The Paradoxical Idealism of Enlightenment

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I

In standard histories of philosophy, there is always uncertainty as to how to incorporate the phenomenon known as enlightenment. Some simply omit it. Others present it as a secondary manifestation of popularizing thought outside the mainstream of philosophy proper. Still others attempt to establish points of definite intersection and reciprocal influence between major philosophers and the Enlightenment as a movement: the impact of Newton upon French materialists, Locke's continental following, the debt of the *ideologues* to general *Cartesian* themes etc. Attempts at discovering what it is that constitutes "enlightenment", apart from conventional platitudes about its humanistic motivation, have been far fewer than one might expect, and not notably successful. True, from the side of historical and literary studies, interest in the "Enlightenment Era" has, if anything, burgeoned of late. But for much of conventional philosophical historiography, the old pattern persists: from the 17th through the 19th century, the caravan of the master philosophers moved on its way, indifferent to the furor generated by secondary minds. This so-called "history of modern philosophy", has become a notoriously innocuous exercise which, because it forms the basis of much of contemporary academic teaching, is largely responsible for the latter's effeteness, and the reaction to it, in philosophy itself, on the part of 20th century "analysis" and other "enlightened" approaches.

In histories of a more general kind, particularly in so-called intellectual history and history of science, the picture presented of "enlightenment" is startlingly different. It describes the dawn of everything that makes sense to us moderns, after centuries of metaphysical slumber and theological nightmare. It describes the emergence of a totally new and eminently sane vision of the world. With it there is recognized as beginning an intensive and extensive process of total reform, progressively making its way into every detail of culture and practice. This gradual triumph of enlightenment is thought assured, for it is rooted in the inviolable and self-evident principles of Reason and Freedom, the twin sources of all modern theory and practice. These principles, whose truth shines forth from the very nature of things, shed a brilliant daylight which renders everything plain, familiar, hopeful and human.

Dionysius, Vol. I, Dec. 1977, pp. 161-176

As for the master philosophers, it is admitted that some of them contributed to the spreading of the light, but only as some among many. Reason is not the private property of philosophy but a natural light shared by all. Indeed, an element of suspicion lurks in the enlightenment perception of the philosopher, a suspicion which often surfaces in the writings of intellectual historians. It is an essential tenet of the enlightenment faith that Reason is universal, immediate, the very substance of things and therefore an absolute starting point. The persistent and characteristic scepticism and critical consciousness of the philosopher seems retrograde. The modern historian of enlightenment shares with Voltaire a certain disdain and deep distrust of philosophy — it contravenes common sense and good will, produces mystery rather than clarity and tends to foster a return to unenlightened abstraction. This suspicion has perhaps its most familiar expression in the common attitude of contemporary scientists toward philosophy.

As much as enlightenment owes to philosophy, they are thus in certain respects fundamentally at odds with each other — a fact which subsequent history of thought clearly reveals, but of which it finds enormous difficulty in becoming self-conscious. It is symptomatically evidenced in the disparity alluded to between the viewpoints of histories of philosophy and general intellectual history. The latter is itself an offspring of enlightenment and assumes an unbroken intellectual heritage linking enlightenment thought directly with our own. As the average American's education may predispose him to think as if nothing really historically significant preceded the Declaration of Independence, so modern intellectual history tends to regard enlightenment, as The Enlightenment surely regarded itself, as an absolute commencement, preceded by a kind of intellectual and spiritual void. Speculative thought, in continuing to raise doubts about what is taken as in principle beyond need of justification (Reason itself), reveals itself as strangely anachronous, at best irrelevant, at worse openly hostile and dangerous to human advancement.

