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Spiegel: Vor zwei Wochen, Herr Professor, schien die Welt noch in Ordnung. . . .

Adorno: Mir nicht.

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Preface

It is natural for us to think that humans as animals belong to a certain biological species and are, as such, subject to a number of natural necessities such as the vital need to maintain a certain minimal body temperature and to eat and drink if they are to survive. We are, however, not merely biological entities but also inherently social animals, and societies, too, will "need" to satisfy certain conditions if they are to survive. In societies that do survive there will be a variety of mechanisms for imposing "necessities" on individuals and smaller groups; often these mechanisms will function under the guise of simply transmitting or "passing on" natural necessities. Thus, I *must* eat if I am to survive, *so* we *must* all work cooperatively for several hours a days in the fields or rice paddies if we are to survive. This transmission, however, is never a mere process of neutral "passing on" necessity. Actual human "needs" of any kind are never presented to us, as it were, "raw" but always in one social configuration or other, so any discussion of basic biological needs is perforce a kind of retrospective abstraction, which might be warranted, but, if it is, is always warranted for some specific purpose. In fact, what is called "transmission" is always a process of the transformation or social constitution of needs. "Transformation *or* constitution" is not a mistaken or incautious formulation, as if I couldn't make up my mind whether there was something, some "need," there to start with that was "transformed" into a slightly different need or whether "needs" did not "really" exist until social processed. Rather it is an expression of my view—which, of course, could be incorrect but is not inconsidered—that this alternative is not to be taken as an absolute but is context-dependent.

"We all need to work together cooperatively in order to survive" is deeply ambiguous, and this ambiguity is a breeding ground for ideological distortion. It can mean:

a. "if we don't all work together cooperatively, each of us will die very soon (because the small boat we're in is leaking badly)"
b. "if we don't all work together cooperatively, not all of us will survive (although some may)"
c. "if we don't all work together cooperatively, we won't survive *as a recognizable group* (although each individual may disperse and survive alone or as a member of a different group)"

In addition to these strict "needs," that is, conditions that must be fulfilled if survival is to be ensured, humans also have an individually and socially idiosyncratic set of desires, preferences, wishes, and aspirations. We all need to eat and drink, but I prefer tea to coffee, although many people have the reverse preference. I also recognise that there are, or at any rate have been, individuals and even whole societies, such as that of ancient Rome, in which neither tea nor coffee is drunk at all. We also all grow up and remain throughout our entire lives enmeshed in a thick web of what are now called "normative" demands that have their origin ultimately in institutions that claim "authority" over us. In many Western European societies fathers of families were for a long time construed as "heads of the household" and had significant real and moral powers over their wives, children, and servants; political authorities of various kinds demanded allegiance; churches (or The Church) claimed to preach the word of god and had institutions like courts to enforce their views; relations of economic dependence among the members of small groups gave the words of those in key positions special weight; local forms of social pressure (and of solidarity) could take sharply articulated forms. Finally, as social beings we humans are to some extent capable of perceiving and acquiring knowledge about the real world in which we live, and we have some extremely feeble, only intermittently effective, and highly variable ratiocinative capacities.[1] Human life is to a large

extent constituted by an attempt to reconcile "needs," desires, and "normative claims" on an individual and social level in view of our best knowledge about our world.

Questions about how individuals and groups should behave can arise in any social form, but it can seem to us from the vantage point of the apparently infinite distance that separates twenty-first-century Europeans from "traditional" societies[2] that in those societies individuals may be perplexed and different groups (and duties to different groups) may conflict, but the question of the *general* structure of an individual human life and of social life as a whole will not seem to be particularly problematic. Since, however, the sources of such normative claims will be diverse, it can easily happen that they seem to make *different* demands on agents even in traditional societies. Equally individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and preferences will be different.

It is natural for thinking people in the West to start by assuming that the world is (finally) "in order" and trying to formulate explicitly and then "reconcile" the various claims made by the different authorities: The Gospel accounts of Mark and John *can* be made to tally. The emperor, the pope, and the local lord "*really*" are demanding us to lead the *same* kind of life. St. Paul *can* be rendered consistent with Aristotle. In a world *with* relatively intact and generally recognised authorities, the question of discipline, both of how and to what extent one should or may coerce others, and of self-discipline seems in principle answerable: One disciplines people by training them, as much as possible, to want to do what they in any case "must" (of natural necessity) do and also what they should do. To what extent it will be possible to make people want to do what they must and should do will depend on a number of unpredictable factors, among them the nature of the demands society makes and the kind of forces of coercion, manipulation, and educations it has available to it.

What happens, however, if the questions go beyond queries about reconciling occasional discrepancies between individual authoritative statements? What if the emperor is a sinner and schismatic? What if the *pope* is a heretic? What if the very idea of "being a heretic" comes

to look archaic and irrelevant? What could proper discipline (including self-discipline) look like in a world like that?

So is the world, including our authorities, fundamentally in order, or is it not? What would we mean by either of these two statements? How could we argue for one or the other of them? What, if anything, would follow for our lives if one or the other of these statements were true and could be shown to be true? There seems little doubt but that traditionally philosophy was supposed to ask this question, and also little doubt that philosophers had a predilection to answer it affirmatively and to draw from their particular version of the affirmative answer very far-reaching consequences for how humans should act. Dewey, that is, was clearly right to think that traditional philosophy was inherently conservative, having as its goal the project of inventing arguments to support as much of the existing forms of social authority as possible.[3] Aristophanes may or may not have got Socrates right in taking him to be a dangerous subversive, but Plato was certainly on Aristophanes' side in thinking that a happy ending was possible only in a polity from which "sophists" were excluded. The difference is that Plato added to Aristophanes' arsenal of satire, innuendo, drama, slapstick, and verbal pyrotechnics a highly developed variant of one of the sophists' own weapons, ratiocination.

The task of philosophy became significantly more difficult starting in the late eighteenth century when the whole concept of "authority" but especially that of "moral authority" became problematic. The reason for this is the modern hypertrophy of ethical thinking centred on the idea of "autonomy."[4] After all, "freedom" was not the *philosophical* obsession in the ancient and medieval worlds that it has become in the past 250 years. That is perhaps because earlier periods actually had visible classes of slaves and serfs, and the distinction of "free" men from them was not as theoretically problematic; freedom was primarily a political problem—could someone torture you with impunity or not; did you have to pay a lord to get married and work without compensation in his fields for a few days a week or not?—not a moral or philosophical one.[5] To be sure, from Herodotus to Nero

one finds pathetic appeals to the "freedom of the Hellenes,"[6] and "libertas" plays an important role in Roman politics, but this originally meant absence of barbarian, especially Persian, military domination over the Greek city-states, then "independence from foreign rule" (more generally),[7] and this had little to do with the *internal* constitution—oligarchy, monarchy, despotism, democracy—of any given city-state. Later "freedom" could be associated with reduction or absence of forms of taxation, and with certain limited powers of self-management within the omnipotent Roman *imperium*. Or "freedom" might come to be associated with "civitas," the acquisition of Roman citizenship. None of these were concepts that seemed to pose any special *philosophical* difficulties, certainly not any of the kind that arise for post-Augustineans. To be sure, one philosophical school, the Stoics, had developed views of freedom,[8] but apart from them "eleutheria" was not a key concept in older Greek philosophy.

The situation changes completely with the advent of the new conceptions of radical individual autonomy in the eighteenth century.[9] With Kant we get a canonical distinction between the morally valuable "autonomy" of an individual subject and a reprehensible "heteronomy" established as fundamental for ethics. Fascination with this distinction, though, can have bad effects for the concept of "authority" because it can easily be thought to belong more naturally with "heteronomy" than with "autonomy." After all, if the doctor is the authority I will often follow his (or her) directives, not because I know them to be good but because the doctor has recommended them. Since it is clearly nonsense to say that I am being morally deficient in following good advice, the Kantian has a prima facie problem here, which he (or she) might try to address by saying that although I may not "autonomously" have decided to do *this* rather than *that*, I can still count as having behaved responsibly if I have autonomously decided to trust the doctor. This, however, does not solve the difficulty but simply pushes it back a step. Am I in a position to know that passing this particular examination really gives the doctor knowledge? How do I know that in accepting the "authority" of the Medical

Board and its examination procedure I am doing more than accepting the local prejudice of my time and society? After all, there were formal and highly technical theology examinations in the Middle Ages, but no one now thinks those who passed those exams could tell us anything that would deserve to be believed or acted on. At each point in the regress the same kind of difficulty re-arises. The Kantian, then, will probably resort to saying that at *some* point the regress *must* stop and I must be able, or must have been able, to evaluate the authority-claim at *that* step "autonomously" (and I either did do that, showing myself to be a morally worthy subject, or failed to do that, thereby leaving myself open to legitimate moral criticism). Again, the use of the philosophical "*must*" should arouse suspicion. Why "*must*" there be such a point? The reason is that otherwise the theory with its sharp dichotomy between autonomy and heteronomy wouldn't be plausible. But perhaps the theory is not plausible. In the ancient world "freedom" was not construed as incompatible with the recognition of "authority." Free men and free self-governing communities would obviously orient themselves on the model of famous men of the past and on the opinions and practice of wise contemporaries. Similarly they would recognise the importance of traditions, established practices, and "unwritten laws";[10] in Rome they would have special regard for the *auctoritas* of the Senate. Finally, if they had any sense, they would attempt to interpret and obey advice, commands, and warnings given by the gods through oracles or via other "signs." We don't believe in divine signs—am I *sure* that my disbelief is something I acquired completely "autonomously" and is not in any way a reflection of the tacit assumptions of my cultural context?[11]—but if modern conceptions of "autonomy" are incompatible with any other of these phenomena, then so much the worse for those conceptions. What sort of human life would it be which failed to assign an important place to respect for, and even a deference to, the judgement and exemplary practice of others?[12] Reverence, respect, and trust are different from blind or coerced submission—in fact real respect is arguably never "blind,"[13] but that also does not mean it is always the

result of the "autonomous decision" of an individual (in the Kantian sense). When Kant claims "Selbst der Heilige des Evangelii muß zuvor mit unserem Ideal der sittlichen Vollkommenheit verglichen werden, ehe man ihn dafür erkennt"[14] ["Even the holy man of the Gospels must antecedently be compared with our ideal of moral perfection, before one recognises him <as such a holy man>"], this is, as Hegel might have put it, one of those half truths which, if presented as the whole truth, is worse than a simple mistake. Of course, in *some* sense we have to be able to connect the life of a human being who is a candidate for being an ethical paradigm with our moral conceptions, but it does not follow either that we antecedently have absolutely fixed and determinate conceptions, as Kant seems to assume, or that we accept someone as exemplary *only if* that person corresponds in *every respect* to what preexisting conceptions we might have. Otherwise it would not be clear how moral development or change was possible, but refusal to learn or to be surprised is no sign of an especially strong or good character; it is more usually of some combination of ignorance, arrogance, and fear. The other "half" of "the truth" is: our "ideal of ethical perfection" is never *simply* our own, in the sense of being a completely autonomous creation from nothing, or in the sense that we have *in every way adequately* "rationally assessed and tested" every component of it. Not only *have* we in fact never done this, but this is not the description of a possible state of human affairs. Kant's claim about the "holy man of the Gospels" is for him the *end* of the discussion and the story. Seeing that claim in contraposition to its other half, however, should rather be seen as the *beginning* of serious discussion.

The "Enlightenment" ideal of an autonomous individual who restricts himself in his acting and judging strictly to that which he understands thoroughly, has rationally well-grounded views about, and has in his control does not describe a possible form of human life. The proper response to this is not simply to accept the station in life we have been assigned and the beliefs our local "authorities" deem to appropriate for us to hold. The thinkers of the Enlightenment may

have connected the practice of "criticism" with a particular quasi-metaphysics of "freedom," but there is no particular reason for us to make this mistake. As Foucault once put it, we need to extract and retain "the ethos of enlightenment"—reasoned investigation of claims—from the "dogma of Enlightenment."[15]

The essays in this collection, all of which were written during the past five years, discuss a number of different issues that arise from this basic situation: What is "authority"? What is "discipline"? What is "criticism"? What is the relation of authority to the question of the "meaning" of human life?

Some of the essays in this collection have appeared in print before: essays 1, 10, and 11 in *Arion* (fall 2009, spring 2012, and spring 2013, respectively); essay 2 in *Cambridge Literary Review* (issue 1/2009); essay 13 in *The Point* (issue 2/2010); essay 9 in *Studies in Christian Ethics* (25, no. 2 [2012]). Essay 6 I originally wrote in German, and a severely truncated version of that text appeared in *Zeitschrift für Ideengeschichte* (Heft IV/4, winter 2010); this is a translation of a revised text based on that longer original.

My thanks for discussion of all the topics and essays in this volume to the members of the *Philosophisches Forschungskolloquium* and especially to Richard Raatzsch. Without the help of Hilary Gaskin I would not have been able to write any of these texts.

A WORLD WITHOUT WHY

1

Goals, Origins, Disciplines

In 1894 Wilhelm Windelband, who was Professor of Philosophy at the University of Straßburg, gave the annual Rector's Address to the assembled members of the university. He took as his topic the structure and classification of the sciences.[1] It is superficial, he claimed, to try to divide the sciences by reference to their subject matter into sciences of nature on the one hand and sciences of spirit (or culture) on the other. A physical object like Mont Blanc or a species of plant or animal can be the subject of aesthetic analysis and evaluation, but such analysis is not part of natural science. Similarly, any human artistic activity has a psychological and eventually a neurophysiological or biochemical basis, but this does not make a study of the brain activity of Michelangelo while he was painting part of "the humanities" (as we would call them). Neither is it the case that there is some specific method or set of characteristic methods used by the natural as opposed to the cultural sciences (or vice versa). Precise observation is equally important everywhere, and the basic forms of logical inference and evidentiary argumentation are similar in all scientific disciplines. Nevertheless, Windelband argued, there is an important distinction between the two basic kinds of "science"; it is merely that the distinction is not in terms of methods or subject matter but in terms of goals or aims. Sciences, after all, are systematic human constructs, and most organized human activity is guided by

some goal or other. We categorize things in different ways depending on our different purposes. A practical field guide to identifying things that fly in the night sky in a certain region of the earth might appropriately include both owls and bats, although according to another classificatory system that is widely used in biology, owls and bats do not belong very closely together because the first are birds and the second mammals. The field guide is not wrong to include bats and owls (though it would be wrong if it asserted that bats belong to the biological order *aves* or owls to the order *mammalia*). Similarly, a survival manual might perfectly reasonably group together some kinds of mushrooms and insects in one chapter, "Things humans can eat," and distinguish them from a group containing poisonous mushrooms and other "Things humans cannot eat" in another chapter, even though this division cuts across recognized biological categories.

One reasonable human goal is to learn to deal with the world by recognizing the recurrent regularities it exhibits. Sciences with this goal Windelband called "nomothetic." All mushrooms that look like *this* are poisonous, and if you eat them you will become very ill indeed and perhaps die. On the other hand, as human beings we are interested not only in laws, regularities, and recurrent features of the world but also in certain striking singularities. So, for instance, we are interested not just in the ways *Mrs Dalloway* is one more novel exhibiting the features all other novels exhibit but also in what makes it different from other novels or even unique. An account aimed at exhibiting the singularity of an object or event was to be called "idiographic."

The period of the Second German Empire (1871–1919) was a Golden Age for the discussion of classificatory problems. This is probably not unconnected with certain aggressive imperialist ambitions that were widely entertained by the political classes of the time, which in turn were mirrored in the dominance of neo-Kantianism.[2] Kant was notoriously almost pathologically obsessed with intellectual (and moral) tidiness, with making sharp and clear distinctions that would

allow one to divide the world up into easily cognizable objects and sectors. For the neo-Kantian the question of the autonomy, distinctiveness, and principles of division of different kinds of human activity was of the very greatest concern. Sometimes these were nothing but turf wars, but sometimes more substantive issues were in play. Thus the discussion of economics between the so-called Historical School and the followers and associates of Carl Menger had ostensibly to do with the role that institutions and history should play in the study of economics, but that disagreement clearly mirrored differences in the conception of the way economic development would, could, or should take place. Could the industrial structures of Manchester simply be replicated in Germany, or would economic development need to take a very different course given the differences in history and institutions between Germany and Britain?

Windelband, of course, writing in late nineteenth-century Germany, did not have at his disposal the concept of "the humanities" but would have had to speak of the Geistes- und Kulturwissenschaften. Actually his Rectoral Address is entitled "Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft," though at one point he also refers to *les belles lettres*. Even if one cannot take seriously Windelband's specific theory about the nomothetic and idiographic, his point that what is at issue are disciplines as human constructs, not simply unvarnished, contrasting blocks of material, is well taken. When we talk about the humanities we are talking about a set of disciplines, human constructs, and we can undertake the construction of these disciplines in a variety of different ways, as well as classify the kinds of constructs that result in a variety of different ways.

Windelband's two basic questions, then, are what sorts of things do we as humans generally want to know about, and why? One way of trying to answer these questions is by observing that there is a strong human tendency to want to know about the origins of things, as if this allowed one a special access to understanding them. What is probably the oldest extant document of Western literature provides several instances of this tendency. In the *Iliad* (book 6, lines 119–236)[3]

Homer describes an encounter on the field of battle between two warriors who do not know each other. Before they fight, one, the Greek Diomedes, son of Tydeus, asks the other, who turns out to be an ally of the Trojans named Glaukos, who he is (τίς δὲ σὺ ἐσσι, φέριστε, καταθνητῶν ἀνθρώπων;). Glaukos replies by embarking on a genealogy reaching back five generations, which contains a series of elaborate narrative accounts of what his father and grandfather and some of his ancestors did at various points in their lives:

> High-hearted son of Tydeus, why ask of my generation [τίη γενεὴν ἐρεείνεις;]?
> As is the generation of leaves [γενεή], so is that of humanity.
> The wind scatters the leaves on the ground, but the live timber
> burgeons with leaves again in the season of spring returning.
> So one generation [γενεή] of men will grow while another
> dies. Yet if you wish to learn all this and be certain
> of my genealogy:
> [ὄφρ᾽ ἐῢ εἰδῇς / ἡμετέρην γενεήν: literally,
> "that you might know well our generation / race / lineage"]
> there are plenty of men who know it.

There follow here about fifty lines describing the trials, vicissitudes, and heroic exploits of his various ancestors (Ailos > Sisyphos > Glaukos (I) > Bellerophontes > Hippolochos). Glaukos ends his genealogy by speaking of his father:

> But Hippolochos begot me, and I claim that he is my father;
> he sent me to Troy, and urged upon me repeated injunctions,
> to be always among the bravest, and hold my head above others,
> not shaming the generation [γένος] of my fathers, who were
> the greatest men in Ephyre and again in wide Lykia.
> Such is my generation and the blood I claim to be born from
> [ταύτης τοι γενεῆς τε καὶ αἵματος εὔχομαι εἶναι].

One might think this is just an instance of puerile boasting, which of course it is, and we might therefore put it aside as irrelevant. In this

context it is, however, perhaps not as off-topic as it might seem. This is a world in which a few highly individuated warriors stand out—often literally, it seems, standing in front of a large, anonymous mass of fighters (the λαοί). By reciting his pedigree in such detail, Glaukos is imparting important and relevant information about his background and probable training, as well as giving a kind of performance. Perhaps he is trying to raise his own spirits and to intimidate his opponent, signalling that he has no intention of slinking away, but he is also in some sense actually changing the situation. *Having* the pedigree Glaukos has means in this context that one is likely to be a person of a certain sort, interested and skilled in warlike pursuits, and brought up to try, as Glaukos says, "to be always among the bravest"; *announcing* that pedigree in a situation of public confrontation means identifying oneself in a certain way and thereby making it impossible to withdraw anonymously, without loss of face, into the mass of λαοί.[4]

When Diomedes hears Glaukos's stories about his ancestors, he realizes that his own grandfather and Glaukos's grandfather were hereditary "guest-friends," and so the two warriors decide not to fight each other after all and instead exchange armour in token of the renewal of this hereditary relation of guest-friendship. Determining *who* they are via their respective genealogies has important normative consequences for how they think it appropriate to treat each other. The question of who one's opponent is seems in this world a perfectly natural one to ask, and it also seems natural to answer that question, even in the heat of battle, by giving a genealogy and a series of narratives. *Who* I am and what my essential properties are are thought to be connected with my origin, which is given by a genealogy. The genealogical narrative is assumed to disclose something important about my essential powers, obligations, and entitlements. What we would call "natural" and what we would call "social" properties are not distinctly separated. Is the question of "origin" really so natural as all that?

Another early and important example of the human concern with origins is Hesiod's great cosmological poem *Theogonia*, which explains

who a large number of gods, goddesses, and so forth are by giving their genealogies. Giving the genealogy here is intended to be explanatory; to know who and what a given god is means to be able to locate him in the sequence of divine generations, and this also gives one at least some minimal ability to address him, to know what to expect of him and how to deal with him.

Oddly enough, this genealogical interest in origins does not seem to have developed in the ancient world into an intellectual, hegemonic, formal discipline. Genealogical inquiries do not seem to have been one of the major direct ancestors of anything we moderns would recognize as full-blown "history" (or, for that matter, what the Greeks called "history," namely systematic empirical enquiry of any kind), and history itself seems never in the ancient world to have attained the exalted status it occupied in some parts of Europe in the modern period. Rather, at a relatively early age the genealogical impulse was crushed to death and pulverized between two huge millstones, which to some extent represented theoretical competitors to genealogy. These two competitors were rhetoric and philosophy.[5]

To start with the first of these, rhetorical culture was focused on producing persuasion through the medium of correct, aesthetically attractive, and effective speaking. Rhetorical training, then, meant the study of language in all its aspects but also the inculcation of certain aesthetic, moral, and political values that were considered part of being a persuasive speaker.[6] In discussing ancient rhetoric it is important not to lose sight of two important facts. First of all, rhetorical training was in the first instance eminently vocational and practical, not abstractly speculative or merely ornamental. The ancient Greeks sometimes distinguished three types of persons who went to the Olympic Games.[7] First there were those who went to compete—to run, jump, throw the javelin, race their chariots, or pummel one another into insensibility with their fists. Then there were those who went to sell things; in the era before corporate sponsorships they were the objects of an entirely appropriate, almost universal contempt. Finally there were those who went to watch. This third group, the spec-

tators, were the archetypal "theorists." Observing, especially observing a highly public competition, can easily come to be associated with commenting on the performance of individual competitors and then with a kind of rudimentary criticism. Ancient rhetoricians were either direct participants in the rough-and-tumble of ancient politics, speaking in public assemblies and trying to get the better of other speakers by defeating their proposals, or competitive performers, and so, in the terms of this comparison, they were more like Olympic athletes than like spectators. Rhetoric as a disciplined skill seems in fact originally to have had a close connection with proto-democratic politics, where such skills would for obvious reasons be particularly valued.

Although the basic structure of the discipline of rhetoric and its teleological orientation were practical and political, this did not exclude the development of some kinds of theoretical analysis and relatively disinterested criticism as a subordinate part of rhetorical culture. Thus in several early Platonic dialogues, particularly the *Protagoras*, we see Plato making fun of teachers of rhetoric who give way to an obsession with correct linguistic usage, subtle semantic differences, and a kind of morally edifying but, Plato claims, fundamentally insubstantial and unsound literary criticism.

The second important fact is that this rhetorical training was *not*, contrary to the propaganda of Plato, originally just a technique for unscrupulously manipulating people. To put it in somewhat later terminology, the original project of rhetoric was to teach something both inherently valuable *and* instrumentally valuable. It was inherently valuable because it made those who learn and practice it good, beautiful, and self-confident (and these are values in themselves), and it was instrumentally valuable because it was useful in helping one get one's way politically.[8] It was precisely this orientation towards human improvement, not just effective instrumental manipulation, that made some of the original forms of rhetorical training such an easy target for Plato's criticism. Plato was terrified by what he took to be the potentially subversive ("democratic") political possibilities of

rhetoric: *anyone* who could pay the fees, *regardless* of their genealogy and family connections, could learn the art of speaking persuasively from professional teachers of rhetoric. Nevertheless, Plato couches his criticism in epistemological terms. If the study of rhetoric really makes people better, he argues, then surely its teachers must be able to explain what the human good is and how the study of rhetoric conduces to helping people attain it.[9] This is part of Plato's general argument that you cannot be performing an activity well unless you can explain *why* you are doing every component part of it in the way you are, and you can't do that unless you have the correct general theory. Since rhetoricians were basically inculcating skills in practical public speaking, secondarily developing certain ways of interpreting literature,[10] and had some theories about some things (such as the correct order of the parts of a speech) but no general theory of the human good, Plato's conclusion is that they did not really know what they were doing and hence could not be doing it *well*, except, as he condescendingly sometimes adds, by accident (θείᾳ μοίρᾳ, *Ion* 542a).

Seen retrospectively from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, there seems nothing extravagant in the claims of professors of rhetoric that they were making those whom they taught "better people"; after all, they were making them more able to participate effectively in public debate and in the common political life of their respective cities, and that might perfectly well be considered a good. Isn't Plato's Protagoras in some sense right to say that a human capable of taking part in sociable common life is better-off than one condemned to a life of solitude, isolation, and silence?[11] Similarly, there seems nothing outrageous in claiming that one is benefitting people (and their cities), even though one cannot specify by reference to a general theory in exactly what way that is occurring. Given our complete inability despite over two thousand years of effort to agree on a theory of "the good" that would have satisfied Plato, it seems highly rash to continue to claim that possession of such a theory is a precondition for any stable form of good practice.

Plato's criticism does not seem to have had much immediate effect; rhetoric was simply too useful for that. What killed off old-style rhetoric was the gradual but cumulative marginalization in the Roman Empire[12] of the political bodies in which free speech was permitted and could be politically effective: the popular assemblies and then the Roman Senate.

In the context of the study and practice of rhetoric, genealogy, historical enquiry, or the study of origins might have had at best a subordinate place. Individuals like Varro (and the Emperor Claudius) might have had idiosyncratic antiquarian interests, and history of a sort had some standing as a source of *exempla* for virtuous or vicious action, so what one gets is at best something like what one finds in the first few books of Livy, and, apart from whatever concerns one might have about the accuracy of the account, the heavy moralizing quickly gets rather cloying.

That brings me to the second of the two huge millstones that ground away at the interest in origins: philosophy. The standard doxographic account of the origin of philosophy, which goes back at the very least to book 1 of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, runs as follows: First, there were myths and poetic cosmologies, structured as narratives or genealogies, like that of Hesiod; then, at some point Thales of Miletus initiated philosophy precisely by breaking with mythic and genealogical accounts and by claiming that there is a single ἀρχή for everything in the world: what he calls "water." Ἀρχή comes from the verb ἄρχω, which means to make a beginning, initiate, take the lead, and then, by a natural association, control or rule. The dancer who makes the beginning in some sense sets the tempo and determines the nature of the dance. For Homer, he who "made the beginning" of Glaukos is first of all his father, then his paternal lineage; and that is what determines what and who this person is. But with Thales, ἀρχή seems to begin to take on the meaning of determining (abstract) principle, while leaving behind the idea that there is an interesting historical sequence that can be traced back to some initiatory moment.

I don't know exactly how Thales thought water constituted the nature of the world, and I think it likely that this is not merely a personal failing of mine. Rather, I think "we" don't know—the available information is just not adequate—and it is even conceivable that Thales himself did not know exactly how he meant various of his claims. In a sense, as Hegel recognized, the whole history of philosophy is nothing more than an attempt to clarify what kind of ἀρχή there can be for the world and in what relation it can stand to the cosmos as a whole and to individual objects and events.

Thales stood at the very beginning of this long historical process of clarification and didn't perhaps have views articulated as highly as those of later philosophers. The pursuit of clarity is in general a good thing, but the indiscriminate pursuit of clarity is a vice and a serious obstacle to the proper understanding of large parts of human life. This is particularly the case when considering the philosophical past. So the obscurity of Thales's actual theory is not surprising and in fact not so important; whatever specific theory he had, if indeed he had any, did not recommend itself sufficiently to any of those of his successors whose work survives for them to transmit it to us. Nevertheless, later thinkers have found in him a kind of origin for philosophy. Hegel remarks[13] that when Thales says "All is water," he is neither specifying an origin the way Glaukos is nor making a statement with the same structure, import, or "grammar" as the statement "All the fish in this barrel are cod" when it is made by the holder of a market stall. Also, "water" in this statement does not refer to the colourless liquid one finds filling the Aegean Sea but to some kind of speculative principle that stands in an unspecified relation to the well-known fluid. "All is water" makes a totalizing claim, the claim that everything in the world can in some way be accounted for by reference to a single abstract principle. Simply having that thought, even if one was not able to elaborate it any further, was, Hegel claims, enough to initiate what we have come to know as philosophy.

We have encountered two different senses of "origin." First, origin in the sense of historical origination, as in the case of Glaukos, and

second, origin in the sense of some explanatory scheme or principle that provides a unitary abstract account or rationale, as in the case of Thales.

In principle one can investigate the "origin" of something in either or both of the two senses. At some point in prehistory humans put two pieces of wood or stone together in a particular configuration and used them to beat pieces of material into shape. As we would say, they "invented" the hammer. One can, however, tell two slightly different stories about this. First, one can tell the story of origins of the hammer, for instance by visiting the Musée de l'homme in Paris and looking closely at the exhibited artefacts. One could also—and this would seem to be a second way of proceeding—discuss the "origin" of the hammer by looking at continuing configurations of human desires, goals, needs, and the conditions under which they are or are not attainable or capable of being satisfied—by looking at the problem to which the invention of the hammer was the solution. One might—or might not—think that this second story gives one a better understanding, and in the second account one might think that the *specific* history is not of great interest. Given the problem (and that means given the assumption that human desires and needs are more or less invariant and environmental conditions more or less uniform), with enough ingenuity someone was eventually going to hit on the solution that consisted in inventing something very much like the hammer.[14] The two stories are, however, perfectly compatible. Once the hammer is there it can, of course, have other uses in addition to its original one. For instance, certain hammers might be so beautifully made that they become objects of aesthetic contemplation. This new function can in some cases survive atrophy of the original need. To be sure, it is not clear to what extent Glaukos would accept that one could equally well tell two distinct stories, parallel to those concerning the hammer, about him. An account of his origins, he would likely think, would have to deal with the specific details of his history. There might be something about being the descendant of *those specific* ancestors that makes him the object of the kind of

individualizing interest that finds its appropriate expression in an "idiographic" narrative. He might think it makes a huge difference that his ancestor is Bellerophontes, not some other equally heroic figure, if only because Bellerophontes was the guest-friend of Diomedes' grandfather, and thus Glaukos and Diomedes should not fight each other. What Glaukos is seems to be comprehensible only relative to his particular history and that of his ancestors.

I have also been discussing "origins" in the context of two different inquiries. First, I have been asking what in fact are the origins of certain human disciplines—from what matrix of human purposes, social pressures, and contingent occurrences they arose; the motivation for asking this question is to get a better understanding of these disciplines. Second, I have been recounting certain traditional views held by the practitioners of one of these disciplines, "philosophy," about what should count as having a satisfactory understanding of any important human phenomenon. The overwhelming traditional view among philosophers is that one only has an adequate understanding of a phenomenon if one has a general theory about or an abstract rationale for it. So if one wants to call a search for the best understanding of something an enquiry into its "origin," the term "origin" has its second, not its first, sense—that is, a good account gives a unitary principle, and certainly not anything that looks like a sequential narrative.

