatic form. The illusion that this principle is unambiguous and consistent, an illusion upon which the whole force and success of the revolutionary movement has depended, is preserved through the division into mutually exclusive forms of the doctrine. Each sees itself as the true account of freedom, each the true overcoming of the divided consciousness of idealism; each sees the other as expressing the very essence of that dividedness. The war with idealism is thus translated into a war between the revolutionary schools. In their original antithetical attacks upon idealism — in Germany upon "Hegelianism" in particular — is to be found the paradigm for the whole subsequent intra-revolutionary debate that forms the principal theme of 19th and 20th century thought.

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27. Revolutionary humanism and absolutism are not the old metaphysical humanism and egoism; the individual as free spirit is neither 'man' (the species) nor 'ego' (the pure subject), but is represented as having these only as moments. The schools nonetheless divide over whether this individuality is more to be characterized as a We that incorporates the I, or and I that incorporates the We; whether universality (being-human) or particularity (uniqueness) is primary. (See M. Messer, *Max Stirner*, 1907, p. 1.)

IV

The general outline of the development of revolutionary philosophy can now be indicated.[28] The ambiguity inherent in the idea of an absolute individual freedom is what determines the form and fate of that development from the earliest statements in the immediate Hegelian era to the present post-contemporary time. It is an ambiguity that has been all along largely concealed in the fierce on-going confrontation between the two major forms of the dogma, but it now comes more plainly into view as the revolutionary principle succumbs to scepticism.

The fact that the movement divides from the outset into two broad schools, here generally designated as humanism and existential absolutism, is a matter the significance of which has not been given nearly the attention it deserves. The division is, certainly, a commonly recognized fact, but up to now most commentary has found itself simply in the debate, aligned on one side or the other of it, thus merely continuing it without really addressing it as a whole. When it is so addressed, what is immediately remarkable is the thoroughgoing reciprocity between the two forms of the doctrine. Both humanism and existentialism present themselves independently in common opposition to the idealist tradition; but what one puts forward as the final breakthrough to freedom turns out to be just what the other describes as the very essence of the idealist fallacy. What for one is the very epitome of the diremptive legacy of speculative philosophy ("Hegelianism") is for the other the very key to the liberation from it; and reciprocally. To this new internecine opposition the ambiguity of the revolt against tradition generally is assimilated.

Again these arguments are not concerned with the actual philosophical tradition any more than the reaction to Hegelianism had much to do with that philosophy. That interest in any case collapses immediately the revolutionary position is taken up, the two being incompatible. Rather its concern is only with the caricature: the *spectre* of idealism. For in its inversion of tradition to make its own the absolute starting point, it regards itself as exempt from all traditional systems and free to make quite what it will of them. The tendency to take extraordinary liberties in the interpretation of the thought of the past, for which revolutionary thinking remains notorious, is initially manifest in the absurd constructions the Young Hegelians and their contemporaries place on cultural history, as a means of "explaining" the genealogy of

28. The present writing is a first chapter in a forthcoming book, the remaining chapters of which touch on 19th and 20th century schools in detail. Here Part IV is only an abbreviated outline.

the revolutionary consciousness. These pseudo-historical sagas typically tell of human self-consciousness degenerating through various stages into its extreme corruption in idealism; from which fate finally, through a bold revolutionary *coup*, the tables are turned, and the consciousness of freedom restored.

What is chiefly of interest in these fictions is that again they fall, on the one side and the other, into utterly reverse accounts of the victory of the "philosophy of the future" over the illusions of the past.[29] The very insight that signals the arrival of the millennium for revolutionary humanism is, from the existential point of view, the perverse consciousness of idealism sunk to its deepest contradiction — precisely to "humanism". But the existential freedom that is then claimed in the revolt of the unique individual against the alien abstractions of humanism is, in turn, precisely what the latter holds to be the quintessential decadence of tradition, namely a particularistic, exclusivist spiritualism that robs real individuals of the objective realization of their freedom. In the general development of the revolutionary movement as a whole, the working out of this mutual inconsistency on the one side and the other is a matter of great importance, for it is the motor which drives the development itself — the reason why there is development at all in a position which, on its own account, is such that to state it at all would seem to be to state it perfectly and forever.