It seems hardly a contentious claim to assert that it is enlightenment and its philosophy which dominates the modern world. The empirical sciences have the unquestioned monopoly on knowledge; liberalism, in the broad sense of an approach to ethics, politics and economic life based on the principle of individual and social freedom, has a total grip upon all aspects of practice. Philosophy is tolerated. If it present itself as a defense of enlightenment principles — as "philosophy of science" for example — it is perhaps even welcomed and thought useful. Even

if it is not this, it may still be tolerated as a purely private interest, on the level of philately. Like contemporary religion, which is allowed to persist if it confine itself to promoting a feeling of humanistic optimism, or to the enjoyment of Bach cantatas as entertainment, philosophy may still be pursued as a harmless preoccupation. The study of the humanities generally provides one of many opportunities available for the indulgence of those few who, though there are much more important things to do, may be forgiven their petty vices. Modern psychology (with Nietzsche's help) can quite ably demonstrate to its own satisfaction that there is no essential difference between a passion for truth and a passion for erotic rewards: *chacun à son goût.* The power of modern liberalism is such, however, that it can tolerate much worse excesses.

What philosophy may not do, however, is question the fundamental authority of those enlightened principles which allow it to persist. One knows only too well how quickly and viciously the contemporary mind lapses into the rhetoric of enlightenment whenever it believes it is being called into question. Concern over the price of advanced mechanization, for example, is regarded as advocacy of primitive misery and disorder. Appeals to theology strike the enlightened mind as sheer resort to pre-scientific superstition. The distrust of unlimited democracy brands one immediately as a political fanatic. Underlying the apparent liberality, openness and popular scepticism of late modernity is a most intractable dogmatism, which draws its irresistible force and conviction from the incalculable profundity of the principles upon which it rests. But it is dogmatism nonetheless and, in its manifold and highly efficient manner of absorbing and repressing all opposition (*vide* Marcuse), it constitutes the basis of an extreme contradiction in modern life, both theoretical and practical in its manifestation and import; a contradiction which is producing pressures and tensions which already are manifest in the form of widespread anxiety, uncertainty and disorder and which many fear threaten an eventual intellectual and spiritual collapse of modern civilization itself.

A critical re-assessment of enlightenment, as a total mentality, is not an easy task. Enlightenment has succeeded in so thoroughly dominating modern culture that its methods and assumptions have infiltrated every region, including contemporary philosophy. Rare indeed are those expressions, even of a critical kind, which do not, in the end, reveal their ultimate debt and allegiance to enlightenment ideals. There is hence nowhere to begin but with enlightenment itself. For it has shown conclusively that nothing

can oppose it — not underground poetry, not traditional religion, not the "history of philosophy". Those who resist enlightenment culture have been reduced in recent times to empty, barren and ultimately futile gestures: catatonic inertness, induced insanity, suicidal anarchism or the ancient device of calculated hedonism on the grand scale.

Rationality and freedom, the basic principles of enlightenment, are so comprehensive, so powerful, that nothing can hold its own against them — that, if anything, is the truth of modernity. It is those principles themselves which must reveal the sources of the paradoxes which beset modernity; paradoxes which have already been clearly noted and criticised in an intellectual vein, as we shall see. But it is only the practical and cultural consequences of these contradictions, which each day become more and more vividly explicit in the actual world enlightenment has produced, that can make a more direct and "internal" critique of these principles generally felt to be urgent. For the most part, we remain enthralled and so our faith continues to feed our destruction.

II

The Enlightenment, as an historical phenomenon, is of compelling interest in that it represents the adolescence of that spirit which, as an achieved reality, has in our day reached maturity. In questioning its original picture of things we are only questioning our own. For what, except for a higher degree of sophistication, is essentially different in the man envisaged as *l'homme machine* of La Mettrie and the man assumed by contemporary cybernetical technology? Only that the latter actually exists. Is Condillac's project of elaborating the whole mental world from simple sensory responses substantially different from the results now actually claimed by contemporary behavioural science? The popular 18th century characterization of society as sustained in all the variety of its institutions by the blind, instinctive requirement of the satisfaction of "basic needs", is no longer just a theory. It describes our social reality itself and is firmly established as the actual basis of political policy, institutional organization, and public morality.