Kant, for me, has always summed up what is most wrongheaded and retrograde in modern philosophy. He follows the philosophical tradition in rejecting any positive role for history in philosophical reflection.[15] Rather, he construes the task of giving an origin for philosophy as that of providing a unitary abstract rationale for it and tries to connect that with a set of universal and invariant human interests. These interests require that humans try to attain a unitary view of the world as a whole. Human agents, Kant thought, had to act in the world, and this required them to make a series of assumptions about how their world was constituted.[16] Several nineteenth-century neo-Kantian philosophers developed lines of thought that

Kant had marked out into a theory of what came to be called the "metaphysical need," which was the need for a single universal scheme that would make all things make sense.[17] This metaphysical need was generally construed by those who believed it existed as a demand rooted in continuing aspects of human nature for the kind of cognitive and normative orientation that could *only* be given by something like a religious or a systematic "philosophical" worldview.

Kant's most important successor, Hegel, represents a significant break by virtue of his attempt to think about philosophy in a more inherently historical way.[18] In one of his early essays he says that "the need for philosophy" arises not ahistorically for all rational practical agents by virtue of a metaphysical need they have but under highly specific social circumstances, namely when "life has lost its 'unity.' "[19] This raises the un-Kantian possibility that fascinated several later philosophers in the Hegelian tradition, among them Marx,[20] namely the idea that in a satisfactory society, from which certain kinds of deep-seated conflicts were absent, philosophy (along with religion) would be superfluous and would disappear. Of course, even in such a basically harmonious society there might be a pale successor-discipline to the antique magnificence of "philosophy," which might, for example, take the form of straightforward attempts to get an overview of the state of our knowledge or even suggestions for minor improvements in our social arrangements. One line of criticism of what are sometimes called "positivist" strands in twentieth-century philosophy consists in claiming that positivists propound methods of direct observation and theory construction that would in principle be cognitively perfectly appropriate in a fundamentally harmonious society; however, by advocating the exclusive use of such methods in repressive and conflict-ridden societies like ours, they tacitly contribute to diverting attention from fundamental social antagonisms.[21]

However, once a connection is established between certain forms of enquiry or intellectual disciplines, such as philosophy, with interests or needs, the door is open to further subversive thoughts. It might be the case that some particular conceptual or theoretical invention

itself creates psychological needs which, once they are in existence, are difficult to get rid of. This is the model that Nietzsche uses for Christianity.[22] It develops a complex set of practices and institutions that arise for perfectly understandable but utterly contingent and perhaps slightly disreputable reasons, such as human weakness and resentment of that weakness, but which, once they get themselves established, generate from within the new set of human needs of which Christianity is the fulfillment. The salvation that Christianity offers is, arguably, not for everyone but for those who need it. Since salvation means in the first instance salvation from sin, it would seem that the Christian kerugma—the message that sins can be erased and salvation is at hand—would have no purchase on those with no sense of sin. Missionaries have special difficulty with people lacking a sense of sin, so they may need to create one.[23] This is completely different from the case of the hammer, in that even if the hammer eventually acquires new functions, such as serving as an object of aesthetic appreciation, the original problem, that of beating things into a more serviceable shape, can be said to have existed *before* the hammer was invented. On Nietzsche's reading this is not the case with Christianity. Christianity did not in the first instance cure the preexisting problem of sin but attempted to cure a completely different (and, Nietzsche thinks, virtually incurable) *other* condition, namely a historically specific, widespread form of human debility. Christianity, as he puts it, "turned sick people into sinners." This means that Christian institutional life can not only inculcate a *belief* that one is a sinner but actually produce people whose somatic constitution is correctly described as "sinful." The model here is addiction to drugs. Those who believe or feel themselves to be "sinners" think they need the consolation Christianity provides; those who really have been turned into sinners really do need that consolation, in the way the addict needs the drug. The only difference is that whereas we tend to assume drug addiction is "in principle" reversible (i.e., given sufficient willpower and a facilitating environment), Nietzsche seems to think that for most people the changes introduced by Christianity are effectively

irreversible. Still, this is compatible with thinking they are radically contingent.

Unfortunately, this whole Hegelian project of doing philosophy in a historically informed way has recently fallen out of fashion for reasons that are too complex and obscure to be presented uncontroversially in brief compass,[24] but a significant part of the reason is likely to be the fear that if one embarks on this path, one will eventually be confronted with the unpalatable alternative of either accepting a highly baroque and counterintuitive metaphysic of the kind Hegel himself advocated or losing one's bearings in the face of the teeming variety of historical forms of thinking and acting. The second of these two fears is often expressed as anxiety in the face of the threat of "relativism." Loss of the absolute moral certainties given by Christian or Kantian attitudes can clearly give rise to vertigo, but perhaps the appropriate reaction to that is to show that the purported threat of "relativism" is illusory and to treat the vertigo as mildly pathological.

Earlier I told the usual story about the origin of philosophy. However, it is notable that Plato[25] gives a different story about the origin of philosophy, which does not begin with Thales. (The first extant occurrence of the word φιλοσοφία is in Plato, and it is not out of the question that he in fact coined the term.)[26] This story is repeated in a very prominent place by Cicero.[27] Philosophy starts with Socrates, and it actually gets going—has its real origin or ἀρχή—when he turns his back on speculation about the natural world and turns to ethics. In Plato's *Phaedo*, Socrates says that when he was young and immature he concerned himself with what the Greeks called φυσιολογία (that is, speculation about nature), but now that he has become an adult he is no longer interested in the structure of the universe but in how things need to be to be "for the best." As Cicero puts it, Socrates "brings philosophy down to earth" (from inspection of the skies to the ἀγορά). For Plato, this seems to mark a kind of beginning; however, Plato did *not* follow Socrates in his turn away from cosmological speculation but developed a highly peculiar theory about the

cosmological basis of values: his theory of "forms" or "ideas." This notion of a conjunction between cosmology and ethics developed especially long legs when it was taken over and adapted by Christianity because Christians construed their god as both creator of the natural world and moral legislator. I simply note that it is highly peculiar that these *two* distinct things—speculation on the nature of the universe on the one hand and moral and political philosophy on the other—get put together as one subject (philosophy).

Once a unity like "philosophy" gets itself established, especially institutionally established, for instance in schools or universities, there is an almost irresistible tendency to *find* or *create* a single unitary genealogy for the enterprise, which means both a unitary history and a unitary, noncontextual goal. There is a compulsion to make up a single rationale and project it back onto people who are then retrospectively declared to be "precursors."

Nietzsche has a notorious line in criticism of all forms of analysis by reference to purported unique "origins."[28] He is especially scathing about attribution of the origins of continuing institutions to individual heroic founders: philosophy founded by Thales or Socrates, Christianity founded by Jesus. There was never a single origin for anything with any continuing historical significance. What looks like a unique origin always disperses into a multiplicity. All persisting institutions and practices have unsurveyable multiple sequences of completely contingent ancestors, "contingent" meaning that there was no logical or rational necessity in their conjunction. One can in principle trace these ancestors back indeterminately into the past, and the farther back one goes the more such ancestors there will be. At some point one will not be able to go farther, but that is merely, as it were, an accidental limitation of our cognitive powers or the evidence that happens to be available.[29]

In fact, then, the account of the "origins" of philosophy I have given is a gross oversimplification. The history of the "origins" of philosophy is not simply one in which two different kinds of inquiries (physics and ethics) come together. There is at least a third more or

less independent element: a concern with forms of argumentation, logical thinking, and the validity of inference.[30] Plato, in composing his dialogues, makes great play of this concern with correct inference, a part of his thought that does not seem influenced either by the earlier speculators about nature (such as Thales) or by Socrates' moralizing but derives from several more obscure sources, including the so-called Eleatic philosophers (Parmenides) and, to some extent, the sophists. The influence of this tradition on Socrates was profound. Plato, to be sure, is anxious to distance Socrates from the sophists as much as possible, so anything he took over from them has to be rather carefully hidden, or Plato has to explain at great length in what way the Socratic version of the concern for correct speaking is different from that of the sophists.

It would not be surprising if the discipline of "philosophy" depended for its continuing vitality on the tension between these different poles—between interest in the structure of the natural world, interest in forms of argumentation, and interest in "what would be for the best"—so that without this tension the practice as we know it could not continue to exist, but would break up into individual parts, each of which would go its own way as a distinct discipline.

There seems, in fact, no reason anymore why those concerned to understand the structure of the natural world should ex officio also have a nontrivial interest in which political institutions or which works of art are best or in formal structures of speech and argumentation. "Philosophy" could dissolve itself into physics for the study of nature; linguistics, rhetoric, and mathematics for the study of speech, argumentation, and formal systems; and politics, *belles lettres*, and social psychology for the study of "what would be for the best." I strongly suspect that a radical dissociation of these interests has already occurred, although many people have not noticed it yet, and the discipline of philosophy in its present configuration is held together only by a combination of historical inertia and a sentimentalized attachment to a mostly illusory image of a glorious past. As a purported single subject, philosophy seems unlikely to last. If the

various components really have as little to do with each other as they nowadays seem to, this may be no bad thing.

This story is a tempting development of Nietzschean themes about the artificiality of what has its origin in a series of contingent encounters of originally diverse and heterogeneous elements. One should not, of course, conclude from the fact that certain disciples have a contingent history relevant to understanding their present form that just *any* old available elements could randomly be put together as a "discipline," or that all conjunctions are equally good. For example, the Roman writer on architecture Vitruvius, when discussing the kind of training a good architect needed to have, states that such a person had to be especially well trained in music.[31] The reason for this was that an architect was expected also to be a military engineer, and a military engineer would be called on to build and activate catapults, and catapults would shoot straight and thus be effective only if the tension in the ropes providing their motive power were equal. Ropes, I suspect, were not industrially produced to a high level of uniformity in the ancient world, and so the only way to tell whether the tension in two improvised ropes was equal was to pluck them and see whether they sounded the same note. If they did, the tension was equal; otherwise not. So in an ideal Vitruvian university architectural training would include bridge-building, ballistics, and music as forming a "natural" unit. This unity was "natural" in that the conjunction gave prospective architects very good preparation for tasks with which they would be confronted. One could not, that is, equally well have taught them cooking, ballet, and viticulture. On the other hand, if most warfare in the Roman world had been naval, it might have seemed more obvious to group ballistics and music with navigation and astronomy, not with bridge-building. When gunpowder arrives, music becomes irrelevant and can be expected to drop out of the military curriculum. So there are things that "go together" better than other things, but it is not at all clear that the idea of "going together" makes sense independent of some at least mini-

mal reference to historically specific human projects, valuations, and purposes.

In addition, it is still an open question whether a conjunction that has been given such a synthetic unity—for whatever reasons and in whatever way—can also just as easily split up into its component parts. One might be tempted to argue that since traditional philosophy arose as a purportedly unitary pursuit from a series of accidental conjunctions occurring over a period of two centuries or so (roughly from Thales to Plato), there is no reason why it cannot also come apart again. This cannot be the whole story because of considerations like those mentioned in discussing the hammer or Christianity—if, like the hammer, philosophy acquired some further functions that could best be discharged by a unitary discipline, or if, like Christianity, it generated from itself needs that only it could satisfy. If there are such hidden, *new* essential functions, what are they?

If this is true about philosophy, it is true in spades for "the humanities." This term, in the sense in which it is used today in English-speaking countries, seems not to go back much further than the middle of the nineteenth century,[32] and to say anything substantial about why it came into use and why it seemed plausible to think it had a referent would require more interest in and knowledge of nineteenth-century Britain than I possess. It seems plausible to expect that at least one of the immediate pressures operating here resulted from the demands of education, especially higher education. What seems, however, also rather clear, even to an outsider, is that the idea that there was one discernible, collective thing, "the humanities," a more or less unitary set of subjects or disciplines that belonged together, required a highly constructive act of conceptualization, putting together various existing, disparate things that had not antecedently been thought to have anything particular to do with each other. The resulting synthesis was composed of various rather debased bits of detritus from the ancient world, with a particularly high concentration of bits of the ancient rhetorical tradition put together with

bits of history and philosophy and some parts of the nonverbal arts. Again, from the fact that it was constructed, it does not follow that it was random in the sense that *any* collection of preexisting skills, forms of knowledge, and practices could *equally well* have been put together; the historical account is in part directly to show that that is not the case.

In light of the above remarks, the relatively artificial nature of the conjunction called "the humanities" ought no longer to seem surprising. It is in any case no news that all human classificatory schemes are partly structured by wider forms of human valuation and human purposes. One might with good reason think that much of value—many important kinds of knowledge—can relatively easily survive large-scale shifts in our way of classifying and organizing disciplines. To recur to Windelband's terminology, we will retain our "idiographic" interest in the Peloponnesian War (and in Thucydides' account of it), and much—though possibly not all—of what we find of the greatest interest will continue to come to representation whether this conjunction of events, actions, and words is treated as part of Altertumswissenschaft, of "classics," or of "history."

The proliferation and dispersion of new subjects and disciplines, combined with changes in the way we live and in our attitudes and dominant concerns, can be expected to render implausible our accustomed way of organizing academic subjects. There is nothing historically unprecedented about this. Foucault closes his study of what he calls the human sciences, *Les mots et les choses*,[33] by comparing their central organizing conception, "man," with a face drawn in the sand that is about to be washed away by the incoming tide. The face may be gone, but provided the sand remains, we have no reason for more than transitory twinges of grief, and certainly no reason for deep melancholy.

In conclusion, I suggest that if the general perspective on our historical situation that I have tried to sketch here is correct—if philosophy in fact is on the point of dissolving into a number of different constituents and has long since lost any organic or systematic con-

nection as a discipline with the so-called humanities, and if a similar fragmentation of the humanities themselves is under way—then the whole question of giving some *general* account of the role of philosophy in the humanities doesn't make sense. Neither of the two purported entities has the requisite stability to admit a useful investigation of this question. At the moment, the relation between what is called philosophy and what are called the humanities is a matter of idiosyncratic associations between certain individuals, which are so contingent they border on the whimsical—the odd Professor of Ethics who *also* happens to have read Greats at Oxford rather than PPE, or the don who works professionally on some aspect of the philosophy of language but also happens to be devoted to the ballet. Whether or not this dissociation is a temporary phenomenon, and if it is not, what new structures will eventually emerge, are matters of speculation, but since such controlled speculation was once one of the things philosophers used to do, I would suggest that if there is no ecological or economic catastrophe—or something comparable that radically overturns, or even puts an end to, our organized intellectual life—dispersal of the kind I have described is likely to be a continuing feature of our landscape for the foreseeable future.

2

Vix intellegitur

The title of this essay is taken, with appropriate grammatical modification, from a comment by Cicero on Thucydides that has always fascinated me. In one of his treatises on the art of rhetoric Cicero is discussing the proper style to be adopted by the public speaker, and he discourages the aspiring orator from imitating the speeches in Thucydides' history. Thucydides, he admits, is good at describing battles and grand public actions, but this narrative style is not directly transferable to political or forensic oratory, and as far as the elaborate speeches that Thucydides includes in his work are concerned: "*Ipsae illae contiones ita multas habent obscuras abditiasque sententias vix ut intellegantur; quod est in oratione civili vitium vel maximum*."[1] ["Those speeches contain so many obscure and recondite formulations that they are *scarcely to be understood*, which in a political speech is about the worst defect there is."]

What exactly does it mean—if indeed it means one univocal thing at all—to say that a speech or a text is unclear, scarcely to be understood or hard to comprehend, and what exactly is supposed to be wrong with obscurity? One might think that this is a rather foolish question because isn't it self-evident that lack of clarity is a defect? My ultimate aim in this chapter, however, is to question this assumption and consider whether there are contexts and occasions in which and on which obscurity is not a deficiency, even a deficiency that might be pardonable or unavoidable, but something with positive value.

Obviously when Cicero discusses Thucydides' speeches he does not mean that they are what we would call completely incomprehensible, as a text in Chinese or Hungarian would have been had it been presented to him. Cicero (106 BC–43 BC) was not a native speaker of Greek or a contemporary of Thucydides (c. 458 BC–c. 400 BC), but he lived only a couple of hundred years later, had resided for a time in Athens, and was a fluent speaker of what was at the time still a living language. I take it also that when Cicero says that the speeches in Thucydides are obscure, he does not merely mean that they are obscure to a Roman audience of the first century BC, or even to a Greek-speaking Roman of the first century BC, but that these speeches, he supposes, would also have been obscure to a fifth-century BC Athenian audience. After all, Cicero's book is a practical guide to his Roman contemporaries interested in becoming skilled orators, so the most reasonable construal of his advice is: "Don't be as difficult to comprehend by Latin-speakers in c. 50 BC as Thucydides would have been to speakers of Attic Greek in c. 400 BC."

I may misconstrue or fail to understand fully (or at all) what is perfectly clearly expressed because of fatigue, poor concentration, weak hearing, preoccupation, or any one of a number of other causes. The cases in which we are interested here, however, are ones in which there is no special explanation that refers to some specific fact about one individual person (rather than some other) and makes it the case that that particular person finds it difficult to understand the speech or text in question. One way in which that could be the case would be if what you said to me was "inherently" misleading or obscure or hard to follow, that is, if *anyone*—within limits perhaps, for instance, "anyone who was not a mind-reader or who did not have some other special form of access to your intentions, your past history, your other beliefs, and so on"—would be likely either to be puzzled by or to misconstrue it.

Does the notion of "inherent" obscurity, or its correlative, "inherent" clarity, make sense? Of course, if it is no more than an empirical, sociological claim—some things I find it hard to grasp; some things you find it hard to grasp; some thing we both, and most of the people

in some imagined reference group, would find it hard to grasp—it is unobjectionable, but it is then unclear what its significance is, or indeed whether it even had any deeper significance. In everyday interaction and language-use what counts as clear and what as obscure depends very much on a highly variable context. "It's down past the Catholic church" is perfectly clear if I am talking to a neighbour, who will know that although there are various Catholic churches in Cambridge the one habitually used as a common point of topological reference is the one with a large spire at the corner of Lensfield Road and Hills Road; it will be likely to be obscure to someone who does not live in Cambridge. It isn't that, as one says, "examples of this kind can be multiplied *ad libitum*" because that suggests that there are special "examples" and thus that there could also be non-examples. Rather, I think this context-dependency is a universal phenomenon, except in the very few areas of everyday life that have been invaded by formal or technical usages, such as discussions of the legal requirements for proper tenancy, inheritance or conveyancing, medical prescriptions, or the naming of the parts and modes of functioning of complex machines like computers. These are isolated islands that depend for the fixity and univocacy of their meanings on being embedded in larger social mechanisms for enforcing strict uniformity, and when the appropriate mechanisms break down or malfunction, as they regularly, and eventually always, do, the islands are submerged again in the sea of everyday speech. These exceptions are exceptions because we *make* them that way through highly artificial means, which, however, will work only in specific local contexts; they can therefore never even in principle be models for the whole of our language-use, our cognitive or practical relation to the world, or our interactions with each other. Cicero can be understood actually to be making this point about context-dependency in the passage above. What he says is *if* you are giving a speech to a political meeting (*contio*) then *this* kind of Thucydidean style is not appropriate. It doesn't *follow* from this—although it might in fact be true—that it would be "obscure" in other situations or circumstances, for instance, among the mem-

bers of a small group of the literary and political elite who met to understand the causes and the course of the war between Athens and the Peloponnesian League, and who could have their slaves read the relevant passages back to them several times for discussion. In fact one of the ancient sources (Dionysius of Halicarnassos) gives as the reason for Thucydides' "difficulty" that his speeches had *too many* thoughts condensed into each phrase.[2] How many is "too many," however, obviously depends on whether one is a Cicero standing in the Forum in Rome, shouting at a changing audience of half-distracted members of the *plebs*, or a Cicero sitting in the comfort and quiet of a rural villa with his learned friend Atticus and his learned slave Tiro.

Nevertheless, although what Cicero *says* in this passage is that Thucydides' style is not appropriate for public political oratory, it might also in fact be the case, although that is not Cicero's main point here, that Thucydides' style is inappropriate because "obscure" in *any* context that might reasonably be assumed to exist for reading it. We might be tempted to say that it is an "objectively" obscure style, meaning that Thucydidean speeches are hard to follow even for people who were not distracted, preoccupied, and so forth, and who also knew a lot about the man and the topic. One might go on to think that if this style is really difficult to understand for anyone in any context, this shows that the whole reference to a "context" is not really relevant here or was trivial and unimportant. One might finally then try to turn this around and imagine that there could be a style that was "objectively clear" in that anyone who understood the language in question could immediately grasp what was being said in it, provided the speaker took a minimum amount of care. Or one could think that there could be not merely a style but a whole language that had this property of "objective clarity." This notion that some forms of speech or writing could be "objectively" clear or "objectively" obscure in some absolute sense is a recurrent illusion from which philosophers have great difficulty freeing themselves. Thus the late Wittgenstein criticises Frege for holding that all proper concepts must be univocal, sharply defined, and absolutely clear. He imagines someone like Frege

objecting, "[I]st ein verschwommener Begriff überhaupt ein *Begriff*?" ["Is a vague concept really a concept at all?"] and responds to this with a crushing:

> Ist eine unscharfe Photographie überhaupt ein Bild eines Menschen? Ja, kann man ein unscharfes Bild immer mit Vorteil durch ein scharfes ersetzen? Ist das unscharfe nicht oft gerade das was wir brauchen? Frege vergleicht den Begriff mit einem Bezirk und sagt: einen unklar begrenzten Begriff könne man überhaupt keinen Begriff nennen. Das heißt wohl, wir können mit ihm nichts anfangen.
>
> [Is an indistinct photograph really at all a picture of a human being? Can one, in fact, always with advantage replace an indistinct picture with a distinct one? Isn't the indistinct one often just the one we need? Frege compares a concept with a domain and says: one cannot call a concept which is not clearly limited a concept at all. I take it that that means, we can't do anything with it <unless it is clearly delimited>.][3]

I take this to mean that what we call "clarity" with respect to concepts depends on what we wish to do with those concepts, that is, with the context of our projects, wishes, expectations, and goals, and these can change. What is true of (individual) concepts is also true of the statements in which such concepts occur. Just to repeat the basic point, then, such notions as "clear," "precise," and so forth are highly dependent on the context within which we are employing them, and one extremely important aspect of that context is the human purposes or uses to which we wish to put the concepts (or propositions) under discussion. "Clear/obscure" is always relative so some such envisaged context. If Wittgenstein is right, the assumption that there is some kind of "absolute" or noncontextual clarity is an illusion, on a par with a belief in Father Christmas.

One immediate consequence of this line of thought is to devalue "absolute clarity" as a cognitive or aesthetic ideal, given that such absolute clarity not only is not attainable but is incoherent—a misunderstanding of what "clarity/obscurity" could possibly mean. Similarly if clarity/obscurity is always a distinction one makes relative to

a context, this would have a strong tendency to undermine any attempt *always* to see obscurity as a defect or a failure—perhaps an *excusable* defect but a failure in some sense nevertheless—because even to speak of "obscurity" is to appeal to some standard, which, even if it is the most appropriate one, is still only one standard among a number of different possible ones, each dependent on a set of human purposes and interests. Since there is no standard given by reality itself, it is always in principle possible that the judgement "This text is obscure" is an expression not of an inadequacy of the text but of a failure on the part of the person making the judgement to be sufficiently reflective about what the appropriate context is and how the assertion in question fits into that context.

One source of possible "obscurity," then, is the general context-dependency of language and the lack of absolute precision and determinacy of concepts in all natural human languages. More specific forms of misunderstanding or puzzlement can also, however, arise from syntactical features of particular languages. Thus, to take a famous example known to every student of Latin, in his epic poem about early Roman history Ennius has the god Apollo give King Pyrrhus of Epirus, who consults him before attacking the Romans, the following oracle:

> Aio te Aeacida Romanos vincere posse[4]

which, given the grammatical peculiarities of indirect discourse in Latin, means either:

> A I tell you, descendant of Aeacus, that you are able to conquer the Romans

or

> B I tell you, descendant of Aeacus, that the Romans are able to conquer you

King Pyrrhus assumes it means (A) and proceeds to carry out his attack on the Romans, only then to discover that it actually meant (B). To say that it "actually" meant (B), rather than that (B) accidentally

turned out to be correct, is to assume for the sake of discussion here that there is a god Apollo who does know the future and is trying to express it in some way, but we will continue to make that assumption for the sake of discussion in most of what follows. This oracular response is a classic case of a perfectly straightforward ambiguity that should be immediately visible to virtually anyone who knew Latin at all and considered the response dispassionately.

To be sure, exactly how cognitively and morally culpable Pyrrhus is in immediately assuming that the oracle favours him depends partly on an aspect of the total situation about which we are not sufficiently informed. We know the (purported) exact words Apollo used in the response,[5] but we do not know what specific question Pyrrhus asked.[6] Given the context-dependency of the distinction between obscurity/clarity, one would like to know the question asked as exactly as possible. Was the original question: "Should I treat with the Romans or attack them?" "Are the Romans at all a threat to my hegemony?" or "Who will be victorious in the coming war, me or the Romans?" or "Shall I defeat the Romans?" Cicero comments on the proverbial obtuseness of the descendants of Aeacus, citing another passage by Ennius to that effect ("bellipotentes sunt magis quam sapientipotentes," i.e., "powerful in war rather than powerful in wisdom," or perhaps "war-strong, brain-weak"), but if Pyrrhus had actually posed the question in the third form cited above, it seems almost inconceivable that he could have overlooked the ambiguity of the response because the very form of the question explicitly evokes the possibility of a Roman victory. This, of course, is part of the point. Pyrrhus's own response to the oracle is significant and indicative of his character. He does not even wish really to envisage the possibility of a Roman victory, so he does not take this possibility with sufficient seriousness. Humans are invariably at least to some extent self-centred and are strongly inclined to wishful thinking. They hear what they wish to hear. They sometimes even ask the wrong questions and then compound that error by jumping to conclusions about what the answers to these questions mean. This is a particularly striking char-

acter trait of the excessively self-confident Pyrrhus, and one that is exposed very clearly by his reaction to the oracle; he is more subject to this general human weakness than most other human beings are.

If one considers the response dispassionately, one should see that there is a further ambiguity that emerges more clearly if one pronounces the phrase with emphasis on the final word "*posse*." If the question really was "*Shall* I overcome the Romans?" then a response couched in terms of what "*could*" happen, or who "would be or is able" to do what, might seem simply to be changing the topic, or perhaps to be an instance of the god giving himself a get-out clause, because presumably what "could" happen is not always what actually does happen. If one takes to this line of thought, (A)/(B) no longer obviously represents an exclusive dichotomy. To say that the Romans *are able to* overcome Pyrrhus might be compatible with the possibility that Pyrrhus *is able to* overcome the Romans. Whether or not this was the case would depend on the particular sense one gave to "*posse*" ["to be able to"]. The god then might well be saying that either outcome is conceivable and possible. So with the emphasis on "*posse*" the response could mean:

C It is inherently indeterminate who will win, you or the Romans; each one *could* (under appropriate circumstances) defeat the other.

Interpreted in this way the response seems useful—telling Pyrrhus to be careful—and unobjectionably commonsensical. The second of the above interpretations, (B), had not come to Pyrrhus's attention because of his impetuous self-centredness. Even ex ante almost anyone else should and would have been able to see the ambiguity in that divine response, and given the notorious ambiguity of oracles, which had already been extensively noted by the time of Pyrrhus, anyone ought to have and almost anyone else would have looked for possible ambiguity. The fact that Pyrrhus didn't meant that he was dim, excessively self-obsessed, or perhaps overly self-confident, or all three. To have any one of these properties was to occupy a very bad

starting point for attacking the Romans in the third century BC, no matter what other military skills one might have. Interpretation (C), on the other hand, would not be likely to recommend itself immediately to anyone who consulted the oracle in the first place because it stood in conflict with one of the assumptions that made oracular practice sensible. If it is objectively indeterminate who will win, why bother to consult the oracle?

Two kinds of human weakness, then, have emerged in this brief discussion of responses to oracles. First, humans are self-centred, too focused on their own abilities and powers, as if they were of final importance in the universe. They try to see the world as much as possible through the lens of what they could (and perhaps should) do. In the case of Pyrrhus this is associated with a certain kind of egotism, a heroic desire to show himself to be the best and acknowledged as the best through self-confident use of his own powers to defeat all comers, including, in the case in point, the Romans, who happened to be the next on his list. It is not, however, merely his overbearing insistence on his own primacy that is the problem with Pyrrhus. One can find a morally less questionable form of the same human self-absorption in the case of Oedipus. He, too, thinks primarily in terms of himself and what he has to do. Oedipus wants to avoid what is announced by the oracle partly for his own sake—he does not wish to be the man who killed his father and married his mother—but his attitude, we can assume, is at least partly altruistic in that he also wished to spare his father and mother the fate in store for them. As in the case of Pyrrhus, the oracular answer fits into a world that is seen by Oedipus as essentially a potential field of his own action, in which things are in the final analysis "up to him to do or not do." As Oedipus's end may be taken to show, his own voluntary or involuntary action in the world is in the final analysis not that important. To think it is, that he can change his fate, that the world is essentially a realm constituted by his action, is a kind of wishful thinking.

The second form of human weakness we encounter is in a way the mirror image of the first. Rather than trusting too much to their own

powers as agents to shape a course of action that will satisfy them, humans can be excessively overcome by the recognition of their own impotence and consequently excessively dependent and demanding. They can expect the god to give them the assurance that comes from absolutely unequivocal predictions that cannot be misunderstood. They need the world *not* to be one in which it is antecedently indeterminate (even for the god) who will win the battle; they need desperately to believe that there *is already* a determinate answer to the question "Who will win?" This is another form of wishful thinking.

It is well-known that over the entrance to the building in which the oracle at Delphi was located there were two inscriptions:[7]

γνῶθι σεαυτόν ["know yourself"]

and

μηδὲν ἄγαν ["don't overdo anything" or "don't do too much of anything"]

These inscriptions have from early times drawn the attention of philosophers and came increasingly to be interpreted as general ethical injunctions. The first was often interpreted in a way that gave rise to a tradition of construing an intense and interiorised form of introspection as a central component of the good life. The second was read, as far back as Plato's *Charmides* (164–65), as recommending to humans that they cultivate the virtue of σωφροσύνη (temperance, moderation, self-control), and thus it was tacitly taken to stand at the beginning of a tradition of preaching an ethics of moderation (e.g., it is thus interpreted by Nietzsche).[8] Philosophers have also often looked for some relation between the two injunctions, but they have not generally been attracted to one of the more obvious ways of doing this: Self-knowledge is good but only, like everything else, in moderation. The course of subsequent philosophy would have been different if Socrates had come to believe that this was what the god was trying to tell him. Perhaps, though, one should return to one of the slightly more mundane ways of reading the two injunctions: Know exactly you want to ask before you enter the temple and don't pester

the oracle with too many questions. It is not necessarily just that the god would be irritated by the need to give repeated responses, but if you felt the need to ask too many questions you would have shown yourself to be in no fit state to receive any response at all. It would be a sign you were stupid, hadn't thought about what you really wanted, or had abandoned yourself to your human tendency to want too much predictable determinacy in the world and were trying to use the god as a crutch to impose or create the illusion of an order that did not exist. Why, after all, should the god suffer such fools gladly?