The revolutionary mythologies of the immediate post-Hegelian era are strongly millennialist in character, filled with the confidence that a momentous change had occurred; an old world was dead, a new one born. [30] The times demanded a wholly new understanding that would entail a reversal of centre and circumference more radical than anything conceived by Copernicus or Kant, because concerned, not with nature, but with the meaning of the spiritual life of man. At issue is whether the perennial idea that there is a universal basis of things to which man must conform mind and heart in order that he be reconciled, is any longer meaningful. The need for such a basis is central for tradition and the soul of philosophy and religion. It is this idea that now is to be relegated to the periphery in the name of freedom: the individual self-consciousness is now the absolute reality, centre and focus. The whole sense of nature, culture and history must accordingly be made to orbit about this new sun, as also must all those old creeds which would have made God, matter or spirit rather the substance and pivot of things be

29. For a sampling of the great variety of these fictions, see L. S. Stepelevich, *The Young Hegelians*, 1983, and W. J. Brazill, *The Young Hegelians*, 1970.
30. Few are as rhapsodic as Feuerbach: "The task of the modern era is the realization and humanization of God."(*Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, 1843; tr. Vogel, 1966; princ.I)

seen as dependent planets. To state this unusual claim was the task the early writers undertook, fueled by the romantic enthusiasm of the revolution generally and equipped with the half-digested terminology of absolute idealism. The aim was to give the new standpoint plausibility in stark contrast to the extant philosophical and theological tradition; in the process they found themselves in the ambivalent role of remaining in its language and assumptions nonetheless.

A few examples from this era are sufficient to illustrate the ambiguity into which this philosophical and theological revolution immediately fell in its antithetical accounts of the new approach to freedom. As it is implied in this freedom that nothing but the witness of individual self-consciousness is authoritative, the whole argument is based upon what it is that is allegedly directly given therein: in what form the free individual directly grasps the absolute meaning of his existence. Strauss and Kierkegaard take the issue up theologically. Strauss equates God with the idea of humanity, that is, with the individual's nature *qua* human being in general. This objective essence is that which forms, he claims, the unmediated, primordial content of self-consciousness. Christian faith, which is nothing but this absolute self-consciousness,[31] teaches that the individual is free only in giving over his natural subjectivity entirely, merging it with this self-given humanity, in which he finds his true, universal individuality; that is, his freedom lies in his being as "God-man". In practice what this comes to for Strauss is the typical humanistic worship of technical progress, science and social activism. The true redemption and spiritual life, he says, is not to be found in heaven but in the world of human affairs: in the laboratory, the opera house and the council room.[32] The fallacy of orthodox Christianity is to have attributed the God-consciousness to one particular historical individual, so that all others are reconciled, not actually, but only through the mediation of this third party.

For his contemporary, Kierkegaard, nothing could more exquisitely express the deepest decadence of the idealist, rationalist element in theology than this notion of a universal individuality,

31. In *The Christ of Faith and the Jesus of History*, Strauss's assessment of Schleiermacher, the maintainance of faith as humanistic optimism in distinction from the orthodox 'superstition' of the divinity of Jesus, through the thorough historicization of the latter, is the supreme task for all future theology. (tr. Kech, 1977, Conclus.)

32. Strauss's *Old and New Faith* is a curious celebration of worldly humanism which evoked a blistering attack on the part of Nietzsche in 1873 (*David Strauss, Confessor and Writer* in *Thoughts out of Season*, tr. Ludovici, 1964), though on behalf, not of orthodoxy, but of a contrary form of worldliness.

"humanity". That freedom exist objectively, that it belong to mankind-in-general, is for him the greatest conceivable distortion of the Christian truth. Its original revelation he declares to be just the opposite: that God becomes, not "man", but *Ecce Homo*, this man — some definite, existing individual who is born, grow up etc.[33] Truth is an actual subjectivity to which natural particularity immediately belongs and from which it cannot be abstracted; an "existential" truth that can have no status as a general fact or essence. Christendom, extant Christianity, he attacked because he saw in it the degeneration of religious consciousness into a humanism absurd because the uniqueness of personal existence is translated into an objective principle, and thereby obliterated.[34] What is primordially given in self-consciousness, however, is for him just the opposite: the radical incommensurability of the single individual's awareness of the contingency and uniqueness of his life with any idea of an absolute objective context. For Kierkegaard humanism is the greatest evil and alienation and its name is idealism.[35] It is, however, precisely Strauss's deepest conviction that the greatest of all absurdities is the fiction that radical human particularity in time is somehow true.

The same antithesis is manifested in the new ontologies of the 19th century. Comte's positivism springs from a radical account of the purported failure of traditional metaphysics and epistemology to get beyond the distinction between the phenomenal and the real. The phenomenal, however, is the real and the real the phenomenal, the evidence for which lies, again, in the absolute self-consciousness in which the individual is at one both in himself and for himself in the immediacy of self-feeling. There, in this unconditioned self-givenness, man is absolute for himself, i.e., what he really is, is also what is given for him as phenomenon: again, his objective nature, his "humanity". This absolute testimony of self-feeling is then the paradigm for the scientific understanding of the objective world as also for a morality whose principle is

33. Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology*, Ed. Bretall, 1946, p. 220.)