If we consider the typical enlightenment characterization of the world and of man, whether in its original statement or as found in the acceptances of contemporary science, we are struck by a paradox. Ostensibly, it is a spirit dedicated totally to the enhancement of human freedom and dignity, progress and rationality. It opposes superstition, bondage, authority, ignorance and suffering. It is firmly rooted in idealistic humanism. Yet in the

name of such ideals, it finds it necessary nonetheless to represent all nature as a lifeless mechanism and man in particular as a mindless automaton. How can the same spirit which is motivated by the desire to claim the world for man and to humanise it in every detail, at the same time, and in the same context, yield such intellectual vulgarities such as we are every day persuaded are the "hard truths" of science, but which, were they to be taken seriously as applied to ourselves literally, would render the whole enterprise which discloses and defends them quite pointless? For if man were indeed the mindless inhabitant of a despiritualized universe, what could the aims and validity of science and reform possibly mean to him?

Among the Enlightenment writers themselves, the paradox is quite plain. Uttering lofty praises to the human spirit in one breath, they sentenced man to the role of a purposeless creature of instinct in the next. Scientists today, perhaps for fear of sounding tender-minded, less frequently are given to excessive sermons on human self-salvation any more. But their idealism is nonetheless implicit in their whole approach, as evidenced by their general faith in the unquestionable benefits, exclusive reasonableness and even the moral rectitude of the mission and methods of science and technology.

"Idealism" would certainly seem, then, to be an essential component of the scientific mentality. But how is one to square that, with its equally persistent insistence upon a totally mechanistic, value-free and non-teleological interpretaton of man? The idealism of enlightenment would appear to be radically paradoxical in principle and, as enlightenment mentality has in our age become the rule, so too has the paradox. The conflict between man as objectively understood and as, at the same time, radically free, is no longer a theoretical, but a practical and existential issue.

Idealism is indeed a theme which runs through all modern philosophy. As a historical form of philosophy, however, we associate it with the golden age of German thought from Kant to Hegel. There, human self-consciousness, spirit and freedom are explicitly advanced as the primary *content* of philosophical science, not merely its presuppositions. In the systems of the 17th century, on the contrary, these idealist notions of reason and freedom take the form of abstract principles which, although they form the starting point of all theory and practice, do not enter into its content. Freedom and Reason are advanced as principles, certainly, yet they exist only as methodological assumptions, articles of subjective faith, having no concrete expression at all in the world which actually is derived from them. This peculiar

truncated idealism of enlightenment therefore manifests itself as a conflict between form and content, between what instigates and what constitutes its world view. This, in a most abstract sense, is our problem.

What does idealism mean in the context of modern philosophy? In its ancient sense, idealism deals with the realm of pure intelligibilities, the universe of forms fixed and held in thought and transcending the world of finite otherness. In the modern form it includes the further demand that all otherness of being be thoroughly reconciled with the standpoint of self-conscious reason. In its outward shape, this reconciliation demands the rejection of all belief in the "occult", in whatever form. For the occult is what is in principle opaque to reason and therefore radically other. The occult is but the popular and picturesque expression of that radical realism which holds that there are realities which are prior to and which lie in principle outside the scope of spiritually enlightened subjectivity. That, for reason, is superstition at whatever level it is maintained and it must be refuted. The rejection of realism expresses the confidence that all being is in principle contained within a higher rational order. Reason, therefore, takes precedence over nature, penetrates, masters, and comprehends it and thus demonstrates its essentially ideal character and priority. Nature must submit, its autonomy destroyed. It must be deprived of its power and divested of its truth. That is the mission of enlightenment idealism.

As many Enlightenment authors explicitly declared, there is involved here a kind of reformulation of the Christian claims as to the essentially spiritual significance of the world. It stands opposed, however, to the *form* in which the tradition characterized this truth. It is not in the beyond, the hereafter, that this spirituality has its home but in the universe of actual human thought and practice. Nature is seen no longer as a dark, arcane, impenetrable reality opposed to the spiritual, but as a "creation" of spirit, *its* other, a reality which is in itself phenomenal, dependent and relative. The new philosophy, educated in this faith, thus appears on the scene in the form of a revolt against everything foreign to the witness of the human spirit, and its method has as its end to demonstrate in every detail the ideality of nature, that is, the principle that all existence is determinable only within the context of a higher rational order thoroughly transparent to the insights of a disciplined human reason.