To return to Pyrrhus, if the above were not enough, one can also wonder about what exactly *vincere* means in the god's response. Does it mean "drive the enemy from the field in a given single battle," defeat strategically in a lengthy war (*debellare*), or overcome and permanently subjugate (*subiungere*)? Pyrrhus himself was in principle perfectly capable of making that distinction on appropriate occasions. After all, he was famous for remarking: "If we win one more battle against the Romans, we'll be completely done for" when he "won" a battle by eventually driving some of the seemingly inexhaustible supply of Roman troops off the field in disordered flight, but at the cost of losing men whom he could not replace.[9] Does "win" mean "tactical victory" or "strategic victory"? How "strategic" and permanent must it be to count as victory?

Two different kinds of obscurity seem to be in play here. First, are the words of the god to be read grammatically according to schema (A), (B), or (C)? Second, what exactly does *vincere* mean? In the first case there seems to be a definite series of different possibilities, each of which can be taken to be of more or less clear import, that is, clear enough "in the context." In the second case, the question is the rather different one of what is to count as "victory." "Ambiguity" seems an appropriate term to designate the first of these cases, but the second case does not seem to be one of "ambiguity" properly speaking but of a certain kind of simple indeterminacy in a relevant dimension.[10]

Let us take now another example, one of the oracles reported in Book III of *Aeneid* as having been given to the Trojans. In the par-

ticular case in question we have, in contrast to Ennius's report about Pyrrhus, *both* the questions posed *and* the response, or rather we have a somewhat unusual speech which is a combination of an entreaty and a series of questions, and then a response. The combination of entreaty and question almost makes it seem as if the Trojans thought the god needed orientation, needed *them* to set the context of what they want and think they require, in order to prompt an appropriately phrased response:

> *da propriam, Thymbraee, domum; da moenia fessis*
> *et genus et mansuram urbem; serva altera Troiae*
> *Pergama, reliquias Danaum atque immitis Achilli.*
> *quem sequimur? quove ire jubes? ubi ponere sedes?*
> *da, pater, augurium, atque animis inlabere nostris.* (III.85–89)
>
> [Give us our own home, Apollo. We're exhausted; give us walls and a continuing succession of progeny and an abiding city. Save us, a mere remnant left alive by the Greeks and pitiless Achilles, and let us be the city of Troy built up again. Whom should we follow? [Or: What place should be strive to reach?[11]] Or where do you order us to go? Where should we establish ourselves? Give us, father, a sign and enter gently into our souls.]

To which the voice of the god replies:

> *Dardanidae duri, quae vos a stripe parentum*
> *prima tulit tellus, eadem vos ubere laeto*
> *accipiet reduces. antiquam exquirite matrem.*
> *hic domus Aeneae cunctis dominabitur oris*
> *et nati natorum et qui nascentur ab illis.* (III.94–98)
>
> [You hard-done-by men of Troy, the earth that first brought you forth from the root of your parents, that earth will accept you back to her happy breast if you return. Seek out your ancient mother. Here the house of Aeneas and the sons of his sons, and those who will be born of them will rule the whole world.]

The first thing to note is that the unclarity here does not derive from and is not otherwise involved with any kind of obvious grammatical ambiguity. It is also not really like the indeterminacy that emerges when one tries to imagine just what would count as a "victory" (in one of the many appropriate senses). The obscurity here is like that one encounters in trying to solve a riddle,[12] and the Trojans are duly puzzled.

Aeneas's father, Anchises, quick off the mark, immediately jumps in and gives an interpretation, namely that the oracle means "go to Crete," citing the Cretan origin of one of his alleged maternal ancestors. This, however, is rather quickly shown to be a mistake because the Trojan settlement in Crete falls prey to a serious pestilence, and so the Trojans themselves are thrown back into a state of puzzlement about the meaning of the oracle and realise that it was not as clear as Anchises took it to be.

The situation here is of a very different kind from that of Pyrrhus. Pyrrhus acted as if he was confident of knowing how the oracle was to be read. It just turned out that (in retrospect) he had misunderstood it. Looking on at this from the outside we can see that there are at least two (or three) relatively (given the context) clear alternative readings, which Pyrrhus ought to have considered. In the case of the Trojans the response has a completely different kind of indeterminacy. "Seek your aged mother" does not in the same way carve out a relatively clear set of alternative possibilities, and it is not exactly "vague" and open to reinterpretation in the way in which "victory" is. What exactly could "Seek your aged mother" mean? Go to Crete and settle there? They try that and it doesn't work. Since, as Book I makes clear, Venus is supposed to be Aeneas's "mother" and Jupiter addresses her as the Lady of Cythera (Book I), are they then to make for Cythera, the small island off the coast of the Peloponnese? Venus is also identified with Aphrodite and Aphrodite's island is Cyprus, so is Cyprus the goal? Does the oracle mean to go back to the Troad? That, after all, is where they were all born. Or does it mean something *altogether different*? For instance, if the "earth" is the common ancient

mother of all humanity, does "seek your ancient mother" mean give up living in cities and adopt a troglodytic form of life, living in the caves that mother earth provides? Or does it mean pursue mining and metallurgy as a mode of life, investigating and exploiting the underground resources of mother earth? Or is it ironic and intended to mean that the Trojans should study natural philosophy (i.e., seek to find what the nature of mother earth really is), that they will be preeminent in such study, and that only in such intellectual pursuits can anyone find a home?[13] Or is it an expression of "the wisdom of Silenus": "The best thing for you all to do is die as soon as possible and go back to your ancient mother, the earth; that is the only place where any human has an abiding city"?[14] Or a Roman version of this: "Die with as many extravagant gestures of bravery as you can, then you will 'rule the world' with your posthumous glory"? Or should the Trojans become professional experts in genealogy, helping everyone find out who their ancient mother (and then also, perhaps, father) really was? Or a tribe of pimps and prostitutes continually seeking out their ancient mother (Venus) in this form, or devotees of a cult of cosmological Venus (*Aeneadum genetrix, hominum divomque voluptas/alma Venus*)?[15]

If the last of these possibilities seem increasingly far-fetched, as indeed they are, one might recall that that is often a characteristic of the fulfillment of oracles, and in the *Aeneid* itself one can find equally recherché examples of the way oracles are claimed to have been fulfilled and thus what it is retrospectively claimed they "really" meant. Oracles are often *worse* in this respect—more obscure—than riddles in that good riddles should in principle be solvable by the person to whom they are propounded in the present circumstances in which that person happens to find himself, whatever they may be, but many oracles can *only* be interpreted *ex eventu*. Recall the prophecy by the Harpy Celaeno in Book III (247–57) that the Trojans won't find their city until their extreme hunger (*dira fames*) has them "gnawing at their tables" (*ambesas . . . absumere mensas*). This turns out, much later, to mean something like eating sandwiches at a picnic (VII.109ff.).

Book III is a flashback in which Aeneas is telling Dido in North Africa about his previous wandering, but no one, either when Celaeno originally spoke the prophecy or even in North Africa when Aeneas was recalling it, could have been expected to understand what "gnawing at the tables" would eventually turn out to mean.

One might think that the above is all perfectly reasonable, but that it somehow misses the point because it puts together a very general philosophical point about the incoherence of some conception of purported absolute clarity with a very particular set of examples of oracular or literary obscurity, which is really of a rather different kind. Even if complete and absolute clarity, precision, and determinacy is a chimera, the oracles described in the literary passages discussed could easily have been *relatively* clearer in practical terms, clearer in contextually *relevant* ways, than they were. Even if it isn't absolutely clear what "victory" is, what constitutes an "attack" or for that matter who the Romans are (do they include the Italians or not?), Apollo could have told Pyrrhus in no uncertain terms not to attack the Romans—"noli aggredi Romanos" would have done the trick, if the god really was speaking Latin—and that would have been a more useful and relevant response to the question that was actually concerning Pyrrhus than the one he received. Similarly the voice in Delos could have said immediately: Try Italy. "Try Italy" is not absolutely *precise*—the Peloponnese clearly does *not* count as Italy, and Sicily, at this point in time, does not either, but what about the Po Valley? Instead of Rome should Aeneas perhaps really have tried to found Milan, Verona, or Venice? Still this advice is better as a useful response to the question posed than "seek your ancient mother."

After all, Apollo does *eventually* cause a clearer answer to be given when he instructs the household gods (the "Penates") to appear to Aeneas in a dream and give him the correct interpretation, namely to go to Italy (III.147ff.). This is confirmed by Aeneas's father, Anchises, who conveniently remembers at this point that Cassandra had often made similar predictions about the final destination of the Trojans. So Virgil, who is terribly concerned to give a divine pedigree for the

Roman Imperium as constituted under Augustus, engages in some literary attempts at squaring the circle. On the one hand, there is the divine pronouncement, but such pronouncements are known to be obscure, so he adds a *second* announcement to clarify the first and then a further confirmation in the form of Anchises' "recollection." Then the final confirmation comes in Aeneas's descent into the Underworld in Book VI. The idea presumably is to get both divine origin for the advice to settle in Italy *and* as strong a confirmation of the specific interpretation as possible.

So why doesn't the god initially say what he means with sufficient clarity to be immediately understood? One possibility is simply to say that this question is based on a misconception. There are no gods, and what are called "oracles" are just inventions of the priests and priestesses who "serve" the oracle; except by accident, they have no more knowledge of anything than we do. Lack of clarity is their way of minimising the chance that they will be found out to be frauds and lose their livelihood. Although I am myself an atheist, I think this is far too quick a response, so I would like to bracket it and continue on the assumption that Apollo and the others did exist, and did in some sense "give" oracular responses A further possibility would be the Epicurean view that although gods probably did exist, they were completely unconcerned with humans and their trivial problems and thus had no real interest in giving useful responses. Perhaps oracular response was a game the gods played with each other, in which humans were mere tokens on a cosmological board. Perhaps the gods gave responses only on days on which they had partaken too deeply of ambrosia and so were themselves understandably muddled. Perhaps the ones who gave responses were *always* on the ambrosia.[16] Or perhaps divine knowledge, or certain types of divine knowledge, divine intention, or divine instruction, *could* inherently not be expressed, or could not be expressed in any human language, other than obscurely. We know that *some* kinds of divine instruction clearly *could* have been expressed more clearly because the Penates do eventually tell the Trojans in perfectly clear Latin that "seek your ancient

mother" means "go to Italy," but it does not follow from this that everything the god knows, wants, and intends can appropriately be thus clearly and directly expressed in all contexts.

This line of thought, that there is perhaps something in the divine mentation that cannot be adequately or appropriately expressed through clear speech, gives one an indication of the direction in which one might seek a possible positive rationale for obscurity.

One traditional view is that the god *could* in *one* sense have been more explicit but that he knew that doing this would be self-defeating relative to some wider purpose he was pursuing. The god is, after all, not a calculating device for predicting the future, much as certain humans might wish to reduce him to this, but, if he is at all like one of the gods in Homer, he will have his own intentions, plans, and projects. Perhaps, as Plutarch puts it, "He is no less a philosopher than a prophet"[17] and has imposed on himself a far-reaching peadagogical task of improving the moral state of humanity.[18] One does not, however, necessarily improve people by telling them clearly, directly, and in a form they can easily and correctly assimilate what they (think they) want to know. Plato's Socrates suggests that the obscurity of oracular pronouncements results from the desire on the part of the god to motivate humans to reflect and search for the truth. When the god says that no man is wiser than Socrates, he does not mean that Socrates is positively wise but only that compared to the god, all human wisdom is equally insignificant. You won't, however, really take this point until and unless you have tried yourself to refute the god and failed. The god's statement is thus intended to motivate Socrates to improve himself (and indirectly his fellow humans) in two ways. He is to pursue the truth assiduously but also to try to prove the god wrong. By failing he will become clearer about the nature of his own ignorance.[19] The resulting grasp of his own cognitive limitations while continuing uninterruptedly to pursue truth is the beginning of wisdom. The best way to acquire a motivation to pursue the truth is perhaps through generating a state of puzzlement, and the best—or at any rate an especially good—way of creating the

right kind of productive puzzlement is by giving an obscure oracular response.

This strategy, if that is the strategy, does not, of course, work for Pyrrhus. His problem is in part that he is confronted with the Romans, who are militarily superior to him in available resources; they "can defeat" him in the long run by simply allowing him to wear himself down with his repeated "victories." An equally important part of his problem, however, is that he is *not* puzzled when he ought to be. This, as has been mentioned, is a result of the particular character traits that exhibit themselves in his response to the oracle. Any sensible speaker of Latin would have seen that the response is not clear. Pyrrhus, however, is impetuous and overly self-confident. Now, of course, the god could have said to him, "You are self-centred, impetuous and overly self-confident," but saying *that* would not really have transmitted the message to him in an effective way because people do not in general learn from being told things, or, at any rate, they do not often learn how to change deeply entrenched forms of behaving simply by being given good general advice about them. Perhaps Plato's Socrates thought that merely discursive instruction of individuals could cause those individuals to change their way of life, but if he did—even if his instruction was "dialectical"—he was wrong. Aeschylus was closer to being correct when he spoke of "learning through suffering" (πάθει μάθος).[20] Perhaps giving the obscure answer will not help Pyrrhus any more, but that could be because he is beyond hope; some people are. Arguably Plato realised that Alkibiades, for all his gifts and despite his association with Socrates, was beyond help, and expressed this in his *Symposium*. Perhaps the god is trying to improve *others* who observe Pyrrhus's fate. The next-best thing to experiencing paedagogical suffering oneself is perhaps to observe it "firsthand" in the case of a highly visible, exemplary individual. So if the intention of the god is not merely to articulate the truth but to express it in a form in which it is most likely to be understood and acted on, then obscurity might be the best way to do that. Not, of course, an infallible way, because there will always be incorrigible

people like Pyrrhus, but one that might in the long run have some effect on humanity as a whole, and the god, if anyone, can afford to play the long game.

Up to now the discussion has been conducted under a slightly oversimplified assumption, namely that there were only two relevant agents involved in the consultation of an oracle—the god and the person soliciting the oracle—but in standard cases in the ancient world it would make more sense to distinguish three agents: the god, the person seeking an oracular response, and the human priest(ess) who, as intermediary, actually spoke the god's response.[21] It is convenient to use the Latin word *vates* to refer to such an intermediary.

Occasionally in the past people have construed the role of the poet as in some sense like that of the *vates*. Sometimes poets themselves, most notably perhaps Hölderlin and Rimbaud, have seen themselves in this way.[22] Even in the best of circumstances, however, the poet does not know exactly what the god knows or at any rate does not know whatever is to be known in the way in which the god knows it. The *vates* does not, that is, in transmitting the god's message *know* any more than anyone else who hears the message. So the extent to which the *vates* can consciously and in detail enter into the potential paedagogic purposes of the god is likely to be limited. Despite this, it could still be the case that the god himself was pursuing a paedagogical project not just of instructing and improving some individual (Pyrrhus or Socrates) but of shifting people's attitudes and perhaps even their way of living as a whole through obscure speech, and it could also be true that the appropriate paedagogical effect would well be lost by clarity of expression.

If one assumes that our society, mode of life, forms of imagination, and language are interconnected, then restrictions or forms of distortion or repression in our form of life would be likely mirrored in limitations and distortions in our possible modes not merely of perceiving but also of imagining the world. This, in turn, would have its analogue in our everyday use of language. If there is no possibility of exiting once and for all from our contextually embedded natural

languages into a pure ideal language of absolute clarity, because no such linguistic system can exist except as an inherently limited and isolated sector that remains parasitic on our everyday forms of interaction and communication, then what, if anything, can we do?

One response might be a kind of *fuite en avant*, an active embracing and celebration of ordinary language with all its blemishes and idiosyncrasies. However, rather than, as the late Wittgenstein and some of his followers thought, assuming that everyday life and language were in their own terms fundamentally in order—or even, in a Romantic gesture, a source of health—perhaps one ought to accept, but not be fully reconciled to, the fact that everyday life and the social structures embedded in it are a basic locus of repression. Prisons and police stations are not the only means of forcing people to act in certain ways. If one is interested not just in overt action but in forcing people to think, wish, and fantasise in a certain way, indirect forms of social pressure are usually much more effective than the chain and the knout. If "clarity" is indeed relative to socially enforced forms of speech, then, unless one makes the highly implausible assumption that our society and form of life are completely free and noncoercive, the demand for clarity can be seen as a requirement of conformity to structures of repression. Such conformity might not merely be seen as limiting and disfiguring our human individual and social capacities but also as "evil" (in one sense of that word).[23] The call for "clarity" then can potentially mean pressure in the direction of conformism and hence complicity in evil.

If that is the case, then perhaps one should distinguish two distinct tasks that the god or his (or her) *vates* might undertake. One task would be to break down the familiar forms of everyday speech (and then perhaps in consequence certain routine patterns of action and interaction); the second would be to create positive new meanings, ways of speaking and acting, and eventually modes of living. The second of these might be thought to be in principle more important, but if the forms of speech and imagination are as dependent on the actual social structure as was assumed, there will be very strong

limits to the extent to which it is possible even to envisage anything genuinely new,[24] except perhaps in highly exceptional utopian moments, such as in 1871 in the Paris Commune. The first task then might be actually and practically more important, because at least in principle dischargeable. It might, of course, be psychologically possible for someone to engage in the first task *only if* he or she succumbed to the illusion of thinking they were engaged in the second, but that is a separate issue.

If everyday language was infected with conformism, repression, and distortion, how might one break out of it? We have seen a number of expedients tried: Heideggerian primitivism, the reduction of everyday language to purported etymological roots, and the reconfiguration of it from those roots; Brechtian *Entfremdung*, once described as the attempt to write High German as if it were a dialect; Karl Kraus's astringent and adamantine literalism; Adorno's precious, convoluted play with pronouns and self-referential constructions; or Paul Celan's hermeticism based on the use of unusual words no longer in use but preserved in weird entries in out-of-date dictionaries.

It is easy to be *merely* obscure—any monkey with a keyboard can do that—but difficult to be productively obscure, that is, to produce something that is not just like the Chinese text mentioned at the start of this chapter. A text completely written in Chinese does not "break down familiar forms of <English> speech" because it simply stands outside them. To break them down is not simply to replace them, Chinese platitudes for English, but to shift them and our attitudes towards them. It is, however, also not at all obvious that any given author is in the best position to assess whether the obscurity and irritation his or her own text generates is really an instance of a creative positive transformation or a creative negative disruption of our attitudes towards our language, our possibilities, and our world. There is an important distinction between what I can see from the outside, from the third-person perspective, where obscurity may have positive value, and what is visible from the first-person perspective from which perhaps I have no alternative but to seek to avoid what I

take to be lack of clarity as much as possible. This would mean valuable obscurity would necessarily be a by-product, like "happiness," not something one could with any hope of success intentionally strive for, but something that will result only from a process of aiming at something else. What could that "something else" be?

The *vates* will then be engaged in a strange and deeply anti-Platonic form of paedagogy because *ex hypothesi* he will not in any concrete detail know the end or goal, and will in one sense not know what he is doing. He will need to strive for what he took to be clarity while perhaps knowing that no such thing exists in any absolute terms and while also knowing that precisely the obscurity he could not eliminate, and perhaps did not even notice, might turn out to be his most valuable achievement.

If a poem can be *fully* understood, it has perhaps already lost some of its most important value. Paul Celan recognised this when he wrote in the preliminary drafts of his famous speech "Der Meridian": "Weshalb uns die Gedichte früherer Epochen 'verständlicher' vorkommen als die unserer Zeitgenossen? Vielleicht auch deshalb, weil sie sich als Gedichte, d.h. mitsamt ihrem Dunkel verflüchtigt haben."[25] ["Why do the poems of earlier epochs seem to us 'more easily comprehensible' than those of our contemporaries? Perhaps part of the reason is that they have evaporated as poems, that is, together with their darkness."] For a poem to be a poem is for it to be obscure: not completely to fit in to our usual forms of speaking, acting, and reacting. Celan speaks of the "congenital, constitutive darkness" of the poem;[26] to "clarify" this would be to destroy the poem. This is perhaps part of the reason why art at any rate in our modern world is always a necessary failure.[27] As long as the work remains obscure, it has not yet acted effectively, but when, and if, it stops being obscure, it loses its most important purpose, its real point. Contrary to certain classicist assumptions, a poem is never "perfect" and is also never, as Thucydides puts it, a "possession for eternity" ("κτῆμα ἐς αἰεί" I.22). This is not a deficiency but part of what makes the poem what it is.

In the glory days of "logical positivism," individual and social maturity was sometimes said to reside in being able and willing to "face the facts," and these were assumed to be discovered by natural science. It was also asserted that there could be an absolutely clear, utterly unambiguous, and context-independent ideal language, the formalised "language of science," which was adequate for expressing all the facts, and that meant everything there is to know. Apart from the facts and their associated modes of representation, there was nothing that was amenable to being discussed in any but a wholly random and arbitrary fashion. As the ideal vehicle for the expression of "the facts," the ideal language of science had a kind of normative standing for mature humans. However, to be able to face the *absence* of determinate "facts" in a given domain is also a sign of a realistic attitude towards the world and is something to be aspired to; inability to tolerate vagueness, ambiguity, indeterminacy, the shifting, unbounded, amorphous nature and sheer randomness of much of human life and of human language is also a serious human weakness.

There are three thoughts here that are distinct but complementary. First of all, the world-language unit is not composed, at any rate not exclusively, of fixed and sharply defined facts that could be the objects of ideally pellucid expression. Much of it is indeterminate in a way that would not admit of absolute clarification. Second, much of our speech is in any case directed not at trying to reflect the natural world or reproduce the social world at all but at trying to change it or them. Third, much of what we take to be clear seems that way only because repressive social forces impose restrictive, determinate forms on our behaviour and on our modes of thinking and imagining. The best modern poetry is responsive to all three of these thoughts. That is one of the things that makes it so unsettling for many people but also one of the reasons we should cherish it, if we can.

3

Marxism and the Ethos of the Twentieth Century

One of the things I have always most admired about Alasdair MacIntyre's work is the particular kind of intellectual courage it exhibits. This virtue manifests itself in a number of ways, including a willingness to address large philosophical questions head-on and to give straightforward answers to them. This is a form of courage, rather than merely of some other more etiolated cognitive excellence, because giving relatively bald and unvarnished answers to big questions makes it difficult to avoid facing up to the implications of what one says for action, and the action involved might be of a kind that requires exhausting, deeply disruptive, and potentially radical changes in the way one lives. In the spirit of an attempt to emulate, at least to some extent, this one of MacIntyre's intellectual virtues, let me try to give a simple answer to the simple question. What happened *in* moral philosophy in the twentieth century, and what happened *to* moral philosophy in the twentieth century? My answer to this is that Nietzsche is what happened "*in*" moral philosophy,[1] that is, the very idea of a "universal" moral philosophy having any kind of transsubjective authority came under attack. The notion of "transsubjective authority" is both unclear and problematic, but that does not mean that it is not attempting, even if not with complete success, to designate something important. It certainly does not mean what philosophers call "validity," and in general it is not a mere epistemic notion.

A practice (and its associated concepts and forms of thought) has what will be called "transsubjective authority" if it is capable of effectively structuring the basic functions of society around itself, endowing them with meaning, telling us how we should understand them, issuing commands, injunctions, and recommendations that "stick"—that is, that are as a rule taken to have weight and standing—and finally if it is able to give some reasonable account of itself and stand up to criticism. So Christianity is a clear historical example of a form of life and thought that had transsubjective authority for a long time in the West. Christianity adds to the mix the idea that its authority is "universal." So the claim is that in the twentieth century Christianity in particular and the very traditional idea of a "universalist" form of ethical life and thought were replaced by a consumerist array of views that was a reflection of a life devoted to more or less unreflective consumption, structured only by aesthetic predilections and the usual sociological imperatives of novelty, snobbism, and so forth.[2] What happened "*to*" moral philosophy is that Marxism, which to some extent came from outside the stuffy *intérieur* of academic philosophy, presented the only genuine and potentially viable attempt at reconstituting some notion of objective moral authority, an authority that was to be based on attributing to production an absolute social and political priority. If this attempt had succeeded, it would have changed the world and with it our intellectual and moral universe, but it failed. It used to be said that Marxism was a pseudo-religion or a religion-substitute and this claim was presented as if it was *in itself* a criticism. As if Marxists had simply not fully grasped the implications of the death of God. My view is that the problem was not that this was Marxism's aspiration but that it failed to achieve its aspiration. Philosophically, then, the story of the twentieth century is the story of the failure of Marxism.

The main philosophical "problem" in the twentieth century, then, is the complex of anarchic beliefs and anomic modes of living for which the proper name "Nietzsche" stands as the designator. This phenomenon "Nietzscheanism" is not a mere historical aberration or an

accidental philosopher's mistake. Rather it is in some sense a veridical reflection of our social reality, and thus Nietzsche can be seen as giving a correct diagnosis of a set of ills with deep roots in modern Western societies. One of the ways in which Nietzsche uses the term "nihilism" is to designate the contemporary situation of disorientation in which "[all] the highest values lose their value" and all forms of authority lose their hold over individuals.[3] This disorientation is thought to be so intolerable that the most urgent task for contemporary philosophers is to try to help social actors replace practical and theoretical Nietzscheanism with something more salubrious. Philosophers should be looking for a stable way of living together that would be potentially universal, in some yet to be specified sense of "universal." This common life would need to be one that would allow us to cultivate certain individual and collective goods, many of which are highly context specific and dependent on historically fragile construction. In addition, it would ideally be one that would tolerate and support, or even foster, a correct reflective conceptualisation of itself, and thus allow us to see it as having some kind of standing, validity, or authority.

This does not yet by itself imply that Marxism is the only viable attempt to provide a coherent moral philosophy that would respond adequately to Nietzsche's challenge, so that the story of the twentieth century can be told as essentially the story of the development and failure of Marxism. Surely, one might think, there must have been other possible contenders for solutions to the problem we were looking to solve? Why is the story not told as one of the failure of Christianity or liberalism? I wish to suggest that Christianity and liberalism did not, properly speaking, "fail" because they were never real contenders. The reason for this is that neither one is properly "universalist." What "universalist" means is, of course, itself a matter of controversy.

This is in no way surprising. After all, it is an oft-noted property of the most interesting philosophical questions that they are reflexive. In asking "What form of life, what worldview, what philosophy, what

authority is universalist?" one is at the same time asking "What exactly is, or could be, meant by 'universalist'?" In a preliminary way one can say that a "universalist" worldview would be one that was relevant to everyone—it was not from the very start intended to be the worldview *only* of aristocrats, football enthusiasts, medical practitioners, and so forth[4]—and second it would have to be a worldview that gave people orientation towards *all* the important features of human life.[5] This preliminary account is not false, but it shares the same indeterminacy mentioned at the start.[6] We don't know what "relevant" means in the phrase "relevant to everyone" or what "important" means in the phrase "all the important features of human life." Part of what we have to do is conduct a unitary enquiry of some kind within which we discover what is relevant and ought to be important to us, and what "relevant" and "important" should be taken properly to mean.

Despite its original (Pauline) intentions to provide a mode of access to salvation to all irrespective of their ethnic affiliation, Christianity, like all the revealed monotheistic religions, is so mixed up with highly local forms of human customary imagination that it is unthinkable that it ever could become truly universal, in the sense of being shared by all humans, unless it were imposed by a form of sustained, unchallenged military, cultural, and economic power no Christian country had in the twentieth century and which, certainly, none seems now likely ever to acquire. This is, of course, a variant of a theme common in Hegel, who connects religion with the ability of the human spirit to produce specific images and concrete narratives,[7] what he calls "Mythen, Phantasievorstellungen und positive, eigentliche Geschichten" ("myths, phantasms, and contentful narratives that are in fact mere stories").[8] There is, of course, a place, even an important place in human life, for historically specific forms of narrative that engage strong human emotions and for local forms of the imagination, but our image-making capacities seem to have a limited ability to give a kind of persuasive account of themselves and their products that would render them universally acceptable and bind-

ing. Unless the particular revelation at a specific time and place on which a given religion is founded can be detached from its context in local fact and fiction, it seems unlikely to be able to command the unrestricted assent that it would require to constitute a proper response to Nietzsche, by exerting a visible and palpable universal moral authority.[9]

Under modern circumstances, then, religion is fated either to degenerate into folklore, a particular emotionally tinged set of provincial ways in which the genuinely universal pressures of global capitalism are inflected in particular localities, or to become an inherently sectarian matter, that is, something relating to the specific choice a small group makes and through which that group isolates itself. Recall the origin of the term "heresy" in the Greek word αἱρέω ("to choose, or pick"): the heretical sect is a group that by choice cuts itself off from a wider "catholic"—that is, genuinely all-encompassing—community, thus becoming a "sect."[10] Its members choose some doctrines and practices rather than others. Members of a "catholic" community do not *choose* their way of life but are born into it, or "grow" into it. If there is an intact "catholic community" in existence that would be one situation, but if there isn't, no amount of wishing or engineering will in itself bring it back into existence. If no truly "catholic" community exists, then every religious grouping, even those into which the members are "born," must be seen as in a very important sense a "sect." So one slightly paradoxical way of describing the contemporary world is as one in which there is no (proper, universal, "catholic") religion but only (various) sects. A sect may have some healthy, admirable, and morally positive features, but it is not a framework for the reliable exercise of potentially overarching moral authority for the modern world as a whole.

That no revealed religion can be the solution of the Nietzschean predicament, then, does not imply that "clarified" and intellectualised successors of Christianity, such as Marxism, might not aspire to being successful in this enterprise. MacIntyre himself occasionally emphasises that Marxism can be seen as being something like a

Christian heresy, although a "heresy" that might, even if in some sense finally a failure, potentially have been more universal than the original religious matrix out of which it emerged. Still it would be a "heresy," part of the essential point of which was that it had turned itself into a philosophy and a kind of political and social thought, and so deprived itself of precisely those attributes that made Christianity not a philosophy but a religion.

One might, of course, argue that "liberalism" is not a contender as a solution to the Nietzschean predicament because it is not really a full-scale philosophy at all. Rather it is one or the other of two things. Either it is an attitude that is inherently adverbial, so that to be *a* Liberal is to be "liberal," that is, to do *whatever* one does in a certain way or spirit of open-handedness, flexibility, and toleration with a minimal use of force. That is, to put it in an exceedingly tendentious way, a Liberal is a person who accepts the first half of the slogan that is often associated with the Jesuits, "suaviter in modo," but ignores or blanks out, and thus tacitly cancels, the second half, "fortiter in re." Alternatively Liberalism is a highly specific political programme, such as the demand that constitutional government be introduced in a particular country (such as Spain in the early nineteenth century). A psychological disposition or attitude, however, is not by itself an ethics at all because it is too indeterminate, referring exclusively to *how* we ought to act rather than what we should do. It might be thought to have some limited ethical value in that it would exclude certain forms of individual or collective action, such as certain crude inquisitorial practices, but that in itself will not give anyone a very useful orientation in life or answer perfectly reasonable questions such as: What courses of action should I (or we) pursue in a free-spirited and open-handed way? Of which institutions should I approve? Why exactly is toleration of error an overwhelming human good? When is discussion or negotiation possible and fruitful and when is it useless or inappropriate? What alternatives do we have when discussion will not serve? Who counts as "one of us"? For which purposes and why? Similarly, a particular political programme like constitutionalism might be compatible with any number of very different worldviews.