34. This endlessly elaborated theme reaches its shrillest pitch, perhaps, in *Attack Upon Christendom* (tr. Lowrie, 1966). With few writers is the essentially dogmatic character of revolutionary philosophy more in evidence.

35. The object of Kierkegaard's ire is not Hegel at all, with whose work he showed little familiarity. It is rather the Danish humanist theologians, of the same cast as Strauss and as loose in their use of pseudo-hegelianisms; a matter fully documented in N. Thulstrup, *Kierkegaard's Relation to Hegel*, Princton, 1980.

the subordination of the will to an immediate "feeling for humanity": radical socialism.[36]

Schopenhauer, appealing to the same authority, drew an exactly opposite conclusion. Nothing, he argues, can be more evident than that, as Kant said, "we only know phenomena" and that the individual's objective existence for himself is thus a contingency, nothing in itself; a mere positive outward show of an reality which itself is never given in its manifestations: "will". That this primal, preconscious urging is reality and that the phenomenal, objective world is nothing but its *Vorstellung*, its ephemeral manifestation, is borne witness to in the individual's immediate bodily self-feeling: there the body is given directly as but the external expression of a more primitive unconscious life. Schopenhauer then extends this paradigm to the whole of nature; in the cosmic, irrational, subjective flux of *Wille* all originates and all is annihilated.[37] What again is remarkable, however, is that it is just this view of the world as the mere outward expression of an inward absolute that Comte considered the essence of the religious-metaphysical mystification that long concealed the plain, positive truth of man as a phenomenon in an objective human-natural world. For Schopenhauer, however, nothing represents more typically the failure to grasp what an honest self-consciousness reveals than the perennial optimistic confusion of the seemingly ordered, purposeful, objective world with reality.

Feuerbach's identification of God with the existing individual was even more stunning in its radical reduction of theology to anthropology and ethics to politics.[38] Again man's universal nature, his species-being, is directly given. It is this "spiritual" nature, now merged with sensuous, particular existence, that distinguishes man as man, a fact again allegedly given immediately in self-consciousness. The overcoming of idealism thus meant for him the overcoming of that view in which the natural individual is isolated in and for himself because conscious of his true essence only as an ideal set beyond himself: God or some speculative category. Stirner, his severest critic, affirmed just this isolated individuality, however, and judged the attempt to find in it an objective human

36. Comte: "The constant cultivation of the feelings must take precedence over that of the intellect, and even activity" for "the only really universal point of view is the human, or, speaking more exactly, the social." *Catechism of the Positive Religion* eng. tr. 1858, p. 8.

37. Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille u. Vorstellung* (1819), sect.21.

38. "The object to which a subject essentially, necessarily relates, is nothing else than this subject's own, but objective nature." "The absolute to man is his own nature." "Consciousness of the objective is the self-consciousness of man." (*Essence.* pp. 4-5.)

essence mere mystification. To be free is to be reliant on no objective meaning, to make nothing one's "cause", to be a unique individual who refuses to forfeit the sensuous immediacy of his existence to some abstraction. All essences, whether God, "humanity" or any other, are nothing but "spooks" conjured up by a consciousness enslaved by "thought": idealism.[39] He saw this mentality to have reached its highest perversity in Feuerbach's wish to make the individual's absolutely subjective self-relation into an objective principle, for Stirner the deepest contradiction imaginable. But it was precisely Stirner's extreme egoism, on the other hand, which represents in Feuerbach's scheme the extreme of isolation which is the root of all alienation.

Implied in the revolutionary principle of a realized subjective freedom is the deliberate abandonment of the entire tradition of speculative and religious thought on the grounds these disciplines, in setting an ideal spiritual order above the real individual's finite life, represent the purest expression of idealism. These forms of consciousness must accordingly be neutralized; yet the early radicals still appeared to think that the new principle could be stated in the manner of traditional philosophy, though only in extreme reformulations of traditional philosophical themes. Accordingly they fell into inconsistency.

The complaint of Marx, and later of Nietzsche, bears on just this issue. The revolution of the so-called German ideology of Bauer, Feuerbach and the others, was faulted, according to Marx, because it remained a revolution in the realm of ideas, and hence was still idealism.[40] To speak of the God-man, humanity or the species being is reduce the reality of freedom to a mere concept, a content of consciousness only. Nietzsche's complaint against his mentor, Schopenhauer, is the same. The pessimist's pretension to ultra-realism never in fact gets beyond a kind of metaphysical mysticism; in the ascetic individual's denial of life and of the world-annihilating will there is betrayed an eleventh-hour relapse into idealism.[41] If Feuerbach's freedom is still a metaphysician's abstraction, Schopenhauer's is that of the moralist who still seeks redemption in otherworldliness; in the ideal.