The rejection of every kind of epistemological and ontological otherworldiness thus forms the common introduction to post-Christian philosophies. We see it clearly in Bacon's method, in

Descartes' procedure of liberating doubt. A veritable flood of essays, treatises and discourses appears, laying down the so-called "limits of human understanding", all of which emphasize, on the pattern of Bacon's idols, the illegitimacy of any reasoning which results in principles and entities which transcend, or refuse to submit to, the light of reason. As a general "revolt against metaphysics", it continues to form the basic viewpoint of common thought to this day.

We need, however, to clarify further the role of philosophy in the development of enlightenment thinking. To that end, it is appropriate to review the chief preoccupations of 17th century philosophy which first set forth, in abstract form, the principles of the idealist revolution.

If we clear away the encrusted layers of three centuries of commentary, the underlying thread of Descartes' philosophy, as the prototype, is fairly plain. His sceptical procedure effects a deliberate overthrow of authority in matters of knowledge and insists upon the right of thought alone to play the judge. Not only God and metaphysics, but judgements of all kinds must submit to the evidence and witness of experience informed by thought. Descartes never departs from this standpoint, even in his most extended metaphysical reflections. His proofs of God's existence and that of the material world, while they appear to establish realities independent of thought, proceed solely on the basis of the evidence of self-conscious experience, coupled with rational reflection on the conditions which alone could make such evidence "possible". If, for Descartes, there can be an Other to thought, it can only be an Other evident *for* thought and *in* thought. Once established within the universe of the *cogito,* Descartes never forsakes his territory; it becomes the medium within which all subsequent philosophy moves.

The ensuing debates, chiefly the debate between empiricism and rationalism, are developments of issues which arise out of the Cartesian position. They have to do chiefly with what came to be called the problem of the origin of ideas. That self-conscious thought, or reason, is the only legitimate starting point for philosophy is no longer seriously questioned for, as Locke put it, nothing at all can be sensibly concluded about the nature of things except we first inquire into the extent, limits and adequate object of human reason. One is not accustomed to the representation of empiricism as a form of idealism. That it is such is plain, however, if the implications of Locke's full acceptance of the fundamentals of Cartesian philosophy are considered. He opens his epistemological reflections in his *Essay* (Book II): "Every man being conscious to

himself that he thinks . . . it is past doubt that men have in their mind several ideas . . . It is in the first place then to be inquired, how he comes by them." Past doubt indeed! But the primacy of self-conscious thought and the "new way of ideas" become the title for the philosophical revolution which sweeps Europe.

The significance of the debate over the origin of ideas thus lies in the claim that it is with self-conscious thought and its proper world that we must begin, and nowhere else. The theory of the origin of ideas now replaces classical metaphysics for it is not the nature of "things themselves" which should first concern us, but the nature of things in the light of reason: not the world beyond, but the *actually witnessed* world. What is therefore sought is a principle not of the reality of the world, but of its objectivity, for the only significance the world can have is a rational one, and that means a significance essentially transparent to thinking experience itself. A true method must, therefore, rest upon principles, not of ontology but of objectification; nature must come to be apprehended as an order essentially determined and determinable through reason itself. As for what may exist beyond that, the modern answer is "we can say nothing".

Empiricism gave its answer to the problem of ideas in the form of positing the existence in human experience of an aboriginal content, a content which by its sheer "givenness" manifests its inherent objective significance. By restricting ourselves to the empirically given, we avoid the lapse into abstraction which takes us beyond what consciousness itself can verify. The idealist principle remains in the restriction of the content to what is found in experience; the limitation of all judgements to what consciousness can actually attest to. This limit fulfills the requirement of idealism that that alone is actual to which reason has immediate access.

Rationalism proceeds rather from the side of the object of thought. It attempts a reconstruction of reality such as to represent being as rational in itself and thus pre-eminently available to reason. The concept of Substance in modern philosophy, is the concept of that which unites actuality with reason in itself. As such, Substance is a pure thought-object: existence which is by its very nature intelligible. It is, in short, objectivity as such, whose existence is not distinguishable from its essential rationality; which is sustained in its existence, indeed, through its unity with reason.