I don't doubt that "Liberalism" was used originally in this adverbial way and then later as the designation of a specific political programme, but I think it is equally clear that nowadays, in much academic and peri-academic discourse, it is presented as a kind of worldview or philosophical position. During the course of his long career MacIntyre has diagnosed four problems with liberalism considered as a full-scale political and moral doctrine.[11]

First, much mainstream Liberalism is characteristically and inherently duplicitous in a way that will eventually reveal itself, particularly when liberals are most in need of orientation and moral guidance, namely when they encounter intact and self-confident nonliberal societies. Doctrinal liberals generally pretend to be above the fray in substantive ideological and moral disagreements. They claim, that is, not to be advocating one particular substantively specified way of life over another, yet they clearly are. Thus the British state, accepting it for the moment as an institution that is committed to the lowest-common-denominator Liberalism, which unites the Conservative and the Labour parties, now enforces a ban on forced marriages and intervenes, coercively if necessary, to prevent female circumcision and other practices,[12] even against groups who take these customs to be an integral part of their way of life. To turn one of Isaiah Berlin's central contentions back against liberalism itself, one might say that even forcing people to acquire the preconditions for acting in an individually autonomous way is *forcing* them to do something (and not something else, e.g., "merely" liberating them or rendering them "more rational").[13]

Second, liberalism cannot easily be extracted from at least some kind of complicitous association with laissez-faire capitalism, and so it inherits whatever deficiencies might be associated with that specific form of economic organisation. I might also add that if one central strand of twentieth-century Marxism is correct, this association with laissez-faire capitalism is a further reason to think that liberalism cannot be an ethical system that lays claim to any real universality. One reason for this is that laissez-faire capitalism seems to require an excluded underclass that is exploited (whether that be an internal

proletariat or one externalised in quasi-colonial arrangements) and to which various liberal claims about voluntary contracting, transfer of ownership of property, free choice of occupation, and so forth, are effectively irrelevant. Another reason is that a laissez-faire economy depends on the continued existence of a series of social domains and institutions like the family, the legal system, the education system, and the health system. These institutions must operate according to pre- or noncapitalist principles and cannot coherently be fully subjected to the imperatives of the "free market" (although they can be significantly distorted and damaged by attempts to do this).

Third, the substantive moral conception to which liberalism as a philosophy is committed, despite the protestations of neutrality made by many of its most vocal proponents, is one based in a pernicious way on a conception of the isolated individual as the locus of an absolute moral autonomy. This represents a serious cognitive limitation, because on this basis no adequate understanding of human society is possible, nor does it permit even individual human agents who are engaged in any serious forms of social behaviour to attain any satisfactory form of self-understanding. It is in fact exceedingly difficult to see how liberalism's pet recommendation "increase individual freedom" can constitute a contribution to solving any of the world's major problems.

An ethic based on this kind of hyperindividualist moral autonomy is, however, not merely cognitively mistaken, but—and this I take to be MacIntyre's fourth point—any form of social action based on or guided by such a view will also be deeply and actively destructive, dissolving forms of collective life that have real value without replacing them with anything of equal value. For these reasons, then, liberalism is not the answer.

Initially it might look as if Marxism was simply orthogonal to the whole universe of discussion marked out by Nietzsche, Christianity, and liberalism. It does not seem to be focused on providing views about the universal validity of moral principles, the salvation of the soul, or the proper role of flexibility and toleration in human life.

What it promised was three things. The first was something very concrete: an end to the boom-and-bust cycle of capitalist growth, and a regime of full employment, economic stability, and full social welfare and security for all. This first promise had particular importance in circumstances in which it called attention to the comparison with capitalist economies that were subject to recurrent, severe crisis, such as those of the 1920s and 1930s, and it retains its importance to the extent to which capitalist societies, despite Gordon Brown's foolish boast, still are subject to boom-and-bust. This first promise was concrete and empirical in the sense that it came about as close as one ever gets in the social sciences to being something the fulfillment of which could be determined by something like empirical scientific means.

Second, Marxism was committed to the view that the appropriately structured abolition of the private ownership of means of production would do away with what were historically superseded social fetters on the development of human powers and unleash an unexpected and hitherto unprecedented increase in human productivity. This increase in human productivity would have as its natural effect an increase in material well-being, that is, in the level of satisfaction of human needs and in levels of human consumption. This second promise, too, was something that, with the usual caveats and qualifications, could be connected with at least some crude standards of empirical confirmation.

The third promise was altogether more problematic for historical and philosophical reasons. That is the promise to end alienation. It is historically problematic because it was most clearly formulated in unpublished writings by Marx that became widely available only after World War I and therefore did not directly influence the formulation in the late nineteenth century of the basic Marxist canon. It has been thought to be philosophically problematic because it seemed to depend on a series of Hegelian views that might be thought to be questionable for any number of reasons (not least because they might be thought to remain implicated in basically idealistic ways of thinking

about the world, which was found to be objectionable). "Alienation" is best understood relative to a distinction between the (mere) exercise of human powers and the "appropriation," or "re-appropriation" ["Aneignung"/ "Wiederaneignung"], of these powers.[14] The intuition behind this distinction is that an individual human agent (or a group of such agents) can be the real locus through which certain powers are applied to the physical world without it being the case that the human individual, or group, in question has "made the (relevant) powers its own." Making certain powers "our own" in turn means acquiring full control over the conditions of further development and the application of those powers and being able to affirm ourselves in the exercise of those powers. "Alienation" refers to the state of affairs in which we have not appropriated some of our most basic human powers, especially those closely connected with material production and reproduction of our form of life. Apart from concerns about the possible idealist overtones of this concept, one might worry that I have given an account of it that is circular and empty, just replacing one undefined and obscure counter or token with another: Alienation is supposed to be the lack of appropriation of powers. That in turn is "defined" by reference to "making the power one's own." "Making a power my own," however, is said to have taken place when I can "affirm myself" in exercising it. However, is "self-affirmation" a well-understood concept? The reference to "self-affirmation" means at the very least that a significant interpretative activity is required to connect the conceptual structure described in any way with anything that empirical social science would recognise as part of itself, and this might be thought to be a further reason to be wary of "alienation." I do not wish in any way to minimise these genuine difficulties, but I do not think they finally matter for the question at issue.

The self-proclaimed Marxist regimes of Eastern Europe were remarkably successful in making good on the first of these promises. To the very end their populations enjoyed full employment and what was by Western European standards a very ample schedule of other benefits that provided more or less complete economic security. Nev-

ertheless they collapsed, not just economically but, as it were, also morally. They failed, that is, to find enough ideational and motivational support among their own populations to continue to reproduce themselves. The reason for this was not, I submit, because they were oppressive, and certainly not because they failed to be "democratic" in the sense in which this term is used in Western liberal societies. It is also hard to think that they collapsed merely because they failed to end "alienation," although it is true that they did thus fail, or perhaps more exactly, as Sartre sometimes claimed, they did not so much fail to end capitalist alienation as replace it with a specific, slightly different kind of alienation. In one of his essays he cites a poster in a factory in Eastern Europe in which workers are enjoined to take care of their health in order not to damage national production. In cases like this one's own health itself (and hence presumably one's own biological possibility of self-activity) is seen merely as a means to a fully external end. Still, politics is usually about differential, not categorical, forms of judgement and action, that is, we characteristically choose X not "for itself alone" but X in preference to Y or Z. So the spectrum of envisaged realistic possibilities that is presupposed in political decision is usually an important variable. If the choice, then, is exclusively between Soviet forms of economic and political organisation and Western capitalist ones, the failure of Soviet-style societies to end alienation would not be a very strong differential argument in favour of capitalist regimes because the latter made no serious attempt at all to make labour (and life) unalienated and unalienating (whatever "alienation" might turn out to mean). Yet when offered the opportunity, in the last decade or so of the twentieth century, populations in Eastern Europe overwhelmingly chose to abandon the self-proclaimed Marxist form of economy and of society and look towards Western European models of modern capitalism.

The lethal failure of twentieth-century European Marxism was its inability to produce consumer goods at the level of quality and quantity that was attained by Western Europe. So a failure in the second of the three promises. Those of us who have always lived in prosperous

societies and have been materially comfortable may well be tempted to be somewhat condescending about this: Is mere failure to provide a steadily increasing stream of luxury consumer goods really good grounds for rejecting a social order, provided ample means for minimally decent living are available? Is even lack of "economic efficiency" good grounds for criticism? I think this is a temptation to adopt a morally shameful attitude that we should staunchly resist.

The positive attraction of the West, then, was completely understandable. It was the attraction of greater productivity combined with a social and political framework that was perceived as permitting a greater distribution of consumer goods. The failure of the Soviet system consisted in the incapacity to provide their populations with capitalist levels of consumption and an inability to elaborate any plausible alternative evaluative standard relative to which life in Soviet-style societies could be seen as distinctively good.

The difficulty was that a central strand of Marxism shared with capitalist ideologies a tacit or explicit productivist ethos. In a kind of parody of a motif taken from the High Enlightenment, a more economically and industrially productive society was expected to be one that was "more advanced" in almost every way. Marx himself was well aware of this strand in his own thinking but did not think it in any way problematic: he expected socialist economies to out-produce capitalist ones and to be self-evidently more rewarding, satisfying, and choiceworthy to those who lived in them than capitalist societies were; he also expected these two things naturally and easily to go together. Perhaps the clearest expression of the productivist view occurs in the *Grundrisse*:

> Wir finden bei den Alten nie eine Untersuchung, welche Form des Grundeigentums etc. die produktivste, den größten Reichtum schafft? Der Reichtum erscheint nicht als Zweck der Produktion, obgleich sehr wohl Cato untersuchen kann, welche Bestellung des Feldes die erträglichste, oder gar Brutus sein Geld zu den besten Zinsen ausborgen kann. Die Untersuchung ist immer, welche Weise des Eigentums die besten Staatsbürger

schafft. Als Selbstzweck erscheint der Reichtum nur bei den wenigen Handelsvölkern—Monopolisten des carrying trade—, die in den Poren der alten Welt leben, wie die Juden in der mittelaltrigen Gesellschaft. . . . So scheint die alte Anschauung, wo der Mensch, in wlecher bornierten nationalen, religiösen, politischen Bestimmung auch immer als Zweck der Produktion erscheint, sehr erhaben zu sein gegen die moderne Welt, wo die Produktion als Zweck des Menschen und der Reichtum als Zweck der Produktion erscheint. In fact, aber, wenn die bornierte bürgerliche Form abgestreift wird, was ist der Reichtum anders als die im universellen Austausch erzeugte Universalität der Bedürfnisse, Fähigkeiten, Genüsse, Produktivkräfte etc. der Individuen? Die volle Entwicklung der menschlichen Herrschaft über die Naturkräfte, die der sogenannten Natur sowohl, wie seiner eigenen Natur? Das absolute Herausarbeiten seiner schöpferischen Anlagen, ohne andre Voraussetzung als die vorhergegangene historische Entwicklung, die diese Totalität der Entwicklung, d.h. der Entwicklung aller menschlichen Kräfte als solcher, nicht gemessen an einem *vorgegebenen* Maßstab, zum Selbstzwecke macht?[15]

[Among the ancients we never find an investigation of which form of landownership is most productive, creates the most wealth? Wealth does not appear as the end of production, although Cato is quite capable of investigating which form of cultivation of the field has the highest yield, and even Brutus knows how to lend out his money at the best rate of interest. The investigation is always which form of property creates the best citizens. Wealth appears as an end-in-itself only among some few trading nations—monopolists of the carrying trade—who live in the pores of the ancient world, like the Jews in medieval society. . . . The ancient conception according to which man in whatever narrow national, religious, or political form appears as the end of production seems to be very sublime compared with the modern world, where production appears as the end of man and wealth the end of production. In fact, however, when the narrow bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of the needs, abilities, forms of enjoyment, productive powers, etc., of the individuals generated in universal exchange?

> The full development of human domination over natural powers, both of so-called nature and of his own nature? The absolute elaboration of his creative capacities without any further presupposition that the previous historical development which makes this totality of development, that is the development of all human power as such, not measured by any pregiven yardstick, into an end-in-itself.]

On the positive side, this does seem to give one at least a possible kind of response to Nietzsche, that is, it can be seen as a description of a universal framework that could be construed as containing a potential kind of quasi-moral but nonsubjective authority, an authority derived from the requirements for maximally developing needs and human productive powers and capacities for their own sake. However, this response does require one to put a huge amount of weight on a particular anthropological conception that emphasises the mutual dependence of human powers and human needs, and the necessary and potentially mutually reinforcing relation between individual and collective development of powers. Nietzsche, of course, would have rejected this conjunction of individual and collective. This disagreement between Marx and Nietzsche about the interconnection of individual and social powers ought not, however, to obscure a further deep-seated similarity. Both Marx's productivism and Nietzschean conceptions of the exercise of the individual will-to-power contain a very strong substantive quasi-normative commitment to the development of power as an "end-in-itself."

Is the development of *every* human power and of *every* need really good, and, more than that, is it a kind of absolute good-in-itself, as Marx's construction seems to imply? Historians often point to Rousseau as systematically introducing the idea of a "false need" into Western social thought.[16] In human society we all develop forms of dependency on the good opinion of others, which give rise to any number of cognitively delusory but motivationally deeply seated "needs," which make no contribution to any real human good and which we would in principle be better off without. Notoriously Marx

will have none of this line of thought. He has a theory of needs, but no analysis of what it could be for a need to be false.[17] A "rich" person is a person "rich in needs," and this is a thoroughly positive and laudatory description.[18] He thought any attempt to introduce a distinction between true and false needs would represent a return to what he took to be Rousseau's proto-Romantic primitivism or to an inherently ascetic view of life that could be justified only by reference to discredited forms of religious belief.

Parallel to these difficulties about "needs" is a question about the idea of a "(natural, human) power," the development of which is here described as an end-in-itself. In some of Marx's early works one finds a very broad construal of this term. So even "forms of enjoyment" that might play a role in my relation to objects in the world (as mentioned in the above quotation),[19] such as the cultivation of the senses and the ability to appreciate the beauty of nature,[20] are construed as "natural human powers" (actually as "menschliche Wesenskräfte"). Arguably this would not give rise to some of the worst features of productivism, because saying that a "form of enjoyment," or even a larger configuration in which a specific form of enjoyment is an essential constituent, is an "end-in-itself" does not seem to leave open certain classic forms of alienation. It really would seem strange to claim that I was being inappropriately forced to develop my own powers of enjoyment of some type of object, at any rate provided that the development of such powers was part of what Marx sometimes calls an "all-sided" exercise of human powers and capacities.[21] Unfortunately, sometimes Marx seems to give "human powers" a significantly narrower reading than the one just canvassed, as if the phrase were equivalent not to "all" the human powers included in one way or another in the cycle of production and consumption (including those of aesthetic appreciation, enjoyment, and discrimination) but were restricted to the power to produce goods or material objects that can be used or consumed. "Power" means, or at any rate is strictly modelled on, *industrial* production: "Die Geschichte der Industrie . . . ist das aufgeschlagene Buch der menschlichen Wesenskräfte").[22]

A "human power" is then tacitly understood essentially as a kind of instrument that is deployed to bring physical things into existence or change their location or material properties.

MacIntyre, in his essay on the *Theses on Feuerbach*, pointed to a "road not taken" by the early Marx that diverges from that trodden by later Marxists.[23] In the "Theses" the early Marx does *not* construe production either in the narrower or in the wider of the two senses distinguished above as the end-in-itself of human life. Rather he appeals to a different kind of human action altogether that is not construed as in the first instance a form of relating to "objects" at all. This form of human action is apparently conceived as standing altogether outside the context of the instrumental transformation of nature in the production of goods or the cultivation of powers to appreciate those goods (and then also perhaps natural phenomena of all kinds, considered as potential "objects"). Marx calls this form of activity "praxis." Whatever "praxis" is supposed to be, it is supposed to be a radically autotelic—that is, it is to have its end-in-itself and not in some external product—and noninstrumental form of activity. Marx, however, does not really give a sufficiently detailed account of "praxis" for us to get a firm grasp on the concept and discover to what extent it is or is not genuinely enlightening. Appeal to "praxis" is no more than a gesture at something not further analysed rather than a satisfactory explanation.

One can see the work of some of the members of the so-called Frankfurt School as developing lines of argument that are parallel to the ones just discussed. Most of the members of this school agree on two points. First, that Marx was either confusing or confused about the exact nature of human action. He tended to construe all human action on the model of instrumental action or under the aspect of its possible mean-ends rationality. He tended, that is, to identify "praxis" and "production," and then to construe "production" in a narrow way as "industrial production." This in effect meant both conceptually reducing noninstrumental forms of action (such as "praxis," whatever that finally meant) to forms of production and subordinating all

human life to the imperatives of increased instrumental control over the environment (and over ourselves). Seen from this perspective, Marx's use of the phrase "Herrschaft über die Naturkräfte <unserer> eignen Natur" ("the *domination* [italics added] over the natural powers of our own nature") in the passage from the *Grundrisse* cited above can be read in a chilling way, as potentially the extension of a paradigm of coercive manipulation from our relations to nature to our relations to other humans, and from our relations to other humans to our relations to ourselves.[24]

Second, the members of the Frankfurt School thought it essential to rehabilitate the distinction between true and false needs by showing how one could speak of "false needs" without asceticism, without a return to an Aristotelian conception of a substantively fixed human nature that could be used as a criterion, and without commitment to a Romantic "return to Nature" view. This attempt was not very successful because it ended up either with the pessimistic aesthetic vision of Adorno, which had no obvious connection to any form of concrete politics, or with the debased liberalism of Habermas and his neo-Kantian ideal speech theory.

Up to now I have not mentioned what I call in my title "the *ethos*" of the twentieth century. To speak of "the" ethos is slightly misleading because it suggests that there is a single unitary such *ethos*. In one sense this is right, in that there seems to be agreement on a cycle of need-production-consumption pursued for its own sake. On the other hand, though, there are two slightly different ways of accentuating the components in this cycle. Marx emphasises the priority of production and tries to find a way of seeing how that production can be a form of human freedom and self-activity. This view dominated Eastern Europe during much of the twentieth century. The various ideologies of the capitalist societies, on the other hand, focused on consumption. The first way of inflecting the need-production-consumption cycle, just to repeat, was, I have claimed, finally unable to maintain itself partly because it was unable to out-produce the group of countries that eventually became the European Union and

perhaps because it could give no plausible answer to the question of why production for its own sake was an end-in-itself and had no genuinely *alternative* value-system, or mode of self-congratulation, to propose. The second, consumption-oriented variety of this same basic worldview and form of society, as MacIntyre has shown, is the natural matrix for the various varieties of emotivism, existentialism, and moral anarchism that are characteristic of the philosophy and the life of our societies. Mainstream Marxism, then, was an attempt to answer the questions of the twentieth century in a way that was in some sense still commensurate with an important part of its *ethos*.

How might one break out of the cycle of need-production-consumption? One way would certainly be to find a single overarching goal outside it, if any such goal existed. And so it is very tempting to follow Aristotle down the path that leads from this reflection to the views that he presents in his ethical and political writings. In a famous passage in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle writes:

> Εἰ δή τι τέλος ἐστὶ τῶν πρακτῶν ὃ δι᾽ αὑτὸ βουλόμεθα. τἆλλα δὲ διὰ τοῦτο, καὶ μὴ πάντα δι᾽ ἕτερον αἱρούμεθα (προοίσει γὰρ οὕτω γ᾽ εἰς ἄπειρον, ὥστ᾽ εἶναι κενὴν καὶ ματαίαν τὴν ὄρεξιν) δῆλον ὡς τοῦτ᾽ ἂν εἴη τἀγαθὸν καὶ τὸ ἄριστον.
>
> [If then there is some end of our practical undertakings which we wish for the sake of itself, whereas we wish for the other things <we wish for> for the sake of it, and if we do not choose everything for the sake of something else (for if *that* is the case, the sequence will go on without limit, so that our desire was empty and vain) it is clear that this <end> will be the good, i.e., the best.]

This is my own *pons asinorum*, the bridge from ignorance into the Promised Land of Understanding that I have found myself always unable to cross. Why, I have always wondered, should my desire be considered "empty and pointless," just because it is part of a sequence of further desires that goes off into infinity (i.e., that continues in-

definitely, has no definite stopping point)? I am thirsty today and want to drink. I know that even if I do now drink, I will be thirsty again tomorrow or the next day. Does that mean that my desire to drink now is "empty"? Even if my action on a specific desire is (doomed necessarily to be) frustrated and "pointless" (ματαία), I do not see how that makes the desire or the course of action to which it gives rise empty. Such desires and such actions are an important, in fact constituent, part of human life. To take a slightly more weighty example, I may desire (both for its inherent properties and for the other good things it leads to) greater European integration, the prosecution of Tony Blair in The Hague as a war criminal, and a more rigorous standard in education without having any idea how these different goals might be related to each other. Even if I were to agree that I need *some* central structure of desire unified under a single overarching end to give my life meaning, I do not see how it follows from that that *all* my desires need to be seen in reference to that central core. I don't, of course, mean to assert that *all* human desire is undifferentially or equally good or valid, or that it might not be perverted, inopportune, or otherwise unwise to act on some desires in some circumstances, but has human desire *no* weight and dignity in itself *at all*, apart from its integration into a single overarching end? Isn't human life in fact like this: a series of desires that at some indeterminate point, we know not when, eventually peters out?

One of the reasons I have always felt great resistance to this Aristotelian line of thought is that it seems to me to add fuel to a view of human life that I find repellent. This is the view that life is either like a race or an ἄγων with clear winners and losers. Or that it is the exercise of a craft with a determinate end, say like the production of shoes, so that univocal success or failure is always discernible. First of all, I have always thought there was much to be said not exactly in favour of failure tout court but in potential appreciation of some of the aspects of failure. One would think that this would be a line of thought that recommended itself with particular force to Christians who took seriously Paul's preaching of "Christ crucified." Second, much

of human life and some of the most interesting and important parts of it do not seem to me to lend themselves plausibly to analysis in terms of success or failure at all. Some aspects of life are not appropriately construed relative to the idea that life is a single continuous narrative about the desire for and pursuit of a single unified (conception of the) good. Furthermore, a human life "as a whole" does not seem to me at all like a single huge race or the deployment of a craft.[25] It seems to me highly questionable whether my whole life admits of treatment as a single narrative in any interesting sense, but even if I were to grant that it is or could be such a narrative, the kind of narrative in question would have to be one that would be only contingently related to the "story" of a single ἀγών, competition, or race.[26] Narrative should be seen as a way of distancing ourselves from Aristotle, not of rehabilitating him.[27] If we at any *particular* time give our desires some minimal order by reference to some conception of a single overarching good, we also know that those conceptions of a unitary good *change* during our lives. Any unity of desire is "necessarily" and unavoidably fleeting, transitory, fragile, and imposed on much more chaotic structures that are, however, not just nothing or "empty."

Thus Aristotle's view has always seemed to me utterly implausible as a view about the nature of human desire and thus also of human life as a whole. Human desire has at least *some* validity in itself, a validity that is not derived merely from some external higher end to which it is devoted. The passage cited from *Nicomachean Ethics* has also always seemed to me to indicate that, regardless of the rather sophisticated discussion one can find in his work of forms of human action that are autotelic, Aristotle is still fixated on a relatively rigid division of actions into those performed "for their own sake" (as end-in-themselves) and those performed "(*merely*) for the sake of something else." In fact if he were to be able to rid his thought of the centrality of this distinction and see it as of merely local or contextual relevance, the argument for the existence of a single overarching end, on which the rest of the work to some extent rests, would be seen to

be implausible. Even interpretations of Aristotle that emphasise the extent to which the conception of εὐδαιμονία ("happiness" or "human flourishing") will be affected by reflection on the real conditions of human life and real human desires seem to me to hold fast to the "(mere) means"/"end (in itself)" distinction. It is one thing to say that in determining what the end-in-itself is, one must reflect even on the means that will be necessary for its attainment, and quite another to do away with the distinction between means adopted for the sake of something other than themselves and ends-in-themselves altogether.[28]

There is, at any rate, a whole traditional sequence of philosophers who think of themselves as turning their backs resolutely on the strict Aristotelian distinction between means and ends, actions under the dominance of instrumental rationality and some form of autotelic human activity. I would include in this tradition Hegel, Marx (in *some* of his moods), Dewey, Trotsky (sometimes), and Adorno (but not Habermas). Obviously the members of this group differ in any number of significant ways, but what seems to me characteristic of all of them is their conviction that one must try to break out of the cycle of need-production-consumption and in particular get away from the idea that some component of that cycle is a kind of end-in-itself. Rather, however, than thinking that there is some other single good that is the one overarching human goal, as Aristotle claims, but that goal is not production, they hold that there is no pregiven overarching single goal. Human life is a matter of *biens à construire* rather than of a *bien à trouver*. Furthermore, they connect this thought and see it as in some way inherently connected with the idea of overcoming the very distinction between means and ends or instrumental and substantive rationality, or at any rate demoting any such distinction to the status of a mere contextual convenience with no final significance. Thus Trotsky speaks of the "dialectic of means and ends."

> Dialectical materialism does not know dualism between means and end. The end flows naturally from the historical movement. Organically the

> means are subordinated to the end. The immediate end becomes the means for a further end.[29]

Appeal to such a dialectic, however, is one way to try to save the deepest intuition behind Marxism, which is that humanity should be capable of collectively self-organising activity, which instantiates appropriate self-control, self-direction, and even, when necessary, self-limitation, without needing to appeal to any external principle.[30] The central idea that humanity is constituted by a self-activity in which the distinction between instrumental action and action performed for its own sake is not relevant is detachable from productivism. This specific conception of self-activity seems to me more perspicuously graspable in Hegelian than in Aristotelian categories.[31] I am sorry to say that I believe that I disagree with MacIntyre on this.

That leaves the issue of Nietzsche. Simply deciding in discussion to abandon Aristotle's distinction between instrumental action and action performed for its own sake will not by itself suffice to do away with Nietzscheanism, unless such a decision was part of a successful project of action to transform society. Marx thought it in some sense pointless to "refute" religion because it arose from human needs that were not satisfied by a certain social formation and would only disappear when those needs were more directly and palpably satisfied. Similarly, Nietzscheanism will disappear only when it loses its plausibility as a mirror of and guide to and in our social life. That will happen only if our social life takes a different form. Nevertheless, the framework provided by some conception of collective self-activity gives us, it seems to me, the best chance we have of constructing a world in which Nietzsche would be an irrelevance. Even if such an institutionally embedded and socially realised framework effectively did exist, it would still be possible for individuals to make a decision to try to reject it, but this decision would have a completely different status from that which a "lifestyle decision" has now. It would be more like what Christians in the medieval period had in mind when they considered the possibility that the fool might say in his heart that there

is no God. Taking seriously the attempt to abolish the distinction between instrumental and substantive reason, between actions performed merely for the sake of other things and actions performed for their own sake, and finally between means and ends, by transforming society in a way that would make these distinctions really marginal and subordinate would, I think, move one beyond the ethos of the twentieth century. Not, of course, that there is politically the slightest chance of this happening at present.

4

Must Criticism Be Constructive?

There is a widely held view—at least in contemporary Anglo-American societies—that "merely negative" criticism is somehow defective or inappropriate. It is part of the responsibility of a critic, it is assumed, not *simply* to denigrate some institution, social arrangement, or form of action but to do so while providing at least the suggestion of a "preferable" way of acting, or a "better" way of organising some sector of the society. Though this view is widely shared, it is perhaps not unimportant to recall that it is not *universally* held. One might think, for instance, of Bakunin, who notoriously claimed, "Auch die Lust an der Zerstörung ist eine schaffende Lust" ("The pleasure in destruction is itself a creative pleasure"), or of Adorno, who insisted that, because of the almost limitless ability of modern societies to co-opt even severe kinds of criticism, philosophy must be a relentlessly negative form of dialectical activity. These examples illustrate perhaps the discomfort that the idea of nonconstructive criticism arouses. One might, of course, argue that the very idea of *completely* negative criticism, like its mirror image, absolutely well-founded knowledge, is conceptually incoherent, but the most usual source of unease is not so much that there is anything *conceptually* inappropriate with the idea of completely negative criticism, rather there is a fear that it is a concomitant of an anarchic abdication

of responsibility on the part of the critic, so the suspicion is a moral rather than specifically epistemological or cognitive.

So I would like to discuss three interconnected questions:

1. What is "criticism"?
2. Is there a single unitary sense of "criticism" that can be found in the forms of "criticism" actually practised in different domains of human life (e.g., social criticism, aesthetic criticism, the moral criticism of individuals and their actions, cultural criticism)?
3. Must criticism be constructive? What is supposed to be wrong with it, if it is not constructive?

The first of these questions raises all the old philosophical questions that have been discussed *ad taedium* (if not *ad nauseam*) for over two thousand years about what it is to give a proper account of a concept or practice. Should one—*can one?*—give a strict definition (Plato), a genealogical account (Nietzsche), or some kind of looser specification of the "grammar" of the concept by locating it in the context of a linguistically structured "form of life" (as in the later Wittgenstein)? This first question is in fact distinct from the second. The first question is directed to the notion of "criticism" *in general*. Is there *any* coherent concept (in any area of human endeavour); if there is, is there *one* concept or many; how can it—can they—be specified? These are questions that one can perfectly reasonably ask, and answer, insofar as they can be answered at all, in the context of *any* single kind of human activity. You can ask this question perfectly reasonably even if the kind of "criticism" you have in mind is restricted to the evaluation of restaurants by the "food critics" whom certain newspapers now employ. The second question focuses on whether, in addition to, or independent of whatever general ambiguities there might be in the concept of "criticism" there is some *disciplinarily specific* difference between criticism as characteristically performed in the study of music, painting, or literature, and criticism as it is practised in science, ethics, or politics.

As far as these first two questions are concerned, I would like to take a non-Socratic approach. That is, I would like to suggest that there is no *single* invariable notion of "criticism," which could be the object of strict formal definition, giving necessary and sufficient conditions, but this does not really matter because such formal definitions are not possible in most of the more important realms of human life, and neither human life itself nor philosophy is any the worse for this. There is no single concept of "criticism," either in ethics, politics, or art, but what there are, are certain paradigmatic cases, and these represent a kind of ideally or fully developed "criticism." Something can perfectly legitimately be called "criticism" that does not satisfy *all* of these conditions. I claim that we should think of "criticism" in its fullest possible form as comprised of four analytically (although not always really) distinct elements or nontemporal stages. Another way of thinking about this is to locate our usual usage of "criticism" at the point of intersection of four dimensions. I will call the first of these four the "structural" or "analytic" dimension, the second the "evaluative" dimension, the third the dimension of "argumentative connectivity," and the fourth the "performative" dimension.