Nietzsche, like Marx, will accept no other premise than that only the real individual exists. There can be no need of recourse, consistently, to spiritual or intellectual accounts of man where

39. Or as Stirner prefers to call it, "Liberalism". *Der Einzige u. sein Eigenthum* (1844), I.ii.3: *'Der Freien'*.
40. Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*, I. Also the principal theme of *The German Ideology*.
41. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Pt. I on "The Prejudices of Philosophers", esp. aphorisms 16, 47.

freedom is the individual's actual life and condition. Indeed, that such accounts prevail at all is symptomatic of a corruption of that freedom. In both these famous and extraordinarily influential polemics, the focus is upon the diremptedness that is implied in the very nature of the religious-philosophical mentality itself, crystallized in subjective idealism, the chief feature of which is a dissociation of the spiritual and natural dimensions in man. Talk of a "religion of humanity" or a "philosophy of the future" is regarded by both as contradictions in terms, the full affirmation of radical freedom requiring rather the most uncompromising atheism, amoralism and alogism. The respective doctrines of these 19th century giants thus have all their enormous appeal and force in the extremity of the demand they make: that we must indeed claim absoluteness for ourselves and for our human world — radical freedom — and we can do so only if we utterly abandon the world as it is for all thinking and believing, learning to live entirely without gods and ideas. It is the invitation thus to defy and emasculate forever the spiritual tendency in man that produces the passionateness, and even fanaticism, that must go with any attempt literally to realize such an extreme vocation.

In contrast to the ideal life of the spirit, the efforts of Marx and Nietzsche were directed toward supplanting it with a vision of a new, fully despiritualized — demystified — individuality as the basis of all human history and culture. It is the world of the existing individual, who has overcome in himself all traces of a spirituality that is opposed to his immediate nature, that is now to be radically affirmed. The opiates and illusions of speculation and belief he will cast from him; its idols he will expose and destroy. It is only needed that he resolutely turn away from the spirit-world and plunge himself into the earth-bound finitudes of everyday practice and life. Nietzsche distinguishes in his cultural typology a genuine from a spurious culture, the first springing from self-reconciled individuals, *Uebermenschen*, who affirm their finite world and contemporary existence and have their freedom simply in this assertion,[42] the second which has the resentment of those who rather affirm a sickened, thwarted individuality, the nay-saying *Untermenschen* , as its basis. It is their substitution for the wholeness of actual life a dirempted view in which a despirited nature is opposed to a denatured spirituality that underlies all religion and philosophy — all "morality" as he calls it. The overcoming of this dirempted consciousness requires the individual's descent from the mountain

42. Will to power is this assertiveness in which being, truth and value is constituted for Nietzsche. See note 16 *supra.* and *Beyond Good and Evil*, 36.

of idealism and spiritual subjectivity back into the real world of earthly "life".

Marx's real world is not Nietzsche's realm of culture; it is history, though in the new and special sense he gives it as the process of collective practical-economic activity.[43] The difference between freedom and diremption here is not based on the individual's subjective affirmation or negation of his finite, particular "life", but rather on differing forms of the overall objective relation between individuals consequent upon their common technical activity. Individuals are free in a system where they are collectively the beneficiaries of these their several labours, unfree where this reciprocity of production and consumption is interrupted by the usurpation of the common economic order on the part of some individuals to the exclusion of others. Unfreedom is thus the same as inequality. Religion and philosophy in their idealism are considered the unique by-products of the order that is based on such usurpation. Appealing to spiritual categories, they fix in imagery and ideology corrupted forms of practice, justifying intellectually real conditions of social inequality and alienation.

In regard to their explicit and violent opposition to the speculative-religious mentality, then, these two positions are much the same: radical counsels of worldliness pitted against the whole of the spiritual tradition in the name of the individual's natural-material freedom. Their return to nature they claim to be unique in that, for the first time, the nature they speak of is not that which, as in traditional materialism, stands lifeless over against a spiritual self-consciousness, tacit or explicit. It is "nature" in a new sense inclusive of the spiritual: the human-natural order.[44] To return to it therefore requires that first of all one be rid of the distinction between spirit and nature altogether, a division seen as nothing more than a speculative-religious elevation to infinity of what are really cultural-social prejudices which would have individuals flee from the freedom of their finite existence into a completeness and fulfillment that is only imagined. To this spurious, spiritual reconciliation which had, according to both Marx and Nietzsche, its secularized form in the " bourgeois morality" both everywhere denounce, they offered radical worldly alternatives; the former a redemption through political activism, the latter a psycho-cultural self-overcoming.