The concept of Substance and the array of concepts included in it, particularly that of causality, thus function as the paradigms of rational objectivity by reference to which the fictions of superstitious thought are distinguishable from true explanations. On this

point, Spinoza and Leibniz speak clearly. The end, as for empiricism, is the reclaiming of the world for thought. For rationalism this reclamation amounts to a redefinition of the real as a universe of concretely existing idealities; for empiricism what predominates is the corresponding requirement that the real be given in consciousness. These were seen in fact, as conflicting conditions, and produced the familiar and still active debate across the Channel as to what objective verification basically means. Moreover, rationalism and empiricism are, like all dogmatisms, circular. The archetypal or "original" idea against which we measure the objectivity of all empirical content is itself, for empiricism, something *given* in experience. Similarly, the criterion in rationalism by means of which we distinguish rational from fictional entities is itself presented as an *entity*, a material or monadic substance. The total significance of what was being worked out comes into perspective, however, only if these positions are thought together.

None of these difficulties or inconsistencies bothered the Enlightenment philosophers, however. They were neither metaphysicians nor epistemologists but practical-minded intellectuals. Never mind whether empiricism and rationalism inherently conflict; it is the practice, the application that counts. Thus, like the Sophists of old whose modern counterparts they are, they claimed justification in the results, in the success achieved in explaining particular systems, solving particular problems, and, most of all, in refuting religion and popular belief. They were hostile even to the further pursuit of philosophical debate. Now, no less than then, the point is not to question science itself or its empirico-rational method. That the world yields to such an explanation is taken as proof enough of the correctness and utility of its approach.

III

Borrowing freely from Newton, Bacon, Locke, Leibniz and Descartes, enlightenment thinkers set themselves to carrying out the destruction of extant traditions and substituting for them a new world interpretation based on empirico-rational idealism. Nothing inspired their critical eloquence more surely than classical metaphysics or occult belief but only because these were the more obvious cases of the more general tradition addicted to the belief in unmediated truth. For the mediation of reason (which is what is entailed in "making things clear", "bring things to light" etc.) is now considered an absolute prerequisite for the understanding of things in their truth. That anything be accepted as it stands is the very root of superstition, for it is an acceptance unassimilated to

reason. The light of enlightenment is the reflected light of reason itself, the "insight" of rational intuition.

The blatantly materialistic, mechanistic universe that they offered in exchange for the spiritual kingdom of belief, was nothing but the first attempt to achieve such a mediation by reason.

Still — and it is precisely this which is peculiar — the world reason so produces is regarded nonetheless as "really there", as an existent, substantial order. Enlightenment, in spite of all, does not, for the most part, get beyond this imperfect understanding of its own objectivism. Its "objectivity" is here, not objectivity recognized *as* such, that is, existence in and for reason. It is still "nature". And the various universal structures which constitute this pseudo-objective order of things are regarded as forces, causal series, all-pervasive properties, primary qualities and the like. Thus, what is supposed to be reason's own realm retains its natural, immediate form, an objectivity conceived as a real substantial system of external things and relations. Any unity this newly constituted Nature may have with reason itself remains subjective or is found expressed only in rhetorical form. It is only required that the main outlines of Nature be characterized in a way which is *formally* consistent with the demands of Reason, which itself remains an abstract methodological principle. The same is true with regard to the use of the practical principle of Freedom in the early political philosophies.

Thus Diderot, for example, insists upon the necessity of Nature being endlessly interpretable in itself, in order that it provide scope for the infinite possibilities of human theoretical reflection. The interests of reason are simply imposed upon, not present in, the content. And the minimal interpretation of Lessing's choice would be that if reason is infinite (in the subjective sense of insatiable in its inquisitiveness) then a realm of fixed and stable truths is incommensurate with it. The noteworthy point is that while objectivity must accord with reason, it is not required that it's content be in itself rational; it is a brute Nature standing before reason, whose truths reason produces, but which it at the same time conceals by representing them in the form of abstract entities and laws. Reacting against the "obvious" world, the belief in which it classes as superstition, reason reduces everything to its own terms and then posits these categories as substantial universals: cause, matter, sensation, instinct, force. Is red red? No, it is "in reality" wavelength and frequency of radiation. Are human beings capable of acts of patriotism, kindness, courage? No, these are "nothing but" the expression of instinctive drives to

satisfy basic needs. So the abstract world of hypostatised concepts is posited as a reality *underlying* common experience, and the manifestation of reason lies only in the carrying out of this reduction.