The first dimension is that in which "criticism" is related to "analyse," "trace," "differentiate." "Critique" (and related terms) derive from the Greek word κρίνω and originally meant simply "analysis," that is, the process of taking a complex apart in thought and specifying its constituent parts or elements. It was then also used to refer to the results of that process. Such analysis will never be strictly value-free, but it will also not be the case that by virtue of engaging in "criticism" of this kind I am in any way presupposing or expressing a *negative* attitude or judgement towards the object of criticism. "Critique" in this sense is self-evidently an activity of virtually universal application in all fields of human endeavour (even if, for contingent reasons, the *word* "critique" is not used in some particular language for what is going on). So I can perfectly reasonably be said to be engaged in "literary criticism," if I analyse the parts of a poem or, for instance, its metre, regardless of whatever particularly evaluative attitude I might

have towards it. If the poem is in the Alkaic strophe, and I state that this is the case and helpfully write out the scansion, that is a rudimentary form of literary criticism whether I especially *like* poetry written in the Alkaic strophe in general or not, or am indifferent, and whether I like *this* particular use of the Alkaic strophe or not (or am indifferent). By analysing the poem in this way I may be helping readers (or listeners) pay attention to features of the work that they might otherwise overlook or fail to notice. This may allow readers (or listeners) to acquire an enhanced engagement with the poem, whether this means that as a result a given reader or listener comes to evaluate the poem more *or less* positively than before, or whether the evaluation remains unchanged. In addition, even if the analysis does not change my evaluation, it may help me understand *why* I like or dislike the poem. Since for many people understanding why I have the reaction to a poem that I in fact have is part of the process of proper engagement with it, analysis may form part of the normal process of aesthetic appropriation.

Similarly, if I am a psychoanalyst I can in one sense "criticise" someone's behaviour by "analysing" it, that is, subjecting it to scrutiny of its origins, motives, symbolic associations, and so forth. I can do the same for a proposal for a piece of legislation. In the case of a human action or a piece of proposed legislation, "analysis" may go *beyond* tracing the internal structure of the proposed law and point out, for instance, what its consequences will be likely to be, what other measures will need to be taken in order to implement it, and so forth. I don't, it is true, usually *call* this "criticism" in English but rather "analysis," but that seems a trivial or unimportant linguistic point.

The second of the four dimensions is one in which "criticise" means to have or adopt an attitude or to judge; usually the attitude in question is a determinedly negative one towards something, and so along this dimension "criticise" is related to terms like "dislike," "disapprove of," and so forth. It is in fact an exceedingly peculiar but undeniable fact that a term that originally (in the ancient world) referred merely to the process of separating that which was distinct,

eventually developed in the direction of acquiring a distinctly *negative* connotation.[1] To be sure, in this case there does seem to be a difference in at least our linguistic usage between the cases of forms of human action and cases of art in that it would be perfectly normal to speak of a "critical" attitude towards a work of art, meaning by that a discriminating attitude that resulted in a finally *positive* evaluation of it. On the other hand, we would, I think, *never* describe a laudatory or approving attitude towards a human action, a piece of legislation, or a social practice or institution as an instance of "critique."

What exactly does "negative attitude" mean in the above? One obvious thing it can mean is that I explicitly formulate a proposition to the effect that the (criticised) object (or action or institution) in question has some defect or that I dislike it, think it is unfit for purpose, reject it, will not tolerate it, and so on. I may formulate this proposition without ever uttering it, merely affirming it mentally, or I may state it repeatedly to all and sundry. Of course, though, I may develop a "negative attitude" towards something without ever formulating anything specifically in a proposition. As a result of long experience with some person I may come to dislike him or her intensely without ever becoming aware of this fact consciously and thus, a fortiori, without ever expressing this dislike in a proposition, even one I never verbally express. It would probably be a stretch of current English usage to say that this course of experience and its conclusion are a form of "criticism" or a "critical process," but although they are an extension of the way we now usually speak, they are a comprehensible and, as it were, conservative extension. Finally, I might *act* in a certain way that could be construed as a form of criticism. To use the classic example drawn from one of the Icelandic sagas, suppose you as a host give me dinner and, as I take my leave, you ask, "How was my dinner?" If I thereupon vomit up the entire contents of my stomach on you, it does not seem utterly fanciful to see this as a kind of criticism-embodied-in-action (not words). Similarly, if I ostentatiously spit when I see you approach, or draw a moustache on your picture, or whistle a parody of your latest musical composition, or do a comic

imitation of some of your mannerisms, these might be construed as very much like criticisms.

So when in 2011 a group of Egyptians and Saudis flew some airplanes into the two spectacularly ugly towers of the World Trade Center in lower Manhattan, knocking both towers down, but very strikingly *not* explaining why they were acting as they did, did that count as "criticism"?

This idea that I might criticise merely by acting without saying anything brings me to the third of my three dimensions. In cases of "full-blown" criticism, the first and second dimensions are explicitly connected. I would not usually think I had in front of me a case of "criticism"—or at any rate of "criticism" in the full-blown sense—if I simply tell you how the object is structured or if I simply express disapproval, or if I *both* have an analysis *and* have an evaluative attitude. To engage in criticism means not merely that I have an analysis and a judgement but that I cite structural or other aspects of the thing in question *as reasons* for my approval or disapproval, or I *argue from* the account I give of the object in question *to* my judgement about it. Obviously, in most cases the notion of "argue" here will encompass a significantly larger range of ways of acting than those usually countenanced by formal logic or by standard views about scientific inference.

Of course, one might claim, and I think one would be right to claim, that the connection between structural analysis and evaluation *in any case* was deeper and more inherent than the previous account seemed to indicate. In most cases, after all, the analysis itself would not *actually* be performed in a strictly value-free way, without any influence of the values I held. Rather I would decide what parts it was relevant to separate out analytically by at least tacit reference to value judgements. This is no doubt true. However, it is no objection, if only because at least at the most superficial level it seems perfectly possible to defend Weber's distinction between what he calls "aktuelles Werten" and what he calls "Wertbeziehung."[2]

The fourth dimension is one in which "criticise" is connected with terms such as "vote against" or "vote down" a proposal, or "to

denounce" an action or a person, or "indict" or "prosecute" a person. All of these things ("indict," "vote down," etc.) are in the first instance public actions. In any case these actions are not merely "public" but also institutional, that is, they are governed by specifiable practices of a certain kind. To "indict" someone (of a crime) is not to disapprove of or reject or distance oneself from what that person did on certain grounds that have to do with the way in which you think that action can be analysed, but it is to satisfy particular specific *legal* requirements that will be given by the legal system in force. This might mean shouting out "Thief!" in a bazaar, or pronouncing an accusation in front of a certain number of witnesses or a magistrate, or filing a written brief in a certain specified form, or whatever. Often in these formal contexts there must be a specified object of criticism (e.g., a person who is indicted as criminal, even if the name of that person is not known, as in British indictments of "persons unknown") and an institutional set of consequences. If you are *successfully* indicted, you pay a fine, go to jail, or come under the guillotine. The action in question formally specifies the person or thing criticised and will often *connect* it specifically with particular envisaged changes of status, actions, and so on. If I am a member of a prize committee, my vote must be for a particular work, and if enough others vote my way, the work I favour will receive the prize.

It is tempting to appeal here to the theory of speech acts that had some currency in the period between the 1950s and the end of the 1970s. There is usually a kind of associated institutional intention that goes with many of these actions. If I "vote down" a proposal, the institutional action I perform is, as it would be natural for us to say, "expressive of" my own, underlying (individual, "mental"), critically articulated disapproval of the proposal, or if I vote to give the prize to a certain work, that will usually be because I admire that work.

The relation of these "institutional intentions" to the real intentions of actual individual human beings (or groups) is, however, a highly complex matter, and probably more complicated than this immediate inclination of ours would suggest. On the one hand, it is

probably correct that the whole mechanism we have developed for describing what we now call "internal" states of mind (and also of action) results from projecting terms that have more or less robust external referents when applied to public actions onto shadowy, invented "internal" states, mechanisms, events, and actions. As Hobbes would have put it,[3] there are terms that have clear meaning "in foro externo"—a process of "deliberation" is one in which the various members of a political assembly discuss with each other (out loud, usually in a public place, at a specified time) what is to be done. These terms can then be extended so as purportedly to apply "in foro interno," that is, to merely mental phenomena of human individuals that are not necessarily ever expressed aloud.

Despite all this, on the other hand, when such an institutional structure is formally established, this can allow the "official" intention embodied in the speech act to deviate significantly from the real psychic state of the person actually performing the action. Not every public prosecutor who initiates proceedings against someone who violates a law must actually disapprove of what the criminal has done. He (or she) might, as they say, "just be doing my job." In various easily imaginable cases I may, a simple citizen eligible to vote or as a Member of Parliament, vote against something, for instance for tactical reasons, of which I do not really disapprove and would not (in itself) wish to criticise.

In some extreme cases the tail may even wag the dog. To give a very vivid instance of this,[4] on the morning of August 21, 1968, forces of the Warsaw Pact, including the DDR, invaded the ČSSR in order to terminate the political and social experiments being carried out there under the leadership of Alexander Dubček. For various reasons, including probably tactical reasons, the official line of the SED—the ruling Communist Party of the DDR—up to the very evening before the invasion was that military action against a fraternal socialist country by the DDR was inconceivable, and reports of preparations for such an intervention were Western inventions, instances of black propaganda, or provocations. Unfortunately, a university

lecturer named Roessler had a lecture at 7 AM on the morning of August 21 and had neglected to listen to the news about the invasion. When asked by students in his lecture, all of whom had been listening to Western radio that morning, about what had happened, he defended what he took to be the official line, that military intervention against a fraternal socialist regime was unthinkable, and suggestions that it might even be contemplated were a provocation of the West. Roessler was then dismissed from his post for criticising the government. In a case like this it seems to me perfectly plausible, although I know that others will not find it so, to say that the unfortunate Roessler *had* criticised the SED and its policies. He had performed the public act of speaking against a decision the SED had made and implemented from a university lectern in front of numerous students. To be sure, in doing this he had in another sense *no intention whatever* of criticising the SED because he could assume that doing so would mean that he would lose his job (which is what occurred). Actually once one has proceeded thus far there is no reason not to add to this analysis. Perhaps the unlucky Roessler in the privacy of his own innermost thoughts *really was* a supporter of Dubček and critic of the SED but had enough sense never publicly to admit such a thing. In defending what he thought was the SED policy, he was performing what he thought was the required act of expressing public support for the SED's decision. It was just an accident that he had not appropriately kept up with the shifts in the official line, so he failed in his intention to support the party and *in fact* criticised it.[5] He was, as it were, trying but failing to sell his conscience to political expedience.

We started with three questions, the third of which concerned the notion of "constructive" criticism. The intuition behind the idea of "constructive" criticism is that the object criticised should really be able to be improved by reference to a form of action guided by the criticism itself. The model here is that there are three items: a critic, an object (action, institution) criticised, and a "target-agent" to whom the criticism is addressed or directed. So I may criticise the medical

authorities for permitting an unqualified surgeon to operate on the grounds that he killed my aunt in what was billed as a routine operation. The model here is that there are three items: a critic—in this case, me—an object (person, action, institution) criticised—in this case, the complex fact that an incompetent surgeon killed my aunt—and a "target-agent" to whom the criticism is addressed or directed—in Britain this is the General Medical Council. It is constructive criticism to the extent to which the "object" could have been "improved"—my aunt would not have died—if the target-agent, the Medical Council, had been guided by what I am now saying, that is, had not allowed an incompetent surgeon to operate. The target-agent to whom the criticism is directed will be some individual (or some group of people) who stands in a special relation to the object criticised so that in criticising the object, the critic is also in some sense calling the attention of the target-agent to deficiencies in the object, which are thereby presented as being the target-agent's job to remedy. The most obvious reason for connecting criticism with a particular target-agent (or agents) is either: (a) that this person (or these people) can be held in some way responsible for the existing state of the object by virtue of which it is deemed worthy of being criticised or (b) that person (or these people) could, and ought, by adopting the criticism in question, act so as to improve the object and remove the grounds for the criticism. I merely note that the second and third of the three items may in some cases be the same. Instead of criticising the medical authorities for letting the surgeon operate, I could criticise him for operating when unqualified. Finally, if I were such a surgeon myself I could engage in self-criticism in which all three items were the same.

"Constructive" criticism, then, goes beyond simple "criticism" in the third sense above in that simple "criticism" requires that one be able to specify what is wrong with the object, whereas constructive criticism requires in addition either the weaker condition that one could in some sense also specify what else would have to be changed in the world in order for the object to escape the criticism, or the stronger condition that one be able to specify what concrete steps

the target-agent would have to undertake actually to remedy what is wrong.

To put what I wish to claim in another way, it is, it seems to me, *one* thing to say:

(a) If this object *lacked* features ABC, it would escape criticism

and quite *another* to say:

(b) *This*—{XYZ}—is my positive alternative to the criticised object.

Statement (a) is characteristic of what I have called "argumentatively connected" criticism. I disapprove of the object *because* I have reasons I can specify and they are ABC. It is my assumption that I can have (a) without (b), that is, that I can have the ability to specify in relatively *general terms* ("criteria" if one will) what is wrong with an object *without* necessarily being able to specify what *particular* configuration (of this object or one sufficiently like it) could exist that would escape condemnation by reference to those general criteria. A fortiori, I need not be able myself actually to produce an object or bring about a state of affairs that would escape the relevant criticism.

I note that in English the notion of "constructive criticism" also often has the further implication:

(a) that I can tell an appropriately constituted agent, the "target-agent," *how* exactly he or she or they should go about producing an object or bringing about a state of affairs that is better.

Think of this example: The world is overpopulated and resources are scarce. In addition, current policies of consumption are squandering existing resources and polluting the environment to an unacceptable extent. I now "criticise" the directors of British Petroleum (BP) for some policy their corporation has adopted. This is a form of "criticism" in the last and fullest sense I distinguished. The directors of BP are the target-agents because they are responsible for the current pol-

icy and (in some sense, although that would require considerable further analysis) "could" change it. I can point out *to them* features their policies would have to lack in order to escape the criticism I level at them. They would have to be less wasteful, more focused on satisfaction of real human needs, more likely to generate in consumers attitudes of prudence and moderation, and so forth. Now it might well be the case that such policies are not actually "realistically" possible given the fact that the energy sector is part of a capitalist economy where a certain motive and incentive structure is operative—this is why I flagged "*could*" in "*could* change <the policy>" above. "*Could*" under what conditions? One could easily imagine, then, that the directors of BP (perfectly reasonably from their point of view) rejected my criticism as not "constructive." The basic point of my criticism might well not only be one to which they "could" not respond, given the constraints of the market economy under which they operate, but also be one the blunting of which would require that they and their whole organisation simply *not exist at all in anything like its present form*. They might well respond that if *they* adopted more enlightened policies, the only effect that would have would be to put them out of business, and then their place would merely be taken by Shell or some other corporation with policies that were effectively indistinguishable from BP's. That would not only be of no benefit to the directors of Shell but would also not represent progress towards anything that the critic could reasonably count as "progress." Why prefer Shell if *they* have the same polices as BP? The only solution might be that all entities like BP be abolished, which would require dismantling and reconstructing the whole economic system. If the economy were to be completely revamped to allow these deleterious policies to be avoided, then people like those on the board of directors would have a completely different social role; they would not be directors of international corporations but would have "*honest*" jobs (and hence would have completely different desires, beliefs, attitudes, powers, etc.). It is not difficult to see how the current directors of BP might well fail to see *this* as "constructive criticism"

in the usual sense of that term. But then that might well be *their* problem. What might count as "constructive" *for us*, that is, what we, given who we are, could do about something, given our identities and possibilities, need not be the same as what is constructive *for them* (given their identity and situation). Appeal to the requirement that criticism be "constructive" can thus often have the function of trying to shift the *onus probandi* in a particular way. I, as critic, am required to formulate my criticism in a way that is shaped to the action-related demands of the target-agents. I must criticise them (and their actions, the institutions in which they participate, etc.) in a way that conforms to what "they" define as what they can "reasonably" be expected to do and results they can "reasonably" be expected to accept.

I should emphasise that nothing in what I have said suggests that it is illicit or inappropriate for a person or group to *lament* unless they can specify *in general terms* what the exact cause of the complaint is, or—an even stronger demand—unless they can propose a remedy. There is a category of what Adorno sometimes calls "creaturely suffering" (*das Leiden der Kreatur*), the expression of which is always legitimate.[6] I can perfectly "reasonably"—"reasonable" is not exactly the word I want here, but I trust the reader understands—lament about the brevity of life or the fact that I am dying of a very painful ailment, although I know that life must end sometime or other, and there is nothing anyone can do to alleviate my present pain or lengthen my time among humans. It is also perfectly possible to lament in this way without there being any target-agent *to whom* the complaint is specifically directed (so one can't use this as a backhanded argument for God's existence). One might not wish to call this properly "criticism," but what term one uses for it is not really important, provided one recognises the legitimacy of such expressions of pain and frustration.

As far as the question of whether criticism must be constructive is concerned, it is important, it seems to me, to distinguish *this* question from a completely different, though equally important, topic,

namely whether criticism can always be "internal," that is, whether a completely satisfactory, comprehensive criticism can be conducted that appeals only to criteria that are in some sense "internal to"—it would be important to specify in what sense exactly one meant by "internal to"—the object criticised, or whether at some point it was necessary to appeal to "external" criteria. One can see that the distinction "constructive/not-constructive" is different from "internal/external" by noticing that forms of internal criticism can be either constructive or nonconstructive: I can show you on reasons *internal* to your own conceptual scheme that there are various deficiencies in the way you act that you (or someone else) can put right, but if your conceptual scheme is a *complete mess*, if it is "internally contradictory" in the way Marx, for instance, thinks that of nineteenth-century bankers is, then Marx thinks he is engaging in a form of "internal criticism" which, however, has in one sense an utterly *nonconstructive* result.

The capitalist economic system, Marx thinks, will collapse from *internal contradictions*. Marx intends this in the first instance as a historical and predictive form of criticism, not a moralising one, but it would be accompanied, as it were, by an ethical shadow. Again his criticism of the capitalist banking system as a whole might not be "constructive" *for* present-day bankers in that there may be nothing they could conceivably do, compatible with remaining who they are, namely bankers, to respond to the criticism, and no life they could lead, as bankers, after responding to it because to respond to it adequately would require their social role no longer to exist. In fact, if the system really is doomed, there might be nothing *constructive* anyone can do, Marx thinks, about such a system and its institutions. Still the criticism might be *constructive for us*, that is, for those of us who are not bankers, in that it could tell us what we need to do, and it could even be action-orienting for individual bankers (although not "constructive" for them *as bankers*) because, as individuals, particular bankers could always change their employment and try to get proper jobs.

This shows the extreme importance in criticism of notions like possibility and necessity, alternative identities and courses of action, *which* points in what framework are taken to be fixed and which are taken to be variable. This in turn raises important general issues about the malleability of human nature and institutions, and the possible limits of such malleability, utopianism, tragic or otherwise irresolvable forms of conflict, and the "substitutivity" of goods, services, practices, and institutions.[7] Certainly the idea of "constructive criticism" seems to be closely connected with the notion of substitutivity. By "substitutivity" I mean in the simplest case that one object or process can stand in for or take the place of another. I can take the sugar cube out of the bowl with a special set of tongs, but if there are no tongs, I could also use a spoon (i.e., "substitute" a spoon for the tongs). Even if there is no spoon, I could in principle fall back on the use of my fingers, which is slightly less hygienic but no less effective. A standard kind of "constructive criticism" would be a case in which I tell a child not to take the sugar cube with its fingers, because that is unhygienic, *but rather* to use the tongs. Here I am saying that the tongs are a viable substitute for the use of fingers in this context, and one that has certain advantages. Similarly in many, although perhaps not strictly *all*, cases I can substitute a fork for a set of chopsticks or vice versa. Action-related forms of criticism would seem to depend very heavily on claims to the effect that the criticised object, process, institution, and so on *could be replaced* by some other, that is, that there *is* a possible substitute for it.

The idea of substituting one thing or process for another is deeply rooted in human social institutions and thinking, and it is not obvious how we could get along without it. Thus, in Sophocles' *Antigone* (ll. 905ff.), Antigone gives as the main reason for her determination to bury her dead brother, Polyneikes, that her brother is irreplaceable in contrast to a possible husband or child. If she lost a husband, she says, she could always get another; the same is true of a child, but, given that her mother and father are dead, there cannot be a substitute for her brother. For that matter one might argue that the very

earliest work in the Western canon, *The Iliad*, is nothing but an extended meditation on what can and what cannot be substituted for what else. If Agamemnon has to give his slave girl up, who will replace her? Agamemnon claims later that not even his wife would be a satisfactory substitute. Is gold a good substitute for bronze (VI.235ff.) or armour worth nine oxen a good exchange for armour worth a hundred? Can Patroclos be an adequate substitute for Achilles on the field of battle? How about if he is wearing Achilles' armour? Is dead Hector a good substitute for live Patroclos?

Nevertheless, there is a certain "natural" tendency we have to fall for an illusion about substitutivity. This illusion is the view that items (things, processes, institutions, practices, etc.) can be treated for the purposes of substitution atomistically. This means that one can ignore the wider context within which the item in question stands and discuss possible substitutes to it relative to one narrowly specified use or function. It is not, however, the case that this narrow focus always makes sense. It is true that one can "in principle" use *either* the Western combination of knife, fork, and spoon *or* chopsticks for eating most of the normal kinds of food with which inhabitants of the European Union in the early twenty-first century will be confronted, but two qualifications need to be added. First, this assumes that the "food" in question will admit of being eaten in either way. This is true of rice, potatoes, and most vegetables but not, for instance, soup or honey, which can be eaten with a spoon but not with chopsticks.[8] So one must take account of the way in which the item in question "fits into" a wider human context; if it is a utensil to eat, then it must fit into the kind of food that will be eaten and the way in which that food will be used is prepared. The second qualification concerns one specific aspect of the "total context" within which (potential) substitution might take place. Chopsticks might be usable "in principle" to eat rice, and they might even be *actually* usable by millions of people in the Orient and hundreds of thousands in the West, but they are *not* usable, and hence could not substitute for knife/fork/spoon, *unless* the agents who are to use them have a certain specific form of

manual dexterity to operate chopsticks (or knife/fork/spoon). Part of the "context" that must be taken into account is the relevant forms of habitual human action. Heidegger makes this point with great clarity in *Sein und Zeit* when he speaks of most of the items in our world as being "inherently" not isolated items but elements of a larger context: such items are what Heidegger calls "Zeuge" in a "Zeugganzes."[9]

The case is perhaps even clearer if one takes a modern calculating computer and an abacus. In most everyday contexts an abacus is just as good as a computer, and vice versa, but it does not follow from that that I can *simply* replace every abacus with a calculator and forget about it. The calculator needs to be *operated* by someone, and people with the skills needed to perform calculations on the abacus will not necessarily know how to operate a computer. Similarly, if the abacus is the standard way of calculating in shops, it might be important not merely that one get the "right" answer to the calculation of an economic transaction but also that it be *clearly visible* to all concerned that the transaction be "fair" (according to whatever are the local ideas about that). Doing it on an abacus (in that society) might well be a way of showing to everyone that all is aboveboard. Punching keys on a computer in a society in which computers are used *only* by certain elite operators might not satisfy these demands.

It is easy to see how this argument can then be expanded, because there is not "in principle" any determinate, natural stopping place for relevance of features of the context to the possible substitutability. Or rather Heidegger draws from this the conclusion that there is only *one* nonarbitrary stopping point and that is my own death (or rather my relation-in-living to my own death). This is something that is not further contextualisable (for me), where substitutivity reaches its limits.[10] Despite one "natural" way of reading the story of Alkestis, no one can die "in my place," or rather even if she does in one sense die in my place, she does not die *my* death. I still have my own death to die; it will simply be an externally differently configured one.

So it makes no sense to think about substitutivity of items apart from their context and that context is open-ended. This may be one

of the reasons why the scope of criticism seems naturally to expand and why repressive regimes often react hysterically to what seem to be very minor forms of criticism; once it starts there is no telling where it will go (and where it will end). One especially important aspect of this "context" is the cost of substitution, both of the new item that is to be provided and of the transition to the new mode of provision. Marie Antoinette famously failed to take the first point when she asked why the starving Parisians who were rioting because of lack of bread did not simply eat (the significantly more expensive but widely available) brioche. She ignored the price of brioche, which, apparently, even at the best of times was beyond the means of the Parisian poor. A computer is virtually certain to be more expensive than an abacus. Of course, if one were seriously contemplating such a substitution one would also have to consider the significant environmental degradation that producing computers represents, the cognitive and emotional deskilling that using them habitually entails, and so forth. One can, of course, construe "price" in a more general way to refer not merely to the monetary cost but to other less tangible costs: You might be able to make more money if you changed jobs, but that would require you to work weekends, and use of the computer might have the (virtually hidden) social cost of destroying the immediate visibility of certain properties of economic transactions (e.g., whether or not they were "fair" by whatever the local standards of "fairness" were).

Even completely radical forms of political criticism will need at least to some extent to be committed to *some* kind of substitutivity. It will not, of course, be the case that one can atomistically compare a *new* structure of the stock market after the revolution with the structure before, because there may be no stock market after the revolution. There may be no banking system we could recognise, but there will still be forms of future-oriented cooperation, and at some sufficiently general level there will have to be a new way of providing foodstuffs to the population that will replace the old way. It might also be the case that it is possible *only retrospectively* to see that the

new form of agricultural production really does "substitute" for an older form, but that is a different issue. The more one thinks about radical substitution, the more one must confront the question of the interconnection of human tastes/desires/needs on the one hand and ways through which these tastes are satisfied on the other. I mean by "interconnection" a relation of influence that is specifically construed as operating *in both directions*. Given that we have certain tastes, we wish to satisfy them in certain ways with certain objects, processes, and forms of human interaction, but those forms of interaction, processes, objects, and so forth in their turn strongly influence the tastes/desires/aspirations/needs themselves. I may initially *prefer* my comfortable abacus and its role in everyday interactions with my peers. If a computer is forced on me, however, for whatever reason, as a substitute for the abacus, the continuing operation with the computer may finally *change my taste* and even generate in me a perverse new "need," for example, for yet more technologically advanced (even if no more efficient) products.[11] I become, as we say, "hooked on gadgets." We can then restructure our industrial plant to produce ever new and shinier gadgets and initiate a self-reinforcing cycle.

This "interconnection" of production and consumption (as Marx would say) in the sphere of art was clearly noted by various nineteenth-century artists. Wagner's notion of a "music of the future" seems to belong here. Wagner thought that his music made people aware of deep needs or desires they had that were incompatible with the existing political order and that therefore were (and had to be) repressed by what he called "the state." Thus the state required a stable family structure of a certain kind, one in which incest, for instance, was forbidden, but our sexual nature was anarchic. *Die Walküre* dramatised and musicalised this tension. Listening to Wagner's music was thus a proto-revolutionary act because merely by becoming aware of those repressed desires we undermined the hold the state had on us. On the other hand, his music could be *fully* appreciated *only* by an audience that successfully completed that process of emancipation from political and religious repression.[12] Certain works of art can create an

audience that comes to have a taste for themselves. Late Beethoven string quartets are an acquired taste, and the only way to acquire the taste is to listen to them carefully. This makes the issue of substitutivity much more complex. You can't simply plug a Wagner music-drama into the repertory one evening in place of a Rossini opera, as if they were just different ways to satisfy the *same* human needs. There is even a crude economic recognition of this fact in that many opera houses will give ticket holders a refund if a different opera from the one scheduled is performed but *not* if there are changes to the cast. So the idea is that any other tenor is substitutable for Pavarotti, but *Tosca* is not substitutable for *Turandot*. Needless to say, this makes the issue of criticism even more complicated.

The more one emphasises simple substitutivity as a precondition of effective criticism, the less modern art would seem to be amenable at all to the kind of criticism we habitually use in politics. Perhaps in ancient times works of art were substitutable. When the singer appears in the Bronze Age Hall, he can sing one song or another, and although one may be artistically better, more appropriate, or more warmly received than another, basically they are interchangeable.[13] Perhaps one singer (or one song) was in fact unique in the sense that it was discernibly *much* better than all others.[14] We are used to the claim that some forms, at least of serious modern art, however, make an even stronger claim. Such specifically modernist works of art aspire not just to be unique—better than all others but better relative to a common standard or set of criteria—but also to be utterly original and completely *different from* all previous art. A particular modernist aesthetic also seems to present this as a *categorical* property of art, and a distinguishing characteristic of it in opposition to the objects of use and consumption we encounter in our everyday life. In *Qu'est-ce que la litérature* Sartre claimed that every work of art is trying to destroy every other work. This is a reaction to the neutralisation of art through its incorporation into museums and a tacit rejection of André Malraux's *Musée Imaginaire.* It is, however, equally closely connected with one of the least plausible and least appealing

ideas of modernism, the idea that the "work" must be a full, all-encompassing cosmos like the Hegelian System, which at the same time depicted *everything*, supplanted all other attempts correctly to depict anything, and gave the canonical terms within which *alone* it should itself be understood and criticised. How can a work of art make itself absolutely nonsubstitutable? By exhausting the universe, encompassing everything and thus demoting every other work to a mere pale reflection of itself, or something "subordinate," or by brutal destruction of the other.

It does seem, however, that the concept of "criticism" in the modern era can be seen to move in two rather different directions. First, criticism is connected with giving a definitive negative judgement on something according to the acknowledged standards. Here there will be a tendency to narrow the vocabulary used and the criteria. The model here is juridical. The judge does not much care about any number of properties of the action but wishes to construe it so as to give a legally binding definitive judgement on it. Is it larceny or not? The judge can give a positive or negative decision; the critic in this sense is a kind of relentlessly negative judge. The second direction is that taken by the notion of "criticism" in literature and the arts. Here the point is not to get a single definitive judgement according to narrow and focused criteria but to point things out to people, allowing them to enter into the work of art and, as we say, "appreciate it." Here a critic is trying not to sharpen, restrict, and discipline the language but to enrich it, change it, reconfigure it so that it is able to serve to draw us into and permit us to see the point of new forms of human experience. Both of these are perfectly legitimate variants of the "full-blown" form of criticism.

To conclude, then, in response to the first two of our three questions, there is no single conception of "criticism" as traditional philosophy would like to require, but neither is the notion of "criticism" in any interesting sense unclear or merely diffuse. It has a variety of different uses, as do most concepts, but they are individually in no way deficient in clarity, and the whole array of uses can be organised

around some paradigmatic cases and a set of structural and functional features, which have as much coherence as most other "everyday" (i.e., nontechnical) concepts have. The notion of "constructive criticism" is specifically connected with criticism in the realm of human ethical and political action and seems to have little relevance for the internal study of art, literature, or music as quasi-autonomous realms of modern human life, precisely because of its close connection with potentially "substitutable" forms of action (or "products"). This, however, may turn out to be a relatively superficial fact about contemporary high art that results from two contingent features of the way in which such high art and art criticism function in our society. First of all, it may have to do with the great emphasis put on the appreciation or consumption of art rather than on its production. Many theorists, mostly notably perhaps Nietzsche, have pointed out the deformation involved in thinking about art exclusively from the point of view of a viewer (or reader, or listener) confronting a *finished* work. What "constructive" comment can one make about a complex object that already exists and has the properties it has? Is one to imagine *another*, but different, completed work that "better" satisfies the spectator? In what way exactly? If, on the other hand, one imagines an artist standing, as it were, in the atelier of a fellow artist during the process of creation or elaboration, that is, while the work is *in statu nascendi*, one could imagine a set of collegial suggestions for how to continue. Perhaps the model should be that of a craftsman giving another aspiring craftsman advice on how to produce a ceramic pot with a spout that actually pours without spilling. The second feature of our notion of (at any rate "high") art that might be relevant is the extreme post-Romantic cult of originality and the associated rejection of craft production as a model for artistic creation. If each object must not merely be a uniquely skillful instance of satisfying recognised canons but a work that overthrows all existing standards and posits new and different criteria for its evaluation (which it itself uniquely formulates), then it is more difficult to see how "constructive" criticism of art could be possible under those circumstances.