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43. "The entire so-called world history is only the creation of man through human labour and the development of nature for man . . . ", Marx, *Econ. and Philos. Manuscripts*, Easton/Guddat, p. 314. Also *The German Ideology*, p. 419ff.

44. E.g., Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach*, 1941, p. 45ff.; also Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, I-12 & 14.

The revolt against tradition here has a different form than earlier, when it was a matter of a new faith set against an old. The relation now of the revolution to the tradition is not that of a true doctrine to a false or of a final intellectual mediation whose conclusion is the millennium; it is the contrasting of a radically secularized and de-rationalized perspective to one grounded in spiritual visions sustained in art, religion and philosophy. Through the victorious self-overcoming of the *Uebermensch* or the collective revolt of the masses there will come about a world in which there will simply be no further role for thought and faith to play. As nothing more than epiphenomena precipitated in an alienated culture now about to collapse and pass away, the speculative-religious mentality is utterly without further significance; indeed its standpoint is entirely inimical to freedom. What is achieved with Marx and Nietzsche is the fullest clarification of the point that the standpoint of radical human freedom and the standpoint of rational thought are utterly incompatible. There can be, therefore, no reform of philosophy or theology that would render them consistent with the revolutionary conception; they and the world they characterize must simply be annihilated.

Yet both Marx and Nietzsche again employ pseudo-history to explain the genesis of this freedom-in-the-world. Their accounts are not speculative reconstructions of the history of thought as before, but reinterpretations of the past according to deliberately anti-spiritual categories. Marx's is an economic history of capitalism and the class struggle, Nietzsche's a cultural psychoanalysis of moralism. These counter-theoretical histories are no less cavalier than are those of the earlier radicals with their various stages leading up to the final, liberated self-consciousness. Like them they too show little real interest in the actual past, anxious only to conscript it into service as counterfoil to the revolutionary anti-thesis. Nietzsche rewrites the whole of history solely in the interest of justifying his call for a radical overthrow of humanism; Marx likewise reads back into every detail of the past the peculiarly 19th century polarization between capitalist and socialist economics.

What is remarkable is how, once more, these two versions of a purely worldly freedom fully contradict one another. They do not form two differing accounts of the same; they are polar opposites — mutually exclusive and negatively reciprocal. Again, what is for the one the ultimate decadence of a spurious culture is for the other the essence of revolutionary freedom. Nietzsche's tale of the emergence of idealism out of successive metamorphoses of "slave morality" through Platonism, Christianity, rationalism and finally humanism, is meant to describe the apotheosis of the culture of dirempted individuality as it appears to his 19th century imagination.

What is to be overcome is the final upshot of the whole religion-ridden pseudo-culture of the west: precisely the triumph of "herd-morality", the culture of the mass-man, the worker, the "human being". But inversely, what emerges at the end of the long history of the class-struggle, on Marx's account, is that ultimate realization of the bourgeois principle of particularistic, isolated individuality that is so vividly represented in Nietzsche's figure of the *Uebermensch.*[45]

Yet these famous and compelling accounts of western civilization which culminate in the idea of a final, fatal crisis in the 19th century are, after all, only fictions. They announce the birth of a new worldly individuality that has broken free of the spiritual enthralment of past ages. But their polarized historical sagas again have little objective value: they simply sketch out, in a vast caricature of the past, the struggle for supremacy between two sides of a contradictory subjective freedom that is the revolutionary ideal itself. Argument and counter-argument in which a radically earthbound freedom is opposed to a spiritual life are scripted into cultural history, yielding two inverse melodramas set upon the same broad stage, in which a free individuality wages a heroic war through all the centuries against the villainy of capitalism or, conversely, the decadence of asceticism. Plausibility aside, so influential has the hyperbole of these dramatic accounts been, they largely remain the basic patterns according to which the history of the world is still popularly understood.

If the first phase of revolutionary thinking was faulted in that it opposed to idealism another form of the same, this second form of the argument does not surmount the difficulty. For in substituting for the spiritual account of the world a contrary material, technological or psychological one, these latter themselves assume a para-religious, para-ideological value. The new praxis and individualism, as the radical antitheses to philosophical and religious culture, may claim to represent an outlook the very converse of idealism. But just because they are antithetically defined, their cultural programs are entirely negative in principle and hence only succeed in antagonizing, not overcoming, the power of tradition. The revolution in this form, therefore, only generates a reaction, a counter-counter-idealism: "neo-idealism". Its counterattack is not a restoration of traditional idealism as such (except, perhaps, nostalgically), but a reactionary idealism determined primarily by its counter-revolutionary intent, and which appeals to tradition