Reason's typical approach lies in the use of the well-worn analytical-reductive method. In enlightenment thought it is pressed into service everywhere to support the new empiricist-rationalist thesis. It reveals the authority and power of reason by showing how everything whatever can be treated as if it were an "artificial" entity, made, not born, constituted, not original. To regard the artificial as real is, once again, the very essence of occultism. Whether it is the church, a work of art, a class privilege, a stone or a human being, the power of reason is revealed in its ability to demonstrate its composite character, to reduce it to elements and thus to deny the reality of its immediate appearance. Social institutions are shown to be "nothing but" composites of like individual wants. Things are atoms, thoughts are words, religion is priests. But this reductionism is not a sheer exercise in explanation as it might have been in other times which knew atomism and contract theory well enough. It has a purpose. The modern analytical spirit aims at destroying the grip of the immediately believed-in world, at exploding all given assumptions, simply because they are given. It seeks to demonstrate reason's mediating power, that is, its power to destroy everything alien to itself and reconstruct it on terms of its own. Its purpose, then, is consistent with the general purport of idealism.

This sheds some light on the meaning of the organic molecules of Buffon, the Newtonian particles, the sensory units of Condillac and the various other neo-naturalistic substrata in which the Enlightenment was so interested. Their appeal lies in their mediated character, that they are rationally reconstituted entities, not the things of familiar everyday experience; for nothing spontaneous must remain. All interpretations of the world which accept it or attach authority and meaning to it as it stands must be displaced by another, for all significance, spontaneity and constructive power must be reserved to reason alone.

There appears before us the new world order of enlightenment: a soundless, mindless, purposeless, fleshless universe of abstract rational objectivities. Above all it is an atheistic and non-anthropomorphic world. For gods and spirits and the human soul belong to the illegitimate world of pure immediate and autonomous spontaneity. They, above all things, must be shown to be in truth "artificial", for they offer the greatest resistance to objectification and compete with reason itself directly for authority.

Hence the familiar taboo which yields the most excruciating contradiction in modern science: the rule that human considerations and values must be eliminated from a true account of things, *even from our study of man himself.* It is now commonplace to complain about science's depersonalizing tendencies, as if this were an unexpected and embarrassing result. On the contrary, it is a necessary condition of the empirico-rational approach itself. *L'homme machine* is not a conclusion of scientific investigation; it is a presupposition required by the method itself.

What we are dealing with in the popular 18th century philosophies, then, might be termed a dogmatic objectivism. A system like d'Holbach's *Système de la Nature,* for example, is an elaborate conjecture as to what the world would be like if abstraction is made, through analysis, from all actual and living experience, this result being regarded, not as abstraction, but as the underlying reality of things themselves. But while a metaphysical reification of abstractions, it is at the same time *objectivism,* in the sense that the reality so posited is seen as one thoroughly mediated by reason and experience, and hence necessary.

In the passion for objectivity, the aim is to establish and sustain rationality in the negative demonstration of the power of reason over the immediately given world, theoretically and practically. This achievement is negative in the sense that the autonomy and authority of reason is demonstrated only in its exercise as a critical standpoint capable of reducing all that would stand against it to naught, as in itself meaningless, purposeless and without independent truth. Hence the sheer relativity and hollowness of the external world which it conceives is reciprocally the guarantee of that power and authority which is reason's own. Yet in this purely negative form of enlightenment, reason attains only to a subjective confidence; it has no actuality of its own and indeed discovers in the mindless a-rational world it produces, devoid of subjectivity and spiritual reality, a new and more radical otherness — more radical since produced and sustained by itself. Hence the paradox mentioned earlier. Reason, in the enlightenment, is the title of the pure abstraction of thinking subjectivity, opposing to itself the equally abstract totality of its negated content. It is the standpoint of "man" as such, represented by individuals insofar as they identify themselves with this universal abstract standpoint. It is in the name of this universal that all the detail of life and nature are mediated and reduced to an empty objectivity from which reason itself is entirely absent. As idealism it is chronically unrealized and unrealizable, since fettered by this contradiction.