In the political realm appeals to the need for "constructive" criticism can *in principle* represent a (generally laudable) attempt to remind those involved in some evaluation of human action of the need to remain aware of a kind of internal demand under which such criticism operates, namely of the need to keep Tschernyschevsky's (and later Lenin's) central question "What is to be *done*?" firmly in mind;[15] *in fact*, however, the demand for "constructive criticism" in general functions as a repressive attempt to shift the *onus probandi* and divert attention from the possibility of radical criticism.

5

The Loss of Meaning on the Left

By, at the latest, the final decade of the nineteenth century, many thinkers were diagnosing a deep malaise in Western culture, which expressed itself in various forms of individual and social disorientation. Thus, Durkheim claimed that increasing suicides rates were connected with the growth of what he called "anomie," that is, with the fact that people were losing a certain kind of normative orientation they had once had.[1] Suicide is an act performed by people who no longer know how they "ought" to deal with the various crises of human life. Durkheim's account might be seen as a kind of sociological confirmation of Nietzsche's speculations about a state of affairs in which "the highest values" that had in the past guided human actions—the values embodied in Christianity and its various secular successors—"lost their value" for people in the late nineteenth century, leaving them so confused, puzzled, and at a loss that they are in danger of being unable to discharge certain vital functions.[2] In art, too, the emphasis on "originality" that was a characteristic of Romanticism led in some cases to a cult of the "new" that distanced works of art so much from traditional forms that they completely outstripped the ability of many audiences to recognise them as meaningful forms of "art" at all. How was one to react to something as *different* as the music of Schönberg or Joyce's *Ulysses* or cubism? What is one to look (or listen) for?[3] By what standards is it to be evaluated? What is an

appropriate response to the work? One might think of an imaginary threshold that is passed when people begin to react to new art not by thinking or saying "That is *bad* music [painting, literature]" but "That is not *music* [painting, literature] *at all*." This experience of puzzlement, incomprehension, loss of control, and dislocation can be reflected in audiences' reactions to "new" art, but it can also become part of the artist's experience. At the very end of the nineteenth century the highly precocious Austrian poet Hugo von Hofmannsthal wrote his influential *Ein Brief des Lord Chandos* in which he describes a process in which words themselves begin to lose their meaning for him and he becomes increasingly unable to put them together in an ordered way to express a coherent thought. This state of disorientation spreads and eventually becomes so entrenched that it disrupts the normal course of his life.

> Mein Inneres aber muß ich Ihnen darlegen, eine Sonderbarkeit, eine Unart, wenn Sie wollen eine Krankheit meines Geistes. . . . [D]ie . . . Begriffe entziehen sich mir. . . . Es ist mir völlig die Fähigkeit abhanden gekommen, über irgend etwas zusammenhängend zu sprechen oder zu denken. . . . Es wurden mir auch im familiären und hausbackenen Gespräch alle die Urteile, dieleichthin und mit schlafwandlerischer Sicherheit abgegeben zu werden pflegen, so bedenklich, daß ich aufhören mußte, an solchen Gesprächen irgend teilzunehmen.[4]
>
> [I must reveal to you something strange in my inner life, a bad habit, an illness of my spirit, if you wish. . . . Concepts escape my grasp. . . . I have completely lost the ability to speak or think about anything in a connected way. Even in the most banal conversations in the family all the judgements that I was accustomed to give easily and with the security of a sleepwalker, came to seem so questionable that I had to stop taking any part in such conversations.]

A further imaginary threshold would be crossed when someone for the first time connected all these apparently diverse phenomena—anomie, the problems artists experienced in attaining coherent artis-

tic expression, the widening gap between what audiences can comprehend and what advanced artistic production can provide, various forms of psychic derangement, confusion about individual and social values and goals—and subsumed them under a single concept: loss (or "crisis") of "meaning." It is in fact very striking that what might seem to be such varied problems come to be conceptualised as loss of "meaning." In the ancient world no one asked about "the meaning of life" or, for that matter, the "meaning of art" in the modern sense in which those questions are sometimes asked. To be sure, ancient philosophers asked questions about how one might best lead a human life, and some of them speculated about divine purposes and a possible continued life of the human soul after death, but these investigations were pursued under a variety of different rubrics, or as enquiries into "the good," not "the meaningful." Similarly, questions occasionally arose about "the meaning" of some particular artefact, as in the famous passage from Ovid's *Ars amatoria* in which a girl asks a boy which mountains and which rivers are represented by the floats in a triumphal procession. This section of the poem might be entitled "How to pull girls at a Roman victory parade":

spectabunt laeti iuuvenes mixtaeque puellae,
diffundetque animos omnibus ista dies.
atque aliqua ex illis regum nomina quaeret,
quae loca, qui montesquaeue ferantur aquae,
omnia responde, nec tantum si qua rogabit;
et quae nescieris, ut bene nota refer.
his est Euphrates, praecinctus harundine frontem;
cui coma dependet caerula Tigris erit;
hos facito Armenios, haec est Danaeia Persis;
urbs in Achaemeniis ualle ista fuit;
ille uel ille duces, et erunt quae nomina dicas,
si poteris,uere, si minus, apta tamen. (Ovid, *Ars amatoria* I.217ff.)

[Happy young men and women will be watching all mixed together because such a day relaxes everyone's spirits. If some young lady from

among the crowd asks you the names of the kings [led in procession or represented on the victory floats], what these places [represented] are, what these mountains and waters are called, give her an answer to every question, and keep on volunteering information even if she doesn't ask any further question. If you don't know, just refer [to the relevant information] as if it were well-known: "This [you might say] is the Euphrates, with his forehead surrounded with reeds; this, with the blue hair hanging down, will be the Tigris; those must be Armenians, that is Danaean Persis; that will be a city in Achaemenis. This one and that one are leaders. Give them whatever names you will, their correct names, if you can, but, if not, at any rate names that seem suitable.]

Questions were also asked about the way art acted on humans, and the value it might have for us, but again these diverse questions were not construed as connected through a purportedly unitary concept of "meaning." Is the fact that in the contemporary world these various things are construed to be connected in this way significant?

I'd like to start the discussion by contrasting the treatment given by two different authors of two boys, each of whom is standing beside a pool. The first is Narcissus and the second an anonymous boy who is cited by Hegel in his lectures on aesthetics.

As presented by Ovid,[5] the story of Narcissus, like that of Oedipus, has radically anti-Socratic implications. Narcissus's mother asks the blind seer Tiresias about his life prospects, and the seer, reprising, as it were, his role in the Oedipus plays, replies that Narcissus will be fine as long as he does not come to know himself:

de quo consultus an esset
tempora maturae visurus longa senectae,
fatidicus vates "si se non noverit" inquit. (III.346–48)

[<When his mother> consulted <Tiresias about whether Narcissus> would see a long and ripe old age, the prophetic seer said: "If <i.e., provided that> he doesn't know himself."]

Oedipus cannot tolerate the truth about himself because it is too painful shaming; Narcissus, it turns out, because it is too absorbingly pleasurable. Narcissus was absorbed by his own image seen in a pool and fell in love with it. Even hearing the final phrases of his own words repeated back to him by Echo (a disembodied nymph who was enamoured of him) was not enough to spark his interest and bring him to reciprocate Echo's love. Only the full visual image of himself would do as a love-object.[6] In the story, to love the self is not necessarily to approve of it in any normal sense; Narcissus, after all, seems to spend most of his time reproaching the image of himself for its failure fully to accede to his erotic advances,[7] but he loves it nonetheless.

Hegel has a slightly different take on the boy-by-the-water.

> [Der Mensch befriedigt ein] allgemeine[s] und absolute[s] Bedürfnis durch Veränderung der Außendinge, welchen er das Siegel seines Inneren aufdrückt und in ihnen nun seine eigenen Bestimmungen wiederfindet. Der Mensch tut dies um als freies Subjekt auch der Außenwelt ihre spröde Fremdheit zu nehmen und in der Gestalt der Dinge nur eine äußere Realität seiner selbst zu genießen. Schon der erste Trieb des Kindes trägt diese praktische Veränderung der Außendinge in sich; der Knabe wirft Steine in den Strom und bewundert nun die Kreise, die im Wasser sich ziehen, als ein Werk, worin er die Anschauung des Seinigen gewinnt. Dieses Bedürfnis geht durch die vielgestaltigsten Erscheinungen durch bis zu der Weise der Produktion seiner selbst in den Außendingen, wie sie im Kunstwerk vorhanden ist.
>
> [Man satisfies a general and absolute need by changing [the form of] external things; he impresses the seal of his inner [life] onto them, and finds again in them his own determinations. Man does this in order, as a free subject, to take away from the external world its rigid foreign-ness and to enjoy in the form of things nothing but the external reality of himself. The very first impulse of the child bears within itself [an orientation towards] this [kind of] practical transformation of external things;

> the boy throws stones into the stream and then admires the circles that radiate in water, and he admires them as a work in which he has attained a way of seeing immediately something which is his own. This need is thorough-going through the most manifold appearances, and extends as far as the mode of production of himself in the external things which is present in the work of art.][8]

His boy does not lie down lazily next to a completely undisturbed pool he has accidentally come upon, seeing his own image only when he gets thirsty enough to try to drink from the pool, like Narcissus.[9] The activity Hegel attributes to this boy is radically nonutilitarian—he is not throwing stones into the stream to kill fish for dinner—and it has no evident moral or ethical dimension—it is not in any obvious way connected with his relations to other people, or with the satisfaction of any evident obligation or duty he might have to himself or to others. He throws the stones into a stream and admires the circles they form in the water because they are something he himself has produced; they are "ein Werk, worin er die Anschauung des Seinigen gewinnt" ("a work in which he attains a direct perception of <something *as*> his own"). In acting in this way, Hegel asserts, the boy is expressing his freedom and impressing his inner life onto objects in the external world. The impulse to practical transformation of the external world so that it can be seen as "our kind of thing" is a fundamental part of human life, an essential human need, Hegel claims, and it is connected with all the higher achievements of humanity, particularly art. Not only is Hegel's boy more active than the lethargic Narcissus, exercising at least some minimal human skills (picking up a stone and successfully hitting the water with it), but he must also perform a much more sophisticated cognitive feat than any with which Narcissus is confronted. Narcissus *eventually* recognises himself in the visual image in the pool, but this is as far as he gets, and he was not capable of recognising even his own words, when fragmentarily repeated by Echo. Hegel's boy, in contrast, succeeds in recognising something that has a completely different look or appearance

from that of a small boy, namely a set of circling ripples in water, as (in some sense) "his own"; "his own," not "himself." The distinction is of great importance and being able to make it is a significant cognitive achievement. Finally, Narcissus's love of his image is so absorbing that the young boy loses all interest in anything else and languishes away. In contrast, the boy in the Hegelian story "admires" his work, but he is not said to "love" it with Narcissus's all-consuming, literally deadly, passion.[10] Self-admiration may, then, be a form of self-love, but it is an attenuated form that allows for a certain distance and a certain contact with external reality.

I want to suggest that Hegel's image is a good starting place for thinking about the phenomenon of meaning in modern society more generally, and in particular about the question of "the meaning of life."

To elaborate this slightly, we can *begin* by noting three properties that the activity of the boy possesses and that we might think are likely to be relevant to making the activity "meaningful" for him.[11] The activity satisfies three conditions. First of all, it is a temporally extended, intentional activity *by the boy himself*. Notice that Hegel does not speak of the boy accidentally dropping a stone into the water and being completely surprised by the result, nor is this a *single unique* episode of throwing *a* stone in the water. One must, I suggest, imagine the boy standing on the shore and *repeatedly* throwing stones, so that he builds up an internally coherent set of skills and expectations. He develops a rudimentary orientation towards at least one small segment of the world. Second, the activity must have a visible external result. These expectations and thus the orientation the boy develops must at least to some extent be the result of an activity directed at something that can be experienced as external, some state of affairs outside the boy. Furthermore, the boy's expectations must track reality at least in a minimal way. That is, one would perhaps hesitate to call the activity fully meaningful if it was based on a complete delusion about its own nature and its location in the world. For the boy to recognise himself meaningfully in the ripples, they must really exist, and not be the mere imaginings of a fevered brain.

Narcissus does not fully satisfy this condition. A third condition is that the boy enjoy the process and admire the result. His orientation must contain some element of positive valuation or affirmation of self and the activity must in some sense be satisfactory to him.

One might think of this third condition as a specifically modern one. Saint-Just during the French Revolution notoriously remarked that "happiness is a new idea in Europe"[12] and Hegel accepts a variant of this, although, for a variety of reasons, he does not use the terminology of "happiness." Meaningfulness in the modern world must have a component that connects it with individual well-being.

> Das Recht der *Besonderheit* des Subjekts, sich befriedigt zu finden, oder, was dasselbe ist, das Recht der *subjektiven Freiheit* macht den Wende- und Mittelpunkt in dem Unterschiede des *Altertums* und der *modernen* Zeit.[13]
>
> [<The recognition of> the right of *particularity* of the subject, the right to find itself satisfied, or, what amounts to the same thing, the right of *subjective freedom* is what constitutes the turning point [in the transition from] antiquity to modern time and the central point <of the modern era>.]

One might observe, quite correctly, that this seems to be *two* conditions: "satisfaction" (or "welfare" or "individual happiness") and subjective freedom. Hegel, however, takes these to be "the same thing," presumably because modern people will not be satisfied if they are not subjectively free, so in theoretical contexts one can use either formulation ("satisfaction of particularity" or "subjective freedom") *ad libitum*. One can see the significance of this if one considers a premodern worldview, like traditionalist Calvinism. Calvinism is a specific Christian doctrine that gives an all-encompassing theory of human life both in this world and in a purported world human souls will inhabit after death. One central component of this worldview is that God has created each human soul and predetermined it to salvation or eternal damnation before it is even born. Those souls created

by God for eternal damnation serve the function of glorifying his infinite justice because they are created as deserving this fate. Let us now assume that Calvinism is true, that is, that it tracks reality correctly. So if I am one of the damned, my life has a completely determinate "sense" or "meaning" that I might even be capable of grasping. I might know full well that I am a reprobate sinner and about to spend the rest of eternity being subject to the most horrible and exquisite tortures devised by God to demonstrate his justice. This is a life that is as full of "meaning" as it could possibly be. Perhaps everything in it, every particular event that occurs to me, is visibly part of a—from my point of view utterly horrid—plan to lead me to my well-deserved punishment. Needless to say, from the fact that my life is full of meaning in one sense, it does not follow that it is full of a *positive* meaning I can affirm. By virtue of adhering to Calvinism I may be fully oriented in this life, but it is not one I "enjoy" as the boy enjoys throwing stones into the water. So sometimes "meaningful life" means, as it properly ought, a life that exhibits a pattern and in which I can orient myself whether for good or ill. Sometimes "meaningful life" means one in which I have orientation that is true (or at least not false). In a further sense, my life is meaningful *only* if it presents my life as something having positive value for me.

Note that even if Calvinism were to be true, and I were correctly to recognise myself as one of the "Elect," not, as in the previous example, as one of the Damned, that is, I was one of those whose life could correctly be seen as having positive value, that would not suffice to give my life "meaning" in the fully modern sense because the meaning of my life would be one given it by God, not created by my own action. One might think of this as a fourth condition: the "meaning" in question must be something we ourselves create in the way the boy creates the ripples in the water, rather than something we simply find, pregiven in the world in the way we might find a vein of silver in a mine or a new species of ape in the rainforest. Clearly to say the boy "creates" the ripples is not to say he creates them ex nihilo; the water must preexist the ripples. Still the ripples are the effect of

the boy's action and seen as such. Equally clearly, the project of distinguishing between what is "found" and what "created" is an exceedingly delicate one that may never admit of a universally satisfactory analysis.

Marx, following in the line of Hegel and Feuerbach, expresses this modernist sensibility very well when he speaks of the need for modern man to be his own sun and "circle around *himself*," that is, see himself as the source of what meaning there is, not have a form of meaningfulness imposed on him from an imaginary Other.

> Die Kritik der Religion enttäuscht den Menschen, damit er denke, handele, seine Wirklichkeit gestalte wie ein enttäuschter, zu Verstand gekommener Mensch, damit er sich um sich selbst und damit um seine wirkliche Sonne drehe. Die Religion ist nur die illusorische Sonne die sich um den Menschen bewegt, solange er sich nicht um sich selbst bewegt.[14]
>
> [The critique of religion disappoints/disillusions man, so that he might come to think, act, and form his reality like a disillusioned man, someone who has come to his senses, so that he comes to rotate around himself, and thus around his real sun. Religion is nothing but the illusory sun, which rotates around man, until such time as he rotates around himself.]

Marx can also be thought to represent a continuation of a line of thought begun by Hegel (and, before him, by Herder) in a further respect. To return to Hegel's example, the subject of activity, the boy throwing stones, is an individual human person, but this must be a simplification for the purposes of exposition. After all, it is Hegel himself who sees it as one of his major theoretical advances to replace the old forms of discussing philosophical problems in terms either of particular human individuals and the psychology or abstract structures with the phenomenon he calls "Geist," which is explicitly said to be an "I that is a We and a We that is an I," that is, an inherently social phenomenon. The example presents a case of an *individual* acting and comporting himself in a certain way, but, of course, one would

really also have to take account of the fact that virtually none of the phenomena connected with "meaning" are asocial.

Marx emphasises the centrality of socially organised production, developing the thought that it makes no sense to think that any individual could lead a meaningful life, or for that matter any life at all that we could recognise as human, outside a social context. Put crudely, if the image of meaning and meaningful action is the boy throwing stones into the stream, exercising his power and impressing on the world an image of his control over it, the *only* way the boy will have sufficient mastery over the basic conditions of his real life will be if he has control over his socioeconomic life. His basic conditions of his socioeconomic life, however, are unlikely to be the sort of thing over which he *as an individual* is ever going to have any significant degree of power. Such control over the economy and social life as is possible is possible only if exercised in a conscious, collective way by the members of a group as a whole. The basic modality of that collective control must be power over nature and mastery over our productive capacities and economic life, a control exercised through science, technology, and politics. Collective productive activities, Marx concludes, are the kernel of a meaningful life. Furthermore, in a properly constituted economic and political order, the very distinction between instrumental and noninstrumental action can be broken down so that the boy can satisfy his absolute need *and* eat the fish he kills for dinner. Or rather the boy can be appropriately integrated into a work unit that collectively satisfies the absolute needs of the members of the work unit while providing fish for themselves and the other members of society. In a society in which work and collective social life was sufficiently satisfying, one might think, the very question of the "meaning of life" would not arise. The very fact that this question *does* arise for a particular person in a particular society is a sign that that question for that person (in that society) has no answer. "The meaning of life" ought not to be reified. To know "the meaning of life" does not mean to know any possible discursive answer that can be given to questions about life. Questions ostensibly about "the

meaning of life" are *really* about whether the social processes are satisfactory or whether certain individuals have a certain capacity or skill, whether they "know *how*" to lead a life of a certain kind, and they exhibit this knowledge in the only way such knowledge *can* be exhibited: by actually leading such a life.[15]

Against this basically Hegelian-Marxist line of argument a series of anarchist and existentialist thinkers objected in the name of the subjective human freedom that is a component of the original synthesis. Hegel may *say* that "satisfaction" and "subjective freedom" are the same thing, but *in fact* in his theory of "satisfaction" comes to be interpreted as "rational satisfaction," that is, only such satisfaction as the Hegelian system thinks is both actually accessible and rationally desirable, and "subjective freedom" comes to be reduced to the acceptance of that which is deemed rationally acceptable: "Ubi rationale, ibi bene; ubi bene, ibi libenter." One may think of this rehabilitation of not necessarily rationalisable subjective freedom as a fifth condition for leading a fully meaningful life in the modern world. An individual may find meaningfulness in integration into the productive activity of a collectively organised society, but then again he may not. Whether it is likely that such integration will be satisfactory depends on many empirical factors, including details about how the society is organised, and perhaps features of personal temperament. But even if a social group is optimally well organised, it is not, or should not be, a foregone conclusion that that is what the individual will opt to do. Is he to be forced? Forced to lead a meaningful life against his will? Wouldn't that return us to a structure of externally imposed meaning not utterly different from Calvinism?

The reference to the anarchists—I'm thinking particularly of Max Stirner, but of course there are also others—brings the political dimension of this discussion to the fore. Many traditional philosophers did not think that taking a position on politics was an integral part of their philosophical view itself. The members of the Frankfurt School, however, did. Their relation to politics was part of their own self-conception as philosophers. The members of the school construed

themselves as a basically Leftist position, that is, as standing *in general* very firmly in the intellectual, cultural, and political tradition of the European Enlightenment, continuing the Enlightenment tradition of secular rationalism, and affirming rather than resisting or subverting the French Revolution and its political outcome. It is perhaps not obvious—in fact it is perhaps not at all enlightening to hold—that the political world is best construed as a mono-dimensional spectrum of opinion ranging from Right to Left. Anarchists have notoriously been difficult to place on this spectrum. Nevertheless this way of thinking about politics as a matter of Right and Left is itself a result of the Revolution, and the Frankfurt School by and large accepted it. To be sure, Adorno thought that Enlightenment could not be construed as a singular historical event that was directed at attaining once and for all fixed goals that had some kind of transcendental standing; it had to be a continuous critical and self-critical process. "Liberty, equality, fraternity" was a powerful and humanly edifying slogan when directed in the eighteenth century against a firmly established feudal and clerical establishment, but a true development of the tradition of the Enlightenment would require one to assess not just the evident benefits the ideology of human equality has had for humanity but also the non-negligible price humanity has had to pay for these gains. To construe this historically specific configuration of conceptions of "equal liberty" as anything more than a step in a process, and in the twentieth century uncritically to absolutise these ideals in the form they happened to take in the late eighteenth century, can turn the process of Enlightenment against itself. The reasonable eighteenth-century demand for equality of all citizens before the law, which stands in opposition to the feudal regime of privilege, can in the twentieth century easily become a justification for a pernicious form of equality: the conformist equality of atomised consumers.

On the specific issue of the nature of "meaning," the members of the Frankfurt School, roughly speaking, think that the characteristic right-wing position is the old-fashioned one that construes "meaning" as something that is fixed, external, exists "out there" in some

sense objectively, and relative to which humans are passive recipients. So in the ancient forms of natural philosophy, the universe had "meaning" in itself as an ontological feature (or perhaps "behind it" in the form of Ideas). Then the meaning was imposed on Nature by the Christian God. Finally, Kant transforms the basic liberating idea of the Enlightenment—the idea of free human activity as the origin and goal of everything—into a reactionary structure. For Kant, we don't "find" meaning in the world, we *impose* it, but this imposition is not really "free" because (a) it is an etiolated kind of imposition through cognition alone, and (b) the *form* of that imposition is a set of a priori fixed structures of human subjectivity. What is common to all the positions in this strand is not only that "we" collectively *are not* in control of meaning but that "meaning" is defined in such a way that it becomes inconceivable that we ever come to be in control. Heidegger and his theory of man as at the mercy of "Seinsgeschichte" represents an extreme modern version of this. However, Soviet-style Marxism, by being based on a form of coerced meaning imposed on human individuals as a kind of politically enforced moral demand from the outside—that they integrate themselves into and identify with a collective work process—has some of the structure features of the Right.

In *some* sense there is nothing at all "right-wing" about recognising that some important features of the "meaning" of our lives are imposed on us rather than constituted. It is the case that each of us is a finite being who will one day die, and no amount of self-identification with "species-being" or with a continuing human collective can *completely* overcome this. To live as if we will never die is not to live a sensible life. This is, after all, just another way of formulating what I called the demand of "realism," that our attitudes not be grossly incompatible with the truth. In contrast to the right-wing view about "natural" meaning, the members of the Frankfurt School take the left-wing option of seeing all meaning as socially constituted. However, they do acknowledge a certain kind of plausibility that resides in the

right-wing view. Meaning is in fact socially constituted, but in *our society* it presents itself *as if* it were a natural phenomenon.

Adorno, who wrote his doctoral thesis on Kierkegaard, had great sympathy for the central existentialist line and its criticism of Marxism. The category of individual, subjective freedom retains a particular saliency in his thinking. Marx was, in Adorno's view, excessively optimistic about the way in which individual freedom and the development of individual powers and capacities would be unproblematically connected with the further development of technological and economic powers in a society without private ownership of the means of production. Marx sought, in fact, to turn the whole world into a huge Victorian workhouse, and Soviet-style systems attempted rather successfully to do just that.

For Adorno in *one* sense the modern world is *not* characterised by a "loss of sense" or of meaning. Rather the world has too much meaning. Modern people don't, in Adorno's view, suffer from anomie, that is, from a complete lack of orientation in the social world, or rather that is not the correct way to analyse their situation. Rather they are threatened from excessive pressures towards conformism even in the normative realm and the realm of human spontaneity. They are given to understand by social institutions all too well what they "ought" to do, and most of them have very extensively internalised these imperatives. Everything in contemporary society is part of an incipient single closed system of capitalist rationality. Both of the two components of this diagnosis of our contemporary world are important for Adorno: It is a world essentially structured by *both* the capitalist form of economic production *and* instrumental rationality. One of the ways in which Adorno departs from the standard older forms of Marxism concerns his view about the relation between these two components. He seems often to argue that the capitalist form of production is best understood as a particular form that instrumental rationality takes under certain conditions, rather than itself constituting anything like the "economic base." In fact Adorno was an early

believer in what later came to be called the "convergence" theory. The demands of instrumental rationality were equally powerful in East and West and led to similar effects in both kinds of regime. This dominance of instrumental reason is part of the Enlightenment project, and the fact that when it establishes itself it has such deleterious consequences is another reason the Enlightenment must be enlightened about itself.

This system of universal instrumental rationality imposes itself on each individual item in the world and makes that item a mere instance of an abstract universal. Instead of cutting our own writing instruments from the quills of geese or other winged creatures, we use mass-produced items. The modern world is a world of "das Immergleiche," that which is "ever-the-same." This is connected with a loss of human experience. Of course, there would be no human experience if I were unable to experience different objects as instances of the *same* thing, in Kantian terms, to subsume them under the same concept. However, fully human experience is also, and must also in part be, experience of that which is qualitatively distinct. To be able to enjoy the nonreplicable, qualitatively specific aspects of experience is also a part of what it is for that experience to be one of happiness for me, or to be at all "meaningful." For Adorno, when the Hegelian boy throws the stones into the stream, part of the point is that he experiences this as "*his*" experience in a uniquely individuated and indefinable way. Of course, the boy cannot *say* in what the uniqueness of that experience consists, although a literary artist like Proust might be able to represent it—Adorno speaks of "Prousts Darstellung . . . des absolut, unauflöslich Individuierten."[16] Human "meaning," at any rate, is not "verfügbar," not producible, reproducible, or accessible at will, but is connected with and embedded in historically specific forms of human experience that are structured by unique human memories and anticipations.[17] You cannot simply conjure real human meaning into existence by wishing it or through any form of simple manipulation. This aspect gets lost both because the objects we encounter become more and more the same and because we are

increasingly trained to experience them only in a schematic way that does not go beyond subsuming them under crude general categories. In thus simply subsuming objects under pregiven schemata, I am acting not as the unique individual I am but as any-interchangeable-representative-of-a-human-subject-whatever. In this way a *kind of* meaning—or perhaps Adorno might call it "pseudo-meaning"—is created and maintained as the artefact, finally, of a subjectless system of economic development, but it is not an appropriately human form of meaning. In such a system human life does have a kind of meaning that is as "objective" as that which the Calvinist ascribed to it: that meaning is simply to be a cog in the wheel of economic production and reproduction. All human experience in such a social system reflects this basic fact.

To be sure, Adorno has been presenting something that he insists is merely a "critical model" of contemporary society,[18] that is, his analysis concerns what he takes to be exceedingly powerful *tendencies* towards homogenisation and uniformity, and towards the formation of totally closed social systems. These "models" are intended to be exaggerated—Adorno notoriously thought *all* truth had to contain a component of exaggeration[19]—and so they do not purport to give mirror-sharp images of existing reality. In one sense the fully closed, utterly homogeneous society could never *be* a reality. I use a particular kind of fountain pen produced by the Lamy Company in Heidelberg. Lamy may wish to turn each of its pens into an *exact* replica of each other, but it is contrary to the nature of reality for that ever to be fully successful. The tendency alone is important even though it will fail. This, however, leaves a small space for human experience and for the constitution of a certain kind of meaning for human life.

It is this space Adorno seeks to exploit. His only hope is that it might be possible to use existing accidental niches that have been overlooked by the capitalist system and are not yet integrated to resist. This is a negative strategy. It doesn't mean using these overlooked realms of experience as bases to launch some kind of transformation

of the whole but simply to maintain them. Adorno was pessimistic about the possibility of political action. All action in the modern world is infected with instrumental rationality, and this would include any political action that tried to revolt against the demands of the system of instrumental rationality itself. The only possible meaning you could give your life in the twentieth century that is minimally realistic is to resist the social pressures towards uniformity and homogeneity in all areas, and to struggle against the subordination of human subjectivity and individual life to the demands of the maximisation of return on capital. That one embrace this life of negativity is *not*, of course, something that could be the object of coercion.

Despite the highly individualistic, not to say idiosyncratic, nature of Adorno's views, in retrospect, they seem strikingly in tune with the mood of the *ohne mich* generation in the Federal Republic (of Germany): "Go to World War III if you insist, but *without me*" (*ohne mich*). As various people were quick to point out, it is not obvious how effective such an attitude could conceivably be in the face of what would have been the realities of war in Europe in the *second* half of the twentieth century. If enough soldiers had refused to march to Smolensk, Kursk, or Stalingrad in the 1940s, *perhaps* this might have had some effect, but trying to sit back and "sit out" a nuclear exchange between NATO and the Warsaw Pact was not an option that provided any prospects for survival in the Federal Republic (or the DDR) in the 1950s, given that the fingers on the relevant buttons would all be located in Washington and Moscow. Adorno's own attitude can look very much like a generalisation of this, although his preferred formulation was: "nicht mitmachen" ("No collaboration"), and it was extended far beyond participation in military activity of any kind. Can such negation by itself really ever be more than detachment or resignation and constitute a genuine form of resistance?