45. Marx's attack on the existential standpoint is directed not, of course, against Nietzsche, but Stirner: "Saint Max." See Brazill's discussion, *op cit.*

chiefly as a source of ammunition. In the later decades of the 19th century, accordingly, during the heyday of imperialism and nationalism, there appear a wide range of neo-philosophies and neo-theologies; an intellectual and moral re-armament that appeals to the principles and arguments of the older traditions in order to do battle with the growing forces of "radicalism, materialism and anarchy".[46]

As wholly reactionary in character this rehabilitated idealism has no substance of its own and owes more to the revolution than it does to tradition. Neo-Thomism, neo-Kantism, neo-neo-Platonism, neo-Hegelianism and all the rest were artificial defenses thrown up against the extremer forms of a revolution in which they in fact participated. Having these principally in view, their outlook is one of conservativism: a striving to preserve something of the older culture and tradition in the face of destructive revolutionary excesses, while yet as anxious as anyone to be free of it and to get on with building the new humanistic-technological world-order. What is sent into the field against the worldly, natural individualism of the revolution proper is thus only a mere spiritualistic, theosophical phantom; a fleshless "self" constructed out of the bric-a-brac of traditional religion and philosophy.[47] Neo-idealism was, as its residual forms still are, a clinging to the wreckage of the foundering fortress of tradition, already overrun by the revolutionary legions. The motive of calling up the heroes of the past was only to rail against a radicalism to which in fact the times had already succumbed; in the process the spirit of the great works of philosophic history, rather than being rehabilitated, was only further obfuscated and misunderstood.[48] Thus Thomas becomes a bulwark against scientific materialism, Kant a hedge against positivism, Hegel an imperialist logician and Plato a Victorian vicar. The real effect of neo-idealism is that, in and through it, what remains of traditional philosophy and religion becomes thoroughly imbued with the revolutionary idea.

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46. K. Jaspers captures the mentality succinctly in relation to the neo-Kantians, in *Kant*, tr. Mannheim, 1962, c.viii, 3.

47. Neo-idealism shares the stage in the decades before and after the end of the century with a general cultural fascination with pan-psychism and pan-logism, scientific and religious mysticism, a preoccupation with the occult, the exotic and so forth. This 'spiritualism' is not the spirituality of tradition but a new form altogether; the reactionary form of the same fusion of finite subjectivity and nature which is the revolution's reality.

48. The great English translations of the masterworks of history — Plato, Aristotle, Hegel etc. — were undertaken in this time. The taint of neo-idealistic moralism and absolutism is everywhere to be found in them and has had much to do with the peculiarly unsympathetic contemporary understanding of the great philosophical issues of history.

This interim phenomenon is soon displaced after the turn of the century by the third phase of revolutionary thought, contemporary philosophy proper. 20th century philosophy springs from the effort to overcome the stand-off between neo-idealism and mainstream humanism and individualism.[49] The new standpoint will no longer oppose to a tradition rooted in speculative thought the counter-spiritual surrogates of technological and cultural naturalism; it will wish to start afresh entirely independent of all relation to the past — to be thoroughly "contemporary". The new art, architecture and music of the era also embarks upon a new modernism of which the keynote is the breaking entirely with tradition and all its aesthetic assumptions. New lines, forms, sounds, structures and harmonies are devised whose intent is not in any spontaneous sense artistic, but to appeal rather to the new subjectivism; to the psychological and the technical interest. The emergent schools of philosophy were similarly preoccupied with the idea of a radical new beginning which meant no longer merely arguing with tradition but standing entirely aloof from it and taking directions blatantly contrary to all its standing conventions.

What underlies this new enthusiasm is the idea of a subordination of philosophy itself to the revolutionary principle, the same total break which *nouveau art* and other movements seek to effect in art. The ideal is a "final solution" that would see an end to all philosophical problems just as Lenin and Hitler were to propose final answers to the "what is to be done" of politics. Unlike Feuerbach, Marx or Nietzsche, who waged war on the speculative spirit, however, the new schools are resolved rather to subvert it from within. They are no longer interested in pursuing philosophy or theology in the customary way, but in abandoning them altogether and developing new, counter-speculative intellectual techniques whose purpose would be to conform thinking to the positivist-existential demands of the world-revolutionary consciousness. With this step, all serious confrontation with the past can be ended. Confident in its capacity to devise a logic of its own that is independent of reason and its tradition, contemporary philosophy takes the war with speculative thought to be irrelevant because it has decided there never really were any grounds for it: the whole traditional view of things was simply founded on a logical mistake.