Reason itself, then, is totally missing in the universes of the Enlightenment philosophy and their successors — and necessarily so — even though everything is characterised in *accordance* with reason. There are no spirits in nature, no mind in the man-machine precisely because human reason produces and sustains itself through its universal negation of otherness only by representing an otherness negative in itself. This product cannot itself include Reason — on the contrary it must be characterized as essentially a-rational. Even human life itself, as contemporary sciences of man and society are bound to demonstrate, must be represented as through and through "mindless". Also, in the practical world, the exercise of abstract freedom as a social and political principle, likewise produces an ethical order of life resting similarly upon a contradictory belief in a behaviouristic account of human motives.

IV

What is uniquely unsatisfying about enlightenment, therefore, is the fact that in it reason finds only a subjective satisfaction. It fails to achieve an objectivity of its own. It establishes the absolute and universal authority of reason but only by denying the existence of any inherent significance in actual human life itself. It is this *abstract* belief in freedom too that plagues modern-day ethics and politics. For it has meant that in order that "man", as represented by the so-called free individual, become free, all concrete human distinctions and interests must be wiped away. Abstract freedom becomes therewith identical with individual caprice with a resulting disappearance of structure, order and respect for ethical ideals in actual life.

The Age of Reason has bequeathed to us a truncated and paradoxical idealism which, since it is abstract and thus only negatively related to actual life, constantly places itself in contradiction with itself. It has taught us to believe in a form of knowing the world, based on principles of detachment and strict objectivity, which, though it has enabled us to liberate ourselves from "superstition", has done so at the expense of the world's intelligibility. It has taught us a freedom which, in its very enactment, produces a world in which freedom has limited scope.

It might seem as if only now are the full implications of the enlightenment scientific-technological mentality becoming clear. But already, with Kant, the standpoint of abstract Reason began to be questioned in the light of a higher interest and framework of thought. A world is envisaged in which reason finds itself concretely present. It is therefore not merely an objective world, as a mere product of an abstract and subjective reason, but an actual

world in which reason is itself both subject and substance. The world in question is nothing more nor less than the world of self-conscious thought and action itself, as a totally concrete and existent order, in the sense that its objectivity is self-produced and not an order to which subjectivity finds itself in oppositon."

With Kant this world is a practical proposal, a moral order, a world which ought to exist and does exist only insofar as one acts morally, though which is otherwise problematic. With Hegel the actually ideal world is no longer a project of the moral will and to that extent still only subjectively constituted. In the actual realm of human labour, history, art, personality and thought, reason discovers a world truly of its own design since it is at once the very substance of its reality. The ideality of this realm of "spirit" is an ideality no longer only subjective, a mere principle of subjective thought and action. Rather, it is an actual ideality in the sense that the human-spiritual order, as such, comprehends within itself whatever objective sense anything whatever may have, including those objectivities which reason, in its negative, abstractive manifestation, produces. Reason as sheer power and principle, which takes itself to be *sui generis,* must be shown as a possibility only so far as it is the actual substance and content of the world.

The tradition of German idealism found itself, therefore, in essential opposition to enlightenment, not as a reaction or a wish to return, but as a further, fuller and more consistent idealism. Enlightenment it saw as a transitional mentality devoted to developing the necessary subjective insight that reason and freedom constitute the truth of existence. But so far as enlightenment cannot transcend its subjective standpoint, it remains paradoxical and destructive. Far from introducing a new kind of metaphysical occultism, speculative philosophy intended to be the philosophy of the actual world *par excellence.* For, it rejected more emphatically than any of its predecessors any notion of an absolute Other, any semblance of transcendent realities beyond the scope of thought and freedom. Yet at the same time it found in that faith at the very root of enlightenment philosophy, a potential for a supreme intractibility and dogmatism much more difficult to uproot: the dogmatism of subjective reason. Hegel himself was acutely aware of that potential as he was certain that nothing could withstand its exercise and development to the limit. The standpoint of "spirit", the self-consciousness of reason, can only emerge out of enlightenment itself, in the working out of its own inherent paradox.