The two major areas in which such resistance is to some extent still possible are our two old friends: art and philosophy. Within certain limited circumstances art can articulate negatively what a meaningful life would look like. Roughly speaking, modern art is a promise

of happiness because it shows that we can still experience the horrors of the modern world *as* horrors, and thus still have the capacity to experience the modern world as it "really is," which in turn means we have retained the possibility of some grasp on a *more* satisfactory form of life. So the revulsion modern art causes is part of its point. It is supposed to be "meaningless" in the sense that it refuses to be subsumed under any established categories. These categories are *at best* mere mechanisms for allowing our economy and social world to run smoothly, although they present themselves as something much more than that. Successful modern art must be "new"—this demand of the Romantic tradition is retained—it must be autonomous, and it must be negative. It must disorient by making the members of the audience aware of the fact that they don't know what they are looking for in the work. They understand it when they see that that is its point and respond *both* by experiencing the horror and by in some sense understanding that that horror is nothing but a realistic transcription of the world we live in. The meaning of Kafka or Schönberg is that that is the way our world really is. There is a contradiction, or at any rate a tension, between Adorno's claim that modern art inherently disorients and his firm conviction that he finally knows what to look for and what the point is: the criticism of the closed world of capitalist instrumental rationality. Adorno goes to the opera to be *predictably* disoriented, knowing in advance that that is what he must look for as the point of the work. It isn't, then, completely surprising that modern art is threatened with two complementary existential threats: on the one hand, by the danger of degenerating into mere entertainment, and on the other hand, by a self-dissolution in the pursuit of ever more complex and radical forms of disorientation.

In the face of this analysis, it is not surprising that Adorno admits the possibility that art is at an end, and there is nothing but continued failure in our attempts to create "sense" in sight. Art might be, and might always have been, a necessary failure: a promise that *inherently* insinuated itself as the fulfillment of that of which it was the (mere) promise. "In an emphatic sense," Adorno writes, "no work

of art can be a success" and the same is true of a life.[20] It is not entirely surprising that at the end of his life Adorno developed a fascination (which was not reciprocated) with Samuel Beckett, whose motto seems to have been: Try again, fail again, fail better.

There is a parallel philosophical project of tracing the discrepancy that exists everywhere between the attempt by the economic system as a whole to produce "das Immergleiche" and its claim that it has done so, on the one hand, and the reality of our world, on the other. Adorno calls this "negative dialectics" and it consists in confronting this image that society projects with the reality. In general terms, one can say that the project of negative dialectics consists in fastening on and drawing attention to the ways in which individual objects, institutions, and actions fail to be simply identically replicated instances of what they are advertised to be. Such a philosophical project is like art in that it is a kind of surrogate meaning. Art is *not* happiness, it is a "*promesse* de bonheur," but a promise is inherently different from the state of satisfaction it promises, and philosophy is not full-bodied somatic happiness either, but at best what Adorno calls a "bitteres Glück"—"bitter happiness"—"das bittere Glück des Erkennens"—the bitter happiness that consists in cognition.[21] However, even a "bitter" happiness is not nothing and in any case it is probably all we have. Adorno thought of himself as a man of the Left, but perhaps his legacy is more ambiguous than that. I mean this as a genuinely open, not a rhetorical, question.

"The Loss of Meaning on the Left" is itself an ambiguous title, allowing for two distinct interpretations. First, it might refer to an interpretation given by people on the Left of a certain general social phenomenon that we call "loss of meaning" and is perhaps similar to what Nietzsche called "nihilism":[22] old structures of meaning—religion, feudal or meritocratic hierarchies, family ties—become implausible and no longer serve to give orientation in life. The Left has an analysis of this—roughly speaking it is a natural concomitant of the development of a society with a certain kind of basic economic structure—and it has one or a number of proposed therapeutic measures, most of

which amount to a change in the basic economic structure initiated by political action of a certain type that is directed at giving immediate producers more control over their own activity. A second way of reading the title, though, is that people on the Left find increasingly that they have lost faith in the traditional diagnosis or in some part of the traditional recommended therapy. Either the malaise is not located in the economic structure, but is even more deep-seated, such as in the structure of rationality itself, or the form of political action traditionally recommended by those on the left is likely to be ineffective or even counterproductive. One can see the Frankfurt School itself as moving gradually from the first of these readings (in the writings of the early 1930s) to the second, culminating in Adorno's work of the 1960s. It is not clear to me that we have yet been able to move beyond this position.

6

Authority: Some Fables

We are familiar with the observation that any number of Greek terms were thought by the Romans to have no proper Latin equivalent and had to be taken over wholesale,[1] but in the third century (AD) a Roman senator from Asia Minor, Cassius Dio Cocceianus, in his history noted that there was one case in which the tables were turned: there was *one* Latin term for which there was no simple Greek equivalent. In a discussion of some of the reforms of senatorian practice implemented by Augustus he spoke of the "auctoritas" of the Roman Senate and added: "ἑλληνίσαι ἀυτὸ [scilicet, τὸ ὄνομα auctoritas] καθάπαξ ἀδυνατὸν ἐστίν" ["It is impossible to render 'auctoritas' in Greek with a single word"].[2] Dio Cassius was himself a native speaker of Greek and so can be assumed to know what he was talking about. The question is what conclusion, if any, one should draw from this observation. If "auctoritas" is not merely a genuinely and uniquely Roman coinage, but one that cannot even be expressed in another language, might that mean that it was a mistake to apply it outside a Roman context, that any such application is inappropriate or at best "metaphorical"? Might we be able to learn to apply the term even if we can't translate it, or even if in some sense we do not understand it?[3] In fact, later thinkers and language-users did use "auctoritas" (or terms clearly derivative from it in other languages) in non-Roman contexts, and one would be loath to say that this was always some kind of mistake.

Or is it that "auctoritas" is simply a perhaps ideologically coloured conceptualisation of a *universal* human phenomenon, namely that some people *in fact* have more standing, prestige, and influence than others, they are able to get other people to follow their lead or do what they suggest or advise, or that some people "ought" (for whatever reason, for instance, because they have more knowledge, experience, and maturity) to have more influence than others or get people to do as they say?[4] The Romans, then, were perhaps simply the first (in the West?) to focus attention to this, articulate it clearly, and give it a name. This would mean that there was nothing specifically Roman about the term or the associated concept. It is natural for us to employ (derivatives of) the Latin word because we still stand to some extent under the spell of Roman institutions, and the specific terms designating these institutions seem to have behind them a weight of tradition. Tapping into that tradition may give the illusion that by using a particular term one is giving a particularly lucid description or even explanation of what is really going on.

If, though, the phenomenon to which "auctoritas" refers really is a universal feature of human life, then shouldn't it be possible to give an adequate, if perhaps clumsy, analysis of this phenomenon without using this specific Roman term, for instance, by speaking of (well-deserved) influence, prestige, and so forth?[5]

Dio does not, of course, say that "auctoritas" is *absolutely* untranslatable, that is, that there is no way to render it *at all* comprehensible to a non-Latin speaker. What he says is that it is impossible to render it in Greek "καθάπαξ," "all at once," "in one go." This can mean one of the following?

(a) In every individual case in which the Latin term "auctoritas" is used, there is a clear succinct Greek equivalent—ἀξίωμα in one case, κῦρος in another, ἐξουσία in a third—different Greeks words in each case, but in each case a clear equivalent.
(b) In some cases in which the Latin "auctoritas" is used, it is unclear which of two possible Greek terms is "the" equivalent (but it is also assumed that it must be one or the other, or be

ambiguous between them; thus "noga" in many Slavic languages means either what we in English would call "leg" or what we would call "foot").

(c) In some cases there is no one clear equivalent or an ambiguity between two or three, but nevertheless one can explain the term through a lengthy and appropriately circumstantial periphrasis. Thus Greek has two different words νέμεσις and φθόνος for a psychic phenomenon in which there is in English (and in Latin) only one word: "[roughly:] envy" (Latin: "invidia"). However, although I can't give "equivalents" of either of these two terms, I can give a periphrastic explanation: "νέμεσις" is feeling pain at another's *undeserved* success; "φθόνος" is feeling pain at another's success not because it is undeserved but because the other is your peer.[6]

(d) In some cases I might not be able to give even a periphrasis but would have to embark on a lengthy explanation. Just imagine trying to explain the terms referring to specific actions or events in a complicated game like cricket to someone to whom the game is unknown in a language like, say, Sami, which will not have had occasion to develop a technical vocabulary for it or "ko" to someone with no knowledge of the game of gô. This doesn't mean that "ko" must remain utterly mysterious to anyone who is not a speaker of Japanese and a gô-player, only that the term in question can be rendered comprehensible not by translating or paraphrasing individual sentences in which it occurs, but only through a lengthy global account of the point and the rules of the game as a whole and then a description of the position in a game to which "ko" refers. Of course, the distinction between "periphrasis" and "explanation" will not be hard and fast.

(e) Two or more of the above.

So there is nothing deeply mysterious about a term being "untranslatable at one go." The case would be different if there were to be

some significant term that could not be made hermeneutically accessible to us *in any way whatsoever*, neither by translation, paraphrase, or "explanation." If one strand of philosophical thinking, initiated by Quine in the 1960s and developed further by Davidson in the 1970s and 1980s, is correct, *any* meaningful term in a natural language will be translatable in this wide sense because, if it were not, we would have no reason to assume it was a meaningful term at all rather than a mere sound.

This may be thought to be correct but not directly relevant to the study of politics and history. What is important here is not just that terms can be rendered in some way comprehensible but how specifically they are internally configured. One tempting way to think about this would be to assume that there was something like a stock of semantic elements or basic units of meaning that could be put together in one way in one language and in other ways in others. So that if I say that "mana" and "negara" are not translatable (all at one go), this is compatible with my explaining to you that "mana" is supposed by certain people in the South Pacific region to refer to a kind of magical power instantiated in particular people, animals, plants, and places that makes it likely that they will be successful in their endeavours but also makes them potentially dangerous to, and hence to be avoided by, those who do not have "mana"[7] themselves. Similarly, "negara" is a term for a South Asiatic "court-centred" polity that was organised in a particular way and made various political, legal, economic, and religious claims upon those subject to it. So in the case of "mana" we still in English have the concept of a "magical power," although we don't use that term anymore except in historical or anthropological descriptions or as a criticism or a joke because we think such things don't exist, and we have the concepts of "success," "danger," and "avoidance." We also have the concepts of a "court," a "polity," and of political, economic, and religious claims, although we don't perhaps recognise the particular "religious" claims associated with a "negara" and we don't have a single term that would refer to the conjunction of all these claims.

Although it is tempting to speak as above of "semantic elements," it is equally important to see that this idea is one of those images that are paedagogically useful in giving one a first approximative understanding (but can be highly misleading if taken in too literal-minded a way) and generate theories that will not survive sustained scrutiny. There are no naturally given, free-floating, language-independent "semantic elements" that are simply arranged differently in different languages. This image is useful because it helps me as a speaker of early twenty-first-century English to project some of my own categories in such a way as, perhaps, to begin to get a grip on what seem to me exotic ways of speaking, thinking, and acting. " 'Mana' is a magic power": this statement is correct as far as it goes in that this gives me a way of getting initial hermeneutic access to something that would otherwise be almost completely opaque to me, but do I and the inhabitants of some island in the South Pacific *really* share an "elementary" notion of such a power; it is just that they think it exists and I don't? Do we share the notion of "power"? The more one reflects on this, I submit, the less plausible it seems.

It is still a significant fact that the Romans had *one simple Latin* word, *auctoritas*, and presumably one concept, which they used to describe cases that a Greek would spontaneously have described using a variety of different Greek expressions. We are still confronted, then, with the same questions: Does this matter? If so, in what way and why? Perhaps discussion of some examples will help clarify this. Both ancient Greek and ancient Roman societies were strongly patriarchal. In these societies it was considered self-evident that women and children (and, of course, slaves) had to obey the man who was established as the head of the household—in the ideal case, the monogamous husband of one of the women and father of her children. Obedience to the "father" was to be unconditional and was expected even when the father's command ran directly counter to the wishes and preferences, or even to the interests and needs, of the children or dependent women. The Romans used the phrase "patria potestas," the father's power, the legally grounded and socially reenforced power to

dispose of the economic resources of all members of the household group, to discipline members of the household, using force to get his commands obeyed, and even, in extremis, to dispose of their lives and freedom. In contrast the father's "authority" did not consist primarily in his legally constituted power to force the child to act in a certain way but had a different structure. The father was, and was supposed to be, a model, an exemplary source of advice and counsel that was to be heeded. This was true even in situations in which the father was not in a position to enforce or had no intention of enforcing compliance with his advice. To be sure, often a given paternal admonition will not have been easy to distinguish from an order, but that will not always have been the case and is, at any rate, a different question. The point is that there was a conceptual distinction between "potestas" and "auctoritas," which, of course, does not preclude the possibility that in many concrete cases it would be hard to know which to apply.

The Greeks, it must be assumed, had an understanding of the general phenomenon (and the specific varieties) of power, whether physical ability or political, social, and legal power, and they had adequate linguistic resources to express these. If their society was in fact "paternalistic," can it really be possible that they had no specific term to express paternal authority? Greek sources do have plenty to say about the power of the father but rather little about any property that seems at all like the Roman "auctoritas patris." So in Aristotle's major discussion of the family[8] we read that the father "rules over the children in the way a king does" (ἄρχει . . . τῶν τέκνων βασιλικῶς). This potentially harsh-sounding remark is almost immediately softened when Aristotle adds that this form of kingly rule (ἀρχή) is very different from the rule (also ἀρχή) over slaves or over one's wife. The father's rule over his children was supposed to be oriented around the principles of benevolence towards that which belonged to him as his own (φιλία) and the prerogatives and privileges (two Latin words, but we have no better) that belonged to the father as an older person (πρεσβεία), so it is internally limited in some way.

This account seems to me to have greater similarity with "patria potestas" than with the "auctoritas patris." After all, even the Roman father in the fullness of his powers was not supposed to rule over his children *arbitrarily* but was supposed to be guided by some notion of what was proper and appropriate.

This example shows some characteristic differences between older conceptions and the assumptions moderns would be likely to make. To be sure the father should use his power "appropriately," but who judges what is appropriate, and is there anyone who is empowered to intervene to ensure that the limits of what is appropriate are not overstepped? Perhaps the ideal "Sage" (σόφος; *sapiens*) is the final judge of what is "appropriate": an "appropriate" use is one of which such a Sage would approve.[9] However, it does not follow from this that the Sage is or should be empowered to intervene. A fortiori the oppressed children would not be acting in a morally fully acceptable way to resist even inappropriate exercise of power. Many modern thinkers would be inclined to assume that if *he* (the father) is acting inappropriately—whatever that means—there *must be* someone who, as we would say, "has a right" to intervene; perhaps even the abused children are not just an object of understandable pity but "have a right to resist." The use of the phrase "must be" in ethical contexts is often a sign that an ad hoc assumption is being smuggled into the discussion. The ancient situation is one that opens a space for a particular kind of tragedy, namely a misproportion between a discretionary power that can, admittedly, be used appropriately or inappropriately and the failure to specify any effective moral recourse to those who, being subject to this power, might be disadvantaged by its inappropriate use. The modern conception closes off this particular space by assuming a certain moral equality among people and by vesting in each individual a prima facie right to self-protection, which means a right "in principle" to resist. Of course merely assigning to individuals a "moral right" to self-protection will not always constitute a real practical defence, so once the assignment has taken place it is natural to look around for, or invent, an agency designed to enforce this right effectively.

Ancient rhetoric provides another example, when Quintilian discusses "auctoritas" in the context of various types of rhetorical argumentation:

> Adhibebitur extrinsecus in causam et auctoritas. haec secuti Graecos, a quibus κρίσεις dicuntur, iudicia aut iudicationes vocant . . . si quid ita visum gentibus, populis, sapientibus viris, claris civibus, inlustribus poetis referri potest.[10]
>
> [Appeal to "authority" can also be brought into a case from the outside. Those who follow the Greeks (who call these "κρίσεις") call such appeals "(appeals to) judgement . . . when one can bring to bear what seems good to tribes or peoples or wise men, famous citizens, or illustrious poets.]

In cases where the gods might condescend to give a clear sign, something that occurs only infrequently—"id rarum est"—but is not completely out of the question, Quintilian says one can even cite "the authority of the gods" (*deorum auctoritas*). A divine sign might have authority because the gods could be thought to have knowledge or forms of experience we lack and also because they might be powerful enough (and interested enough) to make the sign come true.

The parallel—but, of course, temporally much earlier—discussion of κρίσεις in Aristotle's *Rhetoric*[11] differs from Quintilian's in a number of significant ways. Among the argumentative strategies that orators repeatedly use (τόποι), Aristotle says, is the appeal to the judgements people make:

> ἄλλος ἐκ κρίσεως περὶ τοῦ αὐτοῦ ἢ ὁμοίου ἢ ἐναντίου, μάλιστα μὲν εἰ πάντες καὶ ἀεί, εἰ δὲ μή, ἀλλ᾽ οἵ γε πλεῖστοι, ἢ σοφοὶ ἢ πάντες ἢ οἱ πλεῖστοι, ἢ ἀγαθοί, ἢ εἰ αὐτοὶ οἱ κρίνοντες ἢ οὓς ἀποδέχονται οἱ κρίνοντες, ἢ οἷς μὴ οἷόν τε ἐναντίον κρίνειν, οἷον τοῖς κυρίοις, ἢ οἷς μὴ καλὸν ἐναντίον κρίνειν, οἷον θεοῖς ἢ πατρὶ ἢ διδασκάλοις. [1398b21–26]
>
> [Another topos is the appeal to the judgement (κρίσις) of people about which cases are the same, which like each other, and which opposed to each other. This argument is most effective when everyone always judges in the way cited. If that is not the case, the argument can still have a certain

power if most people judge in this way or wise men—again all of them or most of them—or good people, or when one can claim for a fact that those who are being addressed judge in this way or people whom they in turn trust or people whom one cannot contradict such as rulers, or when one can show that those people judge in this way from whose opinion it is considered "not beautiful" to deviate, such as the gods, one's own father, or one's teacher.]

The Romans thus had available to them a schema of rhetorical argument of the following form:

1. Your father [or the god] has authority.
   1a. [That is why everyone else also judges that you ought to obey him.]
2. Therefore you ought to obey him.

The closest parallel to this for the Greeks would have been:

1. Everyone—or at any rate most of the people who count, namely the serious, informed, and intelligent ones—judge as follows:

   It is not good/fine/noble (καλόν) to fail to obey your father

2. Therefore you should obey your father.

Much of the force of this "argument" is contained in the use of the term καλόν, which has a distinctly positive but also highly unspecific meaning. All sorts of things can be called καλόν: a lovely cloak, a favourable wind, a well-positioned and well-built harbour, useful tools, a spirited horse, particularly strong and well-made armour.[12] The Greek conception that finds expression in a statement like: "Many people judge it not to be a fine thing to fail to obey one's father" seems exceedingly weak and mealymouthed compared to the monumentally weighty ascription of "auctoritas" to the Roman paterfamilias. This example illustrates a very striking difference between Greeks and Romans in the way in which the subjective and the objective dimensions are connected. The Romans ascribe a quasi-objective

property to a particular subject: "This man has *auctoritas*," whereas the Greeks report the subjective judgements of various people about what would constitute an objectively good (καλόν) state of the world.

So it does seem that the Greeks lacked a concept that corresponded in any simple way to the Roman "auctoritas." Was this a defect, a blind spot in their political thinking that was perhaps connected with various other deficiencies in the way they conducted themselves politically? After all, no Greek city, federation, tribe, or monarchy ever achieved the political success of the Roman Republic, although, of course, this is also a rather high standard to set. Or was it that the Greeks were simply clear-sighted and hardheaded? "The father in fact has the power of a king over his children and most of the most experienced people also think that it is not a fine thing if his children disagree with his judgement." That, one might argue, simply, neatly, and comprehensively sums the situation up. Why not just leave it at that without inventing a property of "auctoritas" to be attributed to the father? The only point of this addendum would be to provide a mask for relations of power and suggesting that adventitious coincidence of subjective human judgements was something more than it actually was.

Two approaches to "authority" have already been mentioned and rejected: first, attempts that assume that one can give a merely arbitrary or constructed definition; second, attempts that appeal exclusively (and ahistorically) to our contemporary language. Neither of these two would give any kind of understanding. Rather I have suggested the need to start from the history of the term.

The early history of the concept of "auctoritas," then, is both very dark and very complicated, but there seem to be two rather different ways in which it has been approached. The first model attempts to map the structure and functioning of the institutions and practices of the Roman Republic insofar as it is accessible to us through the extant literature, and then to locate "auctoritas" in that system. The second is founded on a speculative etymology of the word "auctoritas" in the light of comparative Indo-European philology.

To start with the first model, the Romans had a variety of political assemblies, differing ways of conferring political power, and different kinds of officials or magistrates, each with his recognised province.[13] In contrast to the Roman father who, as we have seen, unified in his own person "potestas" and "auctoritas," power and authority in the political realm were not always vested in the same persons or assemblies. There was a distinction made between the "potestas" the various different kinds of popular assemblies exercised and the "auctoritas" of the assembly of elite politicians, which was called the "Senate." I suggest, then, that we look at what "potestas" and "auctoritas" meant in the context of these institutions.

In addition to the Senate and the popular assemblies there is a third element in the Roman republican structure: the popularly elected magistrates, who had "imperium," a more or less independent and discretionary power within a certain domain, either geographical (proconsul *of Asia* or *of Sicily*) or administrative (responsible *for the corn supply* or *for aqueducts*).

A certain separation of powers was an important part of Roman republicanism; the system breaks down when a single individual (Octavian/Augustus) accumulates in his own person a number of distinct powers, *each* of which by itself had good republican precedents but which previously had each been vested in a distinct person. It would be as if Berlusconi were to be *at the same time* president of the republic, prime minister, foreign minister, president of the Constitutional Court, head of the Carabinieri, finance minister, Sindicato of Rome, and pope (as well as being the richest individual in Italy and owning all the newspapers and radio stations), and were thus to consider himself a pillar of the republic because he did nothing that was not fully within the constitutional power of the occupant of one or another of these offices. Nevertheless, the principle of the separation of powers did not take the form to which we have become accustomed since the time of Montesquieu.[14] Montesquieu distinguished legislative, executive, and judicial powers and proposed that they be located in separate offices or institutionally distinct parts of govern-

ment. Trying to apply that particular form of analysis to the Roman Republic will generate only confusion. First of all, in Rome there was no separate, institutionally distinct "judiciary" in the modern sense and no professional judges. Legal cases were decided by one or another of the magistrates or their deputies or by arbitration conducted by umpires who were agreed on beforehand by both parties, or by referring a case to one or another of the existing assemblies or in other rather ad hoc ways. It would be completely false to think of the Senate as something like a modern legislative chamber. Its function was not to "pass laws" at all; if anything, that was one of the functions of one or another of the popular assemblies. Its function was also not to enforce or execute the laws; that was the job of the magistrates. Formally speaking, the Senate was a consultative institution whose responsibility was to give advice (*consulta*) when it had been asked a question. Most of us get our first—and for some only—glimpse of Roman politics through the writings of Cicero. Cicero, however, was in favour of a republic dominated by a universally pro-active Senate (with the cooperation of the *boni* in other Orders), and was not beyond allowing this political value-judgement to colour what he presents as a description of the formal mechanisms of Roman politics. It is important to note that there is another way of seeing the Senate and its place in the republican system. One can reasonably describe it in purely formal terms as having a distinctly more limited proper sphere of action and as being distinctly more passive. After all, as a consultative body it was not permanently in session but had to be specifically convoked by someone who wished to ask it for advice, usually one of the magistrates, and it was convoked to answer some specific question. In principle, it did not, then, even set its own agenda but responded to questions put to it by magistrates. It was, of course, possible for the senators to be as "expansive" as they wished in the discussion of questions once they were put to it, and it was also possible for prominent senators to prompt one of the magistrates to ask an appropriate question or solicit advice on a particular topic, but that is a separate issue. Every schoolchild remembers Cato's peculiar

"ceterum censeo." *Whatever* the question, we are told, Cato ended his discussion by saying, "Ceterum censeo Carthaginem esse delendam." This anecdote sums up in a nutshell both how the Senate was supposed to act and how it actually did act. It was supposed to answer the specific questions asked, so there was something odd and noteworthy that Cato kept deviating onto his pet subject, but also no one was empowered, or seemed inclined, to try to stop him.

A magistrate could consult the Senate before, *or after*, he had proposed a law to one of the popular assemblies (and, of course, he *need not* consult the Senate at all). If the Senate approved of the proposal *before* it was enacted by the assembly, then one could see this as a kind of senatorial recommendation to the assembly. If approval is given *after* the proposal is passed, this could be seen as a kind of retrospective endorsement. To be sure, a proposal that had been approved by the Senate, either prospectively or retrospectively, could be thought to enjoy a certain normative perfection, but senatorial approval was not necessary for a law to be valid.[15] Not even the most rabid proponent of senatorial interests was willing to deny this. Laws passed by a popular assembly had the force of law, even if the Senate had not given its approval (or if that approval had not even been sought). So one should also not apply to the Senate a model derived from the theory developed by supporters of the French *parlements* (courts of law located in some large cities) in the eighteenth century, namely that laws and decrees propounded by the king had no legal force unless "registered," that is, accepted by the *parlements* and recorded in their books.[16] In Rome it was perhaps rash to legislate without consulting the Senate and very rash to do something of which it disapproved. The Senate, after all, was composed of especially successful and experienced statesmen and politicians, many of whom had previously held very high magistracies, so it was natural to consider it a repository of a certain kind of practical knowledge, foresight, and judgement. That is not to say, of course, that the judgements on which its advice was based were infallible or that it did not represent to some extent the narrow self-interest of its members and its own

interest as a distinct order of society. Nevertheless, with senatorial approval or without, provided the laws in question had been passed in a formally correct way in the popular assembly, they were still legally binding; valid, to be sure, "without the authority of the Senate." "Auctoritas" was even the technical terms for a recommendation of the Senate that was turned down or not acted on by one of the assemblies and that therefore was not valid law.

One cannot, therefore, even say that the Senate was a place of obligatory consultation because no magistrate was required to consult the Senate, and certainly not required to follow its advice, and laws and decrees adopted against its explicit advice were perfectly legal and binding.

Appeal to the Senate and its *auctoritas* was, therefore, nothing more than another way of summoning moral support or trying to acquire some extranormative weight for one's proposal or of taking out some kind of insurance in case of failure. Unfortunately, the insurance policy is not worth the paper it is printed on. Cicero learned this to his cost—if he did not know already—in the aftermath of his action against the Catalinarians. He had covered himself by acquiring a *senatus consultum*, the so-called *senatus consultum ultimum* to the effect that he, the consul, should see to it that the republic came to no harm, and he had a senatorial vote in favour of imposing the death penalty on the conspirators, but when he acted on that "advice" he could still be prosecuted for executing Roman citizens without trial. The Senatorial decision was still a *consultum* and had the standing of an expression of an opinion, not a legal warrant or an executive grant of immunity. "I was [or, we were] only following the *auctoritas* of the Senate" was never an acceptable excuse or exculpation for a magistrate or a popular assembly.

With that we come to the second of the two approaches to "auctoritas." In his *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, Émile Benveniste starts from some claims about etymology. "Auctoritas," he asserts, should be the property of someone who is an "auctor." The substantive "auctor," however, derives from the verb *augeo* (increase,

swell, strengthen, cause to grow). So the archaic "auctor" is the initiator of some action or sequence of events, that is, someone who has the power and the warrant to begin and carry through some action, and "auctoritas" is the property of being such an initiator and executor of action. So in Roman law the auctor is a seller who must be physically able to give to the buyer the object purchased but must also stand security in case of doubt that he actually owns the object in question. One might be struck by what seems to be a conjunction of a merely factual and a quasi-normative statement—power *and* warrant—but to call this a "conjunction" might be taken to imply that there are two recognisably distinct "things" that are put together or conjoined—the factual and the normative. It is at least just as likely, though, that what one has here is a description of an archaic situation, not in which two things that are distinguished are put together but in which they have not yet been clearly separated from each other.

> On persiste à traduire *augeo* par "augmenter"; c'est exact dans la langue classique, mais non au début de la tradition. Pour nous, "augmenter" équivaut à "accroître, rendre plus grand *quelque chose qui existe déjà*." Là est la difference, inaperçue, avec *augeo*. Dans ses plus anciens emplois, *augeo* indique non le fait d'accroître, ce qui existe, mais l'acte de produire hors de son propre sein; acte créateur, qui fait surgir quelque chose d'un milieu nourricier et qui est le privilège des dieux ou des grandes forces naturelles, non des hommes.[17]

It is almost superfluous to remark that the conception which Benveniste rejects, namely that the *auctor* "rend plus grand quelque chose qui existe déjà," corresponds precisely to the kind of function the Roman Senate seems to have had. It was not officially an initiator at all but rather an assembly which by approving of a proposal that had already been formulated by someone else increased the standing of that proposal. The magistrate who, having consulted the Senate and won their approval, could present a proposal to the popular assembly with an increased chance of its being accepted because the proposal

was backed "by the authority of the Senate." In contrast the archaic *auctor* envisaged in Benveniste's construction would have to possess in perhaps yet undistinguished unity the power to lay down rules (*potestas*), like that of the Roman popular assemblies, the warrant-enhancing *auctoritas* of the Senate, and the actual ability to enforce conformity to what had been laid down. It is not at all clear how exactly to think about these two models. This may be seen as an invitation to tell a "just-so" story that would allow one to visualise one possible form that the relation between them might have taken. The point of such stories is not, of course, to say what actually happened, but by studying their recurrent and plausible-seeming fantasies to try to map people's mental world. The assumption is that the semantics of such things as "authority" will have something to do with the way they imaginatively construe their world. One can, of course, deny this assumption or think that examining such a fiction is a very bad way to *begin* to think about "authority" or that this mode of proceeding must lead one astray or cannot be the final word on "authority." I ask the reader to suspend disbelief for a moment. Suppose, then, that we enter that world of make-believe in which people might live "in a state of nature," "graze on the meadows of truth" after death, truck and barter in a "free market," or discuss their social institutions "behind a veil of ignorance." The specific story about authority begins with an idealised conception of a primordial agent who possesses a large number of highly desirable and highly prized properties and initiates some important collective enterprise, founds a city, or institutes some important social institution. Think here of the stylised "biographies" of mythical Founders one finds in ancient literature, that is of figures like Theseus, Solon, Lykurgus (among the Greeks), or Romulus and Numa Pompilius (among the Romans).[18] In the stories about these Founders a certain number of features recur. (1) The Founder in fact succeeded in the past in taking some kind of initiative, setting in motion some process or establishing some kind of practice or institution that continues.[19] (2) The Founder had sufficient power and an appropriate normative warrant for initiating or founding

whatever he does. (3) The Founder has at his disposal the competences, forms of knowledge, and moral and psychological properties needed for his undertaking, that is, he is able to continue to guide it skillfully in the right direction, that is, in the direction of some tangibly positive results. (4) The natural consequences of the obvious success of his initiative give the Founder standing, prestige, and influence at least among those who participate in the enterprise, identify with it, and benefit from it: they tend to listen carefully to him and to follow his advice.