49. The idealism against which most contemporary schools took their rise was, again, not the original, but the copy: neo-idealism. Thus when it is said of Russell, Dewey, Husserl and others that they started out as "Hegelians", "Kantians" or "Aristotelians", it only meant they were brought up on Bradley, Dilthey or neo-Thomism.

The new philosophy still has the critique of idealism as its principle, but such that the latter is now treated as a fallacy lying in logic itself, to be directly refuted there. The methods of the contemporary schools all have this refutation primarily in view. Husserl's works abound with the reiterated call for "self-original" philosophy, absolutely presuppositionless because its procedure would be to arrest the reflexive tendency of thought right at the outset, thus leaving everything in its immediate "self-givenness", untainted by it. The device employed, *epoche*, is an initial, procedural suspension of all judgment concerning that which experience directly presents, particularly all judgments of "being". This possibility, he says, belongs to our "perfect freedom".[50] The aim, clearly, is to return to an alleged pure immediacy of conscious life — to the *"Sache selbst"* — and to describe what is found there as a pure being-for-consciousness unsullied by the interpreting tendency of reflection, the tendency which breeds idealism, the fallacy which is philosophy itself. "Phenomenological reduction", thus suspending thought itself and its categories, is to allow for the founding of an entirely new and original science, a science of purely pre-reflexive description whose interest will be, not to think the world, but to "read off" the structures that are supposedly embedded immediately in the existential experience.

The so-called analytical movement pursues the same objective though by another route: through ultra-empiricism, i.e., positivism. It purports to achieve counter-speculative purity as a method in reducing all philosophical meaning to strict terms of reference-to-fact. The analysis of such referentiality of thinking to fact is to replace traditional philosophy, and the forms of logical-symbolic codification of reference the traditional categories and inferences of logic. "Truth", the highest interest of all philosophy, is itself now simply the measure of success achieved in the ordinary subjective act of referring to something: *Sinn*.[51] Logic itself, thus purged and re-invented, becomes for the most part the technique for the calculation of inferences without need or benefit of reason, thus again leaving the sanctity of the immediate fact-world unsullied.

50. Husserl, *Ideas* (tr. Gibson 1931), p. 106. The philosophical epoche' means that "in respect of the theoretical content of all previous philosophy, we shall abstain from passing any judgment at all . . . " (p. 81). The "principle of all principles" is that "whatever presents itself in 'intuition' in primordial form (as it were in its bodily reality), is simply to be accepted as it gives itself out to be . . . "(p. 92).

51. The influence of Frege's *Sense and Reference* (1892), Russell's early emphasis on denoting and import, and Husserl's struggle with "dator intuitions" (*Sinngebung*) show how completely taken up were the founders of contemporary logic in the task of assimilating logical 'truth' to subjective meaning.

Language finally, ordinary or fabricated, and not concepts, becomes the new data-base to which all the traditional problems raised by reason are referred. Accordingly, since the great mysteries of human thought can so be shown to reduce to mere confusions about words, naming and usage, or ignorance of mere matters of fact, they can readily be brought within the mastery of ordinary individuals — indeed of electronic devices — to be resolved.

In contemporary theology, ontology, ethics, philosophy of science, the intent is the same: the suspension of thought and the reference of all former speculative-theological questions to the standard of the existing individual's worldly experience. Heidegger's reduction is perhaps the most thorough; in *Dasein* even being, time and world themselves become modes of the individual's being-for-self: his freedom. But the original ambiguities in the revolutionary standpoint have by no means disappeared. Existentialism and positivism, phenomenology and analysis remain not only aloof and exclusive with regard to one another; they are again negatively reciprocal positions. Analysis takes its starting point to be the denial of the tendency that would suspend the fact world in its literal immediacy; to stray from that immediacy is to become a metaphysical lotus-eater. But phenomenology, on the other hand, equally concerned to stay with "the facts themselves", declares that the idea the objective world "out there" or "present to hand" is the immediately given, concrete fact-world, is the height of positivist naivety; the objective world-in-itself is a pure product of reflective thought. Thus each appoints itself the true revolution in logic in which all past paradoxes are resolved, yet what is for one the new logical basis is for the other the old logical fallacy and *vice versa*.