"Absolute" idealism recognized its dependence upon and debt to the already well-developed principle of modern philosophy,

namely the principle of the ideality of the world in the light of the principles of reason and freedom. Yet it opposed enlightenment in the sense that it insisted upon the further step of subordinating Reason itself, as a kind of substantialized and metaphysical subjectivity which reduces all experience to equally abstract objectivity, to a concrete or existential subjectivity which rediscovers itself "in the world" as the *terminus a quo* of Nature and the *terminus ad quem* of history and life. "Truth" is no longer a merely theoretical principle of rationality to be merely presupposed in a knowledge of the world, but an active principle manifest *in* the world itself and which forms the *content* of speculative insight.

Predictably, the enlightenment mentality, as we still know it, can only see in absolute idealism a return to superstition, ignoring the requirement of objective verification and reverting to spinning realities out of one's head. From the standpoint of speculative philosophy, on the other hand, scientific reason, for all its accomplishments, is blind to the spiritual context from which stem the very principles which motivate it. It generates a world which it insists is real, yet which does not include the reality of the thinking, historically active agent which it presupposes as the means of its sense and verification. It dresses the author of the non-anthropomorphic objective world in a laboratory coat and pretends he doesn't exist.

It is in this context that we perhaps could profitably understand present-day conflicts between the humanities and the sciences. From the point of view of the abstract humanism of modern science, art and religion, philosophy and speculative history arouse suspicion, insofar as they seem to resist rational treatment. Their content seems therefore insignificant and reactionary. Insofar as this mentality has taken hold in the humanities themselves, it has led to perplexity. Should the humanities confine themselves only to an emotive or entertainment value and forget any role in establishing truth, or should resolute efforts be made to try to embrace some form of quantitative method and aim thereby to achieve scientifically respectability? As moderns, we have a highly developed sense of the futility, even more, of the immorality of any effort to rehabilitate the pre-Enlightenment outlook. We cannot but reject at heart its capricous mysticism, its violence, its arcanity. Our sympathy with science is thus well-founded in a belief in our humanity and it is this which discourages us from embarking upon any serious revolt. With this sentiment, idealism has no argument.

But as the enlightenment outlook is still very much our own, so are its contradictions. We feel more and more that, in a poorly

understood way, our humanism is producing a new occultism, that we are enlightened to the point of blindness. Our typically abstract belief in Man, Freedom and Reason is itself producing dehumanization, bondage and an increasing inability to comprehend who we are. Yet we cannot turn back and we are at a loss as to how to move ahead.

The post-enlightenment philosophy of German idealism was a call to a new humanism which is not interested in either opposing or succumbing to the scientific standpoint, but in transcending and subordinating it. For it proposed a science of the human spirit, of the ultimately concrete "ideal world", and embarked upon an elaboration of the categories of our own human self-experience, as a context wider and more inclusive than that which empirical science comprehends. Not the least important — indeed perhaps the most important — requirement of such a humanism is a speculative philosophy of nature, for the Enlightenment view of nature reveals it only in its negative relationship to man. Our ability to comprehend ourselves and our world depends upon the interruption of our enthralment by the spirit of scientific objectivism and our learning to understand Nature from the point of view of actual self-conscious life and values, rather than the reverse. This is no easy task, as it must fully recognize the momentous achievements of empirical science over the centuries.

The drawing together and subordination of the fruits of Enlightenment under a comprehensive philosophy in which man as spirit, not just "Reason", forms the theme, is the challenge which now confronts philosophy. In some respects the challenge has already been felt, if not understood. The project has yet to have much support in the academic world. There, on the contrary, the tired old spirit of the Enlightenment still marches on, refining its paradoxes while it loses its power to inspire. Its achievement, significance and immeasurable value can be preserved only if it can be transcended and understood. It is time to question the religion of enlightenment, to demolish Robespierre's idols.

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