The part of the above that is likely to seem most problematic to modern observers is (2). What is "an appropriate normative warrant"? Isn't the whole notion of "normativity" a contemporary creation, concocted from Christian and Kantian sources? Can it without serious anachronism be projected back onto the ancient world? Where, then, would an appropriate warrant come from? What is its relation to mere strength or force? Sometimes the warrant in question is presented as being clear, prospective, and unambiguous, such as in the case of Battos, who is sent off from Delphi with a direct, clear injunction from the god to go off and do something new, in this case found the city of Cyrene in Africa.[20] Sometimes, however, the warrant is merely retrospective, as when the gods send a sign that confirms what has already been begun, Romulus and the eagles. Sometimes it is ambiguous (Aeneas). Sometimes, finally, it seems to be merely hypothetical (and retrospective): The continued prosperity of this city, one might think, shows that the gods "must" approve. Why "must" the gods approve and why in any case should the approval of the gods be the final word? In the archaic period, there are plenty of exemplary stories about (excessive) prosperity and success *not* being a sign of divine approval but a trigger of divine jealousy. If one asks why Zeus's approval is so important, the answer is likely, at any rate in the early period, to be couched in terms of his greater strength than other gods,[21] his defeat of the Titans in the Great War,[22] and so forth. The role of the gods in all of this is deeply ambiguous. Whereas it is probably not quite correct to say that might makes right, few things seem

to speak as loudly as visible power and *continuing* success and prosperity. In a highly uncertain world, what higher "warrant" could one have than the example of visible continuing success? In particular, how can I reasonably fail to admire and emulate those who in establishing my form of life have conferred such signal and significant benefits on me?[23]

The story up to now has been couched in terms of a single Founder, but there is no reason in principle—other than a human aesthetic preference for having a human individual at the centre of a story—for something similar not to hold for a group. If the Spartans had Lykurgos, the Romans had the *mos maiorum*. What is to be done, however, if the four conditions mentioned above (power, success, other abilities, prestige) are not co-instantiated at the same time in *one* given individual or in *one* determinate group? What if one person or group has the effective power, another great skill and experience, and yet another high prestige? And what if these individuals and group interact in a variety of different ways over time? What, to put it differently, if there is no single, closed Bildungsroman of a unitary individual or group who has or instantiates "authority" that can be run through schematically in the imagination in a relatively clear narrative way? What if there is only a (real) history of "authority"?

Oddly enough, given what is often said about the fundamentally "ahistorical" nature of Greek thought, considerations like this would probably have left them unmoved. After all, "authority" played no role in their imaginative and conceptual life. We bump up again against the question why that should have been the case, although perhaps by this point I will have impressed on the reader sufficiently the peculiarity of the concept of "authority" to leave room for the possibility that the question should be reversed: Why and how could the Romans have come up with such an oddity?

Until the middle of the nineteenth century, one could argue, "Greece" was no more than a mere geographical name. The various spaces occupied by speakers of Hellenic dialects never achieved political unity apart from the fragile and ephemeral empire of Alexander

until the Romans took them over in the first century before Christ. In these spaces there lived a variety of different groups who put forward conflicting, heterogeneous, and variously grounded claims to different kinds of knowledge and to different types of power. There were different groups of people who called themselves (and were called by other people) "the good,"[24] people who claimed wisdom for themselves (and to whom wisdom was attributed by others), "rulers," aristocrats, citizens. There were varying majorities in the different tiny city-states and other constituencies ("most Athenians think . . ."; "most doctors would prescribe . . ."; "most rowers in the fleet agreed . . ."). Fathers generally had power over their children, but Zeus himself had been able to turn the tables on his own father, and that had clearly been a good thing. What is striking in this world is variety and diversity; what would prompt one to assume that some particular people or occupants of some particular roles had an "objective" authority? In Rome, in contrast, centralisation of power—"centralisation" relative to what one would have found in Greece—seems to have been a fact of life from early on. The "Fathers" formed a political and social elite, owned extensive property, monopolised the most important priesthoods, provided the candidates for magistratures, served as military leaders, and sat with their peers in the Senate. They were the *auctores* par excellence. Eventually the plebs was able to limit their overwhelming predominance and acquire for itself both legislative power and, through popularly elected magistrates, indirect executive power. *Auctoritas* was what remained to the Senate as a kind of shadow of its former prevalency. Although some political philosophers seem to connect the uses of the imagination with the production of unrealistic fantasies about a utopian future, Hegel and Marx (and Freud for that matter) were right to emphasise that the more usual role of the imagination in politics was to reinforce the hold of the past over the present.

If the Roman concept of *auctoritas* was shimmeringly indefinite, the modern concept seems simply to be polysemous. One can distin-

guish several kinds of authority: personal, moral, discretionary, and cognitive.

Personal authority is a sociopsychological property of a concrete individual, more rarely of a very small group. A person has "authority" in this sense if he or she in fact impresses others as being especially competent, firm of purpose, self-confident, willing to give orders and used to seeing them obeyed.[25] In emergency situations people who have this property, which is sometimes also called "charisma," can be especially valuable. Moral authority generally derives from having led, and being seen to have led, a morally exemplary life.[26] One can easily imagine situations in which someone who has the sociopsychological property of personal authority does not also have any particular moral authority. Moral authority is a more fine-grained but also more encompassing phenomenon than "charisma" because it has to do not with such things as efficiently organising specific forms of action in situations of urgency but with more general and potentially reflective overall judgements about the good, the praiseworthy, that which is to be avoided at all costs. Since there is such human disagreement on what a good life is, as well as significant disagreement on what a "moral" life is, it is hard to agree on examples of holders of moral authority. Perhaps among contemporaries someone like Nelson Mandela would come closest to instantiating the ideal of a person with very widely recognised moral authority.

Since the world is unpredictable, most societies have found it advisable to give to some specified members "discretionary" power, that is, the power to judge a situation that demanded action and take what means they thought appropriate, using even means that were at other times not part of the normal or permissible repertory. The most extreme example of this was perhaps the Roman Senate's *consultum ultimum* mentioned above, but any ordinary policeman even in a Western European society is invested with a wide range of discretionary powers, including restricting or redirecting the flow of vehicular traffic, stopping and searching suspicious characters, and ordering

groups of people to disperse. Because discretionary powers are so easy to misuse, they are usually hedged around with conditions, restrictions, and potential sanctions, but although these limitations and controls may be more or less effective, they cannot ever be so strong as completely to regulate the discretionary element without destroying the advantages it brings with it—the ability to react systematically precisely to that which is *unforeseen* and therefore cannot be antecedently regulated in detail.

Finally there is the cognitive authority of the expert. A physician has studied at a medical school, has passed a certain number of qualifying examinations, and has had some experience in treating the ill; a craftsman has shown his ability repeatedly by discharging a variety of different commissions to a very high standard; the art dealer can (almost) always tell you who painted a certain painting he has never seen before (without looking at the signature), and he immediately spots forgeries (although he can't always tell you exactly how he does that); the taxi driver of long standing can give you reliable directions (provided you are in a motor car; the city might look different to someone on foot).

In addition to all these modern usages of "authority" there is a further one, which seems especially characteristic of the modern world in contrast to the ancient (although there are perhaps some isolated instances of the "modern" usage in antiquity). This is the sense in which, for instance, in certain legal contexts a lawyer may speak *for me*, that is, in my place *because* I "have authorised him" to do so. I give him (or her) this "authority" usually by participating in some recognised process, such as signing a formal document, by which what he or she says or does comes to have the same standing in the legal system as what I might say or do. What is crucial here is that "authority" in this sense is thought to be *transferable* in a way that other forms of authority, such as moral or personal authority, are not. The lawyer needs this transferred or derivative authority because he would otherwise not have what we call "(the) authority (to do x, y, and z)" no matter what other personal, moral, or cognitive capacities he might

have. Although in many cases the grant of a certain authority may be limited to particular domains—the agent whom I might authorise to buy books for me in a foreign country, that is, as we would say, to buy them "on my account," will not thereby be able to enrol me in the army, use money in my account to fund even worthwhile political causes, or buy lottery tickets in my name—the agent will in general be construed as being able to exercise some measure of discretion. This notion of a transferable, discretionary warrant makes sense in commercial transactions, but it comes into its own in the modern period.[27]

In the ancient world there were, of course, noncommercial cases in which one person "spoke for" another. Thus a herald in one sense "speaks for" someone else, but the herald has no discretionary power. The same is true of certain priestesses, who may speak for the god, although they do not themselves even know what they are/he is saying.[28] A professional speechwriter may have composed a defence for presentation at a trial, but the speech will be presented by the defendant himself—the Athenian model—or an advocate may make a speech *in support of* a certain case—the Roman model. Still, it makes a big difference whether Lysias writes a speech that I present at my trial, Cicero speaks *in my favour*, or a modern lawyer speaks *for me, that is, instead of, or in place of, me.* Finally, one would be exceedingly ill-advised to ignore what the pro-consul demands just because Rome is far away. However, the main reason to assume that the pro-consul in some sense "speaks for Rome" is that he has what the Romans called *imperium* (and an army at his back), not what they would have called *auctoritas*.

In the end, then, one is left with the three possibilities. First, there is Benveniste's archaic ideal of a plenipotent, maximally competent primordial "auctor" who is an absolute, unitary source of power and legitimacy and is construed as independent of and prior to a specific institutional structure, indeed as "founding" it. Second, there is an institutionally specific concept that arises naturally from thinking about the practices of the Roman Republic. Certain persons in certain

roles or positions or certain bodies are conceived to embody a special competence at deliberating or giving advice by virtue of these positions. This advice is not infallible or unlimited, but it is construed as good as the best available, even if because of the overall structure of the system concerned, the advice has had no effect (because the person or agency who has the authority to give it has no appropriate institutional power). Third, there is the "Hellenic" conception, which does even bother to try to construe the multifarious, diverse collection of different phenomena, which we, following the Romans, call "authority," as a single, unitary, theoretically coherent domain at all. What the Romans called *auctoritas* is just to be analysed as a series of diverse forms of human behaviour (imitation of the powerful, submission to the influence of a patriarchal father, consultation of experts) and different kinds of claims that some people make (to obedience, collaboration, belief, etc.) and others accept or reject, the whole process in each case located in a particular constellation of individual and institutional power, competence, and "normativity" and in a world of varying possibilities and necessities. Influence, obedience, expert knowledge, prestige, skill, and the varying ways in which people can be morally exemplary are not all cut back to fit the same single pattern of "authority."[29]

7

A Note on Lying

It has often seemed odd to me that lying, meaning the intentional telling of what one knows to be false as the truth, has had such a bad press in the modern world, and I can explain this only by the persistence of bog-Christian attitudes. Christianity is, after all, intended to appeal to simple souls whose speech was to be "Yea, yea" and "nay, nay" with everything else consigned to the category of the "evil" (ἔστω δὲ ὁ λόγος ὑμῶν ναὶ ναί, οὒ οὔ· τὸ δὲ περισσὸν τούτων ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ ἐστιν; Matt. 5:37). In claiming that lying has had a bad press I do not, of course, mean to say that I think it is a good thing, merely that it is not clear to me that it deserves the uniquely reprehensible status sometimes assigned to it, and that in some contexts there is more to be said for it than is often acknowledged. In a way the fact that a government feels the need to lie to its population can be seen as a progressive trait. Governments that were utterly sure of themselves and their own power and ruthless in their use of it would not need to lie. So the fact that they *need* to lie can, it seems to me, not unreasonably be seen as a kind of advance on a state of primitive brutality in which force and the threat of force could be used. To be sure, Christianity has traditionally argued the opposite, so that Dante, for instance, places liars and evil counsellors *lower* down in Hell than the violent. The reason for this is presumably that lying is a perversion of a higher human capacity, that for speaking the truth, and it is worse

to corrupt a great possible good than simply to act in a brutal way. It is possible, of course, to be of two minds about this. So one question I would suggest we ask is: Is lying *always* and in all contexts an absolute evil? Even if the alternative is the direct use of force? A second question is: Is lying, meaning by that term the intentional assertion of something one knows to be untrue, necessarily worse for the liar than telling an untruth one does not know is untrue? Finally, is being lied to necessarily worse for a person than being told an untruth by someone who is himself taken in by it? I submit not that lying is sometimes clearly a good but that in all three of these cases the jury is still out.

It has often been noted that ancient Greek philosophers were obsessed with the issue of the distinction between appearance and reality but showed relatively little interest in lying versus truth-telling, and in particular showed no tendency to think of the distinction between the two as indicating a basic moral issue. In general the idea that under all circumstances it is categorically *wrong* to lie and that lying is a sign of having a bad character, as distinct from the thought that it is painful to be taken advantage of because one has fallen for a plausible lie, seems a relatively late development. Thus in the so-called archaic period Odysseus is generally, if not universally, admired for being such a consummate liar. Achilles, we know—because he tells us[1]—does not like duplicitous people, but then this seems to be an idiosyncratic part of his individual character. In a well-known passage in the *Odyssey* the goddess Athena appears in the semblance of a young herdsman to Odysseus and asks him who he is, but when he embarks on a characteristically lengthy, detailed, and completely untrue story, she interrupts him to say that part of the reason she is devoted to him is that he is so like her, so good and plausible a liar that if she were not a goddess and even more quick-witted than he is, he might even pull the wool over her eyes.

κερδαλέος κ᾽ εἴη καὶ ἐπίκλοπος ὅς σε παρέλθοι
ἐν πάντεσσι δόλοισι, καὶ εἰ θεὸς ἀντιάσειε.
σχέτλιε, ποικιλομῆτα, δόλων ἆτ᾽ , οὐκ ἄρ᾽ ἔμελλες,

οὐδ᾽ εν σῇ περ ἐὼν γαίῃ, λήξειν ἀπατάων
μύθων τε κλοπίων, οἵ τοι πεδόθεν φίλοι εἰσίν.
ἀλλ᾽ ἄγε, μήκετι ταῦτα λεγώμεθα, εἰδότες ἄμφω
κέρδε᾽ , ἐπεὶ σὺ μέν ἐσσι βροτῶν ὄχ᾽ ἄριστος ἁπάντων
βουλῇ καὶ μύθοισιν, ἐγὼ δ᾽ ἐν πᾶσι θεοῖσι
μήτι τε κλέομαι καὶ κέρδεσιν

Anyone, even a god, who could get past you in any kind of scam [δόλος] would have to be wily [κερδαλέος] and duplicitous [ἐπί-κλοπος]. You're a hard one, crafty [ποικιλο-μήτης] and addicted to scamming [δόλος]; you won't let up in deceiving and deploying those duplicitous [κλόπιος] words that come natural to you, even though you are [back home] in your own land. Both of us are past masters at getting around people [εἰδότες ἄμφω κέρδε᾽α], you are by far the best among all mortals at deciding what to do and telling stories, and among the gods I'm famous for my nous [μῆτις] and my eye for the main chance [κέρδε᾽α], so let's not continue this kind of discussion any further. (*Odyssey* XIII.296–99)

This duplicitousness seems to have very deep roots and to run in the family because Odysseus's grandfather Autolykos was a favourite of the god Hermes, who made him an exceptionally gifted thief and "swearer of oaths."

Αὐτόλυκο[ς] . . .
. . . ὃς ἀνθρώπους ἐκέαστο
κλεπτοσύνῃ θ᾽ ὅρκῳ τε· θέος δέ οἱ αὐτὸς ἔδωκεν
Ἑρμείας· τῷ γὰρ κεχαρισένα μηρία καῖεν
ἀρνῶν ἠδ᾽ ἐρίφων· ὁ δέ οἱ πρόφρων ἅμ᾽ ὀπήδει.

Autolykos . . . who surpassed all men both in thievery and in the swearing of oaths. The god Hermes himself gave him this gift for to please him Autolykos has burned the thigh bones of lambs and kids, so Hermes was well-disposed to him and stood by him. (*Odyssey* XIX.394–98)

No Greek thought that either Autolykos or Odysseus had the gift of dissembling speech "from the evil one" (ἐκ τοῦ πονηροῦ in the

passage from Matthew cited above); rather they had received it from the god Hermes and the goddess Athena.[2]

In contrast to what a modern reader might expect, the two-hundred-odd pages of a modern edition of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* contains discussions of all kinds of virtues and vices (moderation, justice, perversion, courage, brutality, etc.), but only about two of them are devoted to truthfulness and its opposite (1127a13–b18). Even when truthfulness and the lack of truthfulness are discussed, these are not construed exclusively or even primarily as ways of saying or failing to *say* that which one considers to be the truth, but rather as failures of ways of living (ἀληθευτικὸς καὶ τῷ βίῳ καὶ τῷ λόγῳ ["truthful both in his way of living and in his speech"] 1127a24). So a person who exhibits this vice is construed as one who habitually lives in a way that goes beyond or falls short of his own real merits, *part of which* may be that he fails to find the mean in speech between making claims for himself that are overly grandiose (ἀλαζονεία) and being too modest or self-deprecating (εἰρωνεία). To live in an overly grand style, or too modestly, is not obviously a form of lying. Similarly, modern readers seldom fail to be struck by Plato's insouciance in the matter of what has come to be called the Noble Lie (*Republic* 414B–5D). Poets are to be banished from the city because they confuse the real and the merely apparent, and that is intolerable, but the philosopher-kings, who know reality and the truth and hence can lie to the populace in the interests of maintaining the city in a good state, can, of course, lie with impunity.

There is a kind of failure vis-à-vis the truth that Greek philosophers worried about, but it was not failure to tell the truth which one knew. Greek philosophers were concerned with failure to *see* the truth because one was taken in by mere appearances.

Classical philosophers did not *in general* worry about lying or truth-telling and certainly did not take true speech as a general touchstone of moral character. However, as Foucault recently taught us,[3] there was *one* specific context in which a certain type of truth-telling was discussed and in fact highly praised. This was the virtue of παρρησία,

which, as the name indicates (πᾶν + ῥῆσις), is not really the virtue of speaking the truth *rather than* a direct lie but of speaking out and saying everything, as opposed to keeping silent or saying only what will be acceptable to one's interlocutor. We might call it "outspokenness." Thus in Euripides' *Bacchae*, Pentheus, the young ruler of Thebes, has begun to act so much like a classic stage tyrant that even the Chorus says

> ταρβῶ μὲν εἰπεῖν τοὺς λόγους ἐλευθέρους
> πρὸς τὸν τύραννον, ἀλλ᾽ ὅμως εἰρήσεται·
> Διόνυσος ἥσσων οὐδενὸς θεῶν ἔφυ.
>
> I am afraid to speak free words to a tyrant, but nonetheless it shall be said: Dionysus is inferior to none of the gods. (ll. 775–77)

When a messenger appears who has witnessed something he knows Pentheus very much wishes not to be the case, he hesitates and asks Pentheus whether he wishes really to hear the whole story.

> θέλω δ᾽ ἀκοῦσαι, πότερά σοι παρρησίᾳ
> φράσω τὰ κεῖθεν ἢ λόγον στειλώμεθα
> τὸ γὰρ τάχος σου τῶν φρενῶν δέδοικ᾽, ἄναξ,
> καὶ τοὐξύθυμον καὶ τὸ βασιλικὸν λίαν.
>
> I wish to know whether I should tell you what happened out there outspokenly, or whether I should hold my peace. I am afraid of the quickness of your temper, Lord. It is exceedingly sharp when roused and very kingly. (ll. 668–71)

Here the political and social context is all-important.[4] This truth-telling in the sense of "outspokenness" is an act of moral and political courage, telling someone in a position of power—and is known not to be averse to using that power if displeased—something he does not wish to hear. "Outspokenness" as opposed to discretion, timidity, silence, telling only the acceptable *part* of the full story, is a completely different thing from speaking the literal truth as opposed to saying out loud what one knows is factually false.

This might be taken to throw doubt on the claim, which has its origin, I believe, in the work the twentieth-century journalist Hannah Arendt, that the liar is the political man; the truth-teller not.

> While the liar is a man of action, the truth teller. . . . most emphatically is not. . . . The liar . . . is an actor by nature . . . he wants to change the world.[5]

There seem to be two slightly different ideas operating here, both of which are incorrect, or at least extremely misleading. The first is that the "truth" is simple, just out there for all to see, and so seeing it and telling it is just a matter of recording what anyone can see is self-evidently there. The second is that the decision to tell the truth is simple or apolitical, in contrast to the highly political action of lying. To say that truth-telling is nonpolitical means presumably that it is not based on a calculation about its possible effects on the distribution of power, or an active concern to change the political situation; in contrast, presumably, I lie for a particular political effect.

To start with the first of the two misconceptions, that of the simplicity of the truth. In contrast to this, I would contend that what is "out there" is usually a farrago of truths, half truths, misperceptions, indifferent appearance, and illusion that needs to be seriously processed before one can accept any of it as "real." Think of the contents of a daily newspaper or the opinions expressed in a pub. One specifically modern form of social control is to allow free expression of *all* opinions, thus creating a chaotic landscape of informational overload in which politically important facts simply get lost in the welter of surrounding nonsense, and important connections cannot be made.[6] As the Greeks put it, truth "is deep down in the well"—you have to look for it and extract it—it doesn't lie there on the street in the sun waiting to be observed by anyone who glances in its general direction. That means that to see and recognise the truth requires the exercise of a certain kind of systematic violence on the inchoate and formless mass of undifferentiated appearance, wishful thinking, fantasy, and half truth in which we live most of our lives.[7] Nietzsche at the end of the nineteenth century spoke of a will-to-truth that was

necessary to explain how we came to be able to get access to the true and keep a firm grip on it, and he, correctly I think, emphasised the amount of asceticism that was required of a human being to resist our natural impulse to wishful thinking and see the world as it is rather than as we would like it to be.

The second misconception is that telling the truth is in some deep sense "apolitical." Certainly ancient παρρησία was not a form of mere speculation but rather a kind of politics. Discovering, expressing, and implementing the truth is not a way of stepping out of the messy realm of power and politics altogether but, to some extent at least, a way of acting within it.

The characteristic modern struggle, then, is not between those who tell a factual lie or a factual Big Lie, and might even try completely to defactualise the world, on the one hand, and those who bear witness to a simple truth, on the other, but between those who wish to keep politically active populations in a state of "doxa," mere undifferentiated shifting opinion, that is, a world in which masses of truth and falsity are inextricably interconnected, in which, for instance, all the facts are in *some* sense available, but they are so distributed that no one can put them together coherently. Ancient models are better at analysing this than Christian ones.

Even if one is interested not in the distinction between mere appearance and reality but in some psychological property of "truthfulness," it isn't clear that any exclusive emphasis on lying is appropriate. Straightforward lying about factual truths—saying explicitly of some object one knows to be made of brass that it is not made of brass but, for instance, of gold—is only one particular instance of the human Duplicity. Christian ethics focuses on this one kind of case, but it is easy to see that cases like this by no means exhaust the almost infinite variety of forms of deception. Thus, to return to Odysseus's grandfather, when Autolykos is described as someone who "excels all men in <the swearing of> oaths" (*Odyssey* XIX 396), this probably does not mean that he swore strictly oaths that were strictly false. He did not swear to give someone two sheep tomorrow and then fail to do

that. Rather he was capable of formulating oaths he could literally keep while at the same time seriously disadvantaging the other party in a way they did not expect. Christianity, obsessed as it is with straightforward speech, is also obsessed with lying. The direct lie, however, is by no means the only, or even the most important, aspect of a whole archipelago of related phenomena.

The specifically "modern" danger is not the Big Lie: the straightforward intentional assertion of a nontruth that is known to be a nontruth, such as that Trotsky was in the pay of the Gestapo and plotted to kill Stalin or that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. To worry about "lying" can be a way of diverting attention from other aspects of the situation and focusing it on such phenomena as sincerity with which the belief is held and affirmed. Did he *really* believe what he said? If he really did sincerely believe it, can he be said to have been "lying"? Perhaps it is instead just a harmless mistake. Politically, and arguably even morally, this is usually of distinctly subordinate importance. Blair's problem was not that he intentionally told the public something he knew was not true but that he had no interest at all in the category of "truth," only in his own religiously based moral intuitions and in what forms of speech would be politically effective. An opportunistic fantast is not exactly a liar, but this is not obviously to his moral or political credit. The characteristic strategy for politicians in the modern world in any case is not to tell a direct lie but to sow confusion. Political manipulation nowadays is more likely to be a subtle blend of keeping the pieces of a puzzle apart so they do not cohere, deemphasizing some things that are important, diverting attention to other things, deniably suggesting connections that do not exist, distracting people's attention, wishful thinking in the evaluation of evidence, and so forth. None of these is interestingly analysed by the model of conscious suppression of strict factual truth.

So my conclusion is that trying to understand modern, twenty-first-century politics under the category of "the lie" is a very superficial way to proceed, encouraging naïve moralising and discouraging

serious thought. It is better to look at the pathologies of contemporary politics as a series of differentially structured complex conjunctions of cognitive, psychological, moral, and political failures of a different kind, conscious deception, insouciance, unconscious self-deception, wishful thinking, lack of attention, lethargy, distraction, suppression of dissent, and inertia. This whole domain is deeply structured by the play of powerful agents pursuing their own interests in relatively unscrupulous ways, using threats, bribery, and direct force. In this context direct lies may, of course, be told, but the focus, if one wishes to understand, should be on the context, not individual psychology. The difference between truth and its opposites, and between more admirable and less admirable forms of politics, is not a difference between a disembodied realm of ideal discourse and the sordid world of interests, powers, and complex motives but a distinction within this latter world—the real one we in any case always inhabit. Moralisation is no substitute for historical and institutional analysis.

8

Politics and Architecture

In 2001 some of the faculties of the University of Frankfurt began to move physically from the often shoddy and distinctly rundown-looking postwar accommodation that had served them since the early 1950s into an architecturally spectacular set of buildings designed by Hans Poelzig in the late 1920s and set in a large park with an impressive view over downtown Frankfurt. Unfortunately, these buildings, known collectively as the Poelzig-Bau, had served as the corporate headquarters of I. G. Farben between 1931 and the occupation of the city by the U.S. Army in March 1945. What this means is that in 2009 a student could find that he or she was taking a seminar on Descartes, on Rimbaud, or on early church history in the very rooms in which in the early 1940s gas chambers and crematoria for extermination camps were designed. In the period between 1945 and 1995 the complex served as the headquarters of General Eisenhower and then of the Fifth U.S. Army. When the U.S. military moved out upon German reunification, the question arose as to what to do about the huge I. G. Farben complex, and it was only after a certain amount of political wrangling that the decision was taken to move the university into it. There was finally a sense that if the complex was not simply to be torn down, it would have to be symbolically detoxified, but how could that be done? The solution finally reached was that a permanent exhibition about its history would be installed in the build-

ing, which would be as uncompromisingly truthful about its past as possible, the main building itself would retain the historical name I. G.-Farben-Haus, and the large and impressive open space one encounters upon first entering the building, which is now the student café but in the late 1940s was the antechamber of Eisenhower's offices, would be named the Eisenhower Rotunda. Finally, one of the squares on the new campus would be named after a former forced labourer in one of the I. G. Farben Works: Norbert Wollheim, a name that has special resonance for a philosopher because it is the surname of an important British philosopher, Richard Wollheim, who participated in the liberation of Belsen in World War II. It is possible, in fact almost inevitable, that there will be no consensus on whether this series of decisions and actions was in fact appropriate and adequate—that is in the nature of a complex historical and political process like this one—but I would ask you now to accept for the sake of argument my view that this was a reasonable and laudable attempt to deal with a difficult situation. Let me, however, now engage in some counterfactual history. Suppose the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe had not been the traditionally conservative Eisenhower but Field Marshal Douglas MacArthur, who was during the same period effectively Supreme Commander in the Pacific. MacArthur was a man of extreme right-wing political views who came to be notorious for his persistent advocacy of the use of nuclear weapons against the North Koreans and Chinese during the Korean War. MacArthur saw this as a prelude to the extension of the war to be conducted with nuclear weapons into China proper, which he also advocated. When he failed to obtain authorisation for this policy, because President Harry Truman refused to countenance it, he tried in various ways to use his military position to undermine or circumvent the civilian political apparatus in the United States until Truman was finally forced to dismiss him from his post. I suggest that naming the entrance to Poelzig's complex the MacArthur Rotunda would not have had the same effect of at least partially rehabilitating the building. On one final note, I should mention that parts of the

Poelzig-Bau served as the headquarters of the CIA in Germany and in the 1970s and 1980s was the object of three terrorist attacks probably by members of the Rote Armee Fraktion (RAF), a splinter group that had its origin in the German Student Movement of the late 1960s. In a bomb attack by the RAF on May 11, 1972, one U.S. officer was killed and thirteen others wounded.[1]

I would not now be discussing this case at all if I did not think that the Poelzig-Bau was a most impressive piece of architecture. However, the more I think about this, the more difficult it seems to me to separate the strictly architectural aspects of my reaction to this building from the historical and political, and, what is more, I do not think that this is so unusual.

The very term "architecture" itself suggests a closer connection with politics than might be thought to be the case with any of the other arts or crafts. The Greek word ἀρχιτέκτων signifies the person who is in charge of and has control over builders. ἄρχω/ἀρχή in fact is one of the usual terms for a political relation of domination. On the very first page of his treatise on the good human life, *Nicomachean Ethics*,[2] Aristotle appeals to the example of the architect to discuss the notion, especially important for him, of the hierarchical relation of human activities one to another and the differential forms of value that such hierarchically ordered activities have. The study of ethics, for Aristotle, is subordinated to that of politics just as the builders are subordinated to the architect. This metaphor of the "architectonic" is one that recurs in many later views to refer to relations of subordination between different parts of a theory. Such relations may, of course, be ones of mere logical, epistemological, or paedagogical dependence or of pragmatic subordination rather than specifically political subjection. It is not, in any case, as easy as it might initially seem to say exactly what a "political" relation, for instance, a relation of political subordination in the relevant sense, is.

It has often been pointed out that there is a basic ambiguity in the concept of "politics." There is what I will call a "wider," "broader," or "less specific" construal of the term and a narrower or more specific

construal. In the broader and less specific sense, "politics" means simply any human activity of structuring or directing or coordinating the actions of a group. So we can speak of a "politics" of the family or gender politics. The actions of different human beings can be "coordinated" in any number of different ways. Thus if one thinks of a preindustrial society living in a small mountain valley, there may be a very high degree of "coordination," in the sense of simple regularity, exhibited by the members of that society. For instance, if there is only one pass over the mountains, it might well be the case that virtually anyone who ever tries to leave the valley in the winter does so through this pass. This is certainly a regularity we might observe to hold, but it is not *in itself* an archetypically political phenomenon because we think that using this pass to exit from the valley is a matter of simple necessity. That one goes through this exit, if one leaves at all, is not anything that is "in our power" or "up to us," and that means it is not itself a political matter but simply a natural fact. In addition, however, to such "natural" coordination there is also coordination that results from specific forms of human intervention such as persuasion, emulation, or coercion, and these are the characteristics of politics.

Thus when certain philosophers have called freedom a precondition of politics or politics a "realm of freedom," they are most sympathetically understood as making not some kind of ontological claim but rather describing a way of looking at the world. "Politics," that is, especially in this first wide sense, is best understood as referring not to a special *domain*, like biology or astronomy, but to a way of seeing or considering the human world. The basic statement in politics is not: "This is a political phenomenon" as parallel to "This is an organic (or inorganic) compound" or "this is a prime number." Rather the paradigmatic claim is "this is a political *question* or *issue*." "This is a political matter" means it is a matter considered in some sense to be potentially in our power and up for decision, and which we have some potential interest in dealing with in one way rather than another.

If this is right, three further things would seem to follow. First, although in a primitive society the weather might simply be a given,

not *in itself* a matter for political discussion, the question of what we might *do* about the weather can well be a political issue: Do we distribute umbrellas to everyone or not? Do we put up a communal awning or tarpaulin on poles over the village green? Or do we let everyone fend for themselves?

Second, what *is* a political