V

In contemporary philosophy the essential revolutionary ambiguity comes to the fore. It means to be an overthrow of philosophy from within. The contradiction in the notion of a speculative overthrow of the speculative, the conquest of thought by thought, which gave the early 19th century radicals difficulty, here reaches an unprecedented extremity. The aim of the contemporary schools is to show that the standpoint of speculation is as such spurious and "reasoning" is therefore to be supplanted by purely non-speculative techniques. The carrying out of this paradoxical enterprise for a time gaves contemporary philosophers much to do, reviewing the whole range of traditional arguments and restating them in accordance with the new restriction. Thus it had to be shown how all the principles and reasonings of the past were either simply nonsense, or else meant to say something very different

than they thought: Plato was either mistaken or else really a philosopher of language; Augustine could not have meant what he said or, if he did, should be psychoanalyzed; Spinoza was either a crypto-existentialist or a fool. The take-over of academe by contemporary philosophy through the middle decades had just this significance and there was much business for a while. A whole generation needed to re-educate itself in the new counter-philosophical doctrine that the history of philosophy was in fact over and the revolutionary outlook had succeeded it. Philosophical teaching accordingly became largely a matter of carrying out the autopsy on the corpse of traditional wisdom; a scholasticism of anthologies and journals took over from systematic, constructive thought.

But in the carrying out of this mandate, the enterprise ran afoul of its own inherent ambiguity. This describes the current state of things: through the work of the contemporary philosophers, "thought", "faith", "reason", "spirit" stand refuted. Philosophy has therefore essentially been declared irrelevant: there can no longer be any point in it. There is left only the utterly positive witness to revolutionary freedom, the full embrace of which has now been shown to demand the giving up of all reasons, even of those contemporary philosophy appealed to by way of affording it intellectual respectability.

The upshot is more vivid, perhaps, in the case of the fate of theology. If Feuerbach preached a radically inverted interpretation of Christian theology, Marx and Nietzsche a counter-Christian atheism, and neo-idealism a pale reactionary imitation, contemporary theology explicitly proclaims religion to have its true meaning in humanistic activism or existential narcissism. But to become fully aware of this is already to wonder what further role theologians, priests and parsons, as such, need play, or what, if anything, the rituals and poetry of religious traditions can add to the already fully developed rhetoric of social and psychological liberation. It is the same question to ask concerning philosophy what possible pertinence its pursuit can have for a new generation of individuals who, thoroughly absorbed and confident in other means of enlightenment and liberation, no longer feel the need of it.

This is again the present impasse. The revolution has succeeded on all fronts, having fixed the principle of subjective freedom ineradicably in general consciousness, and established it as the overriding political and cultural norm. There can be no regime of thought or practice accepted any longer which does not do justice, or at least appear to do so, to the infinite significance, the absolute right, of individuals. The difficulty is, the freedom so established has authority only in the individual's mere claim to it. Its "reality"

lies only in the subjective certainty it has and in the practical-existential will that affirms it. As such, while freedom is believed by all to be what ultimately counts for everything, this belief itself is entirely a contingent one; a sheer assertoric positivity. Revolutionary individualism, in holding fast to this form, must and does eschew all appeal to thought, to rational principle, or to objective ethical grounds; it thereby becomes indistinguishable from an absolute intellectual and moral caprice, a caprice which translates in practice, on the one hand, into a terrible and destructive power, and on the other a cynicism for which even freedom itself is ultimately something accidental, unstable and even dispensable in man.

In making this subjective side absolute the other dimensions of freedom have been suppressed and concealed, namely its actual authority as a principle of objective ethical order and its universal necessity for rational thought. Freedom in relation to nature and to the social order the revolution knows only as a subjective right artificially and externally enforced, which, as aiming only to subordinate all objective actuality to individual need and preference, yields that aggressive, negative practicality which is what ultimately fuels the uniquely contemporary tendency toward technocracy and totalitarianism. A true objective discipline that would inform and mold the finite forms of the natural and human environment in conformity with freedom would require rather the positive, articulate insight of thought and faith into the infinite necessity of freedom; but this side, the spiritual consciousness of freedom as the true, universal *logos*, has likewise been corrupted by revolutionary subjectivity: a raising to infinity of the purely finite inwardness of particular individuals; the apotheosis of the anarchic and narcissistic will.

Yet it is the necessity and universality of the concept of freedom that Hegel has shown to be the source from which all religious and philosophical categories and values spring and to which they all return, and it is the awakening to this necessity that is the advent and progress of the spiritual consciousness in man. The revolution, even in its extreme one-sidedness, entirely presupposes the tradition in which this concept, for Hegel the absolute idea, was developed and embodied; it has all the confidence it has only through its debt to this source. In identifying this freedom with the immediacy of a natural, individual subjectivity, however, it has caused it to degenerate into nothing more than a mere compulsion, an obsession with individuality in the most arbitrary sense, indistinguishable from the caprice which is the principle of barbarism. The fascination with the primitive and barbaric in the times, indeed, reveals nothing so much as this atavistic tendency.

Still this reversion to an absolute naturalistic subjectivity is just the soil into which also the principle of freedom has now fully sunk its roots, and it is from these roots alone that the further flowering of freedom can take place.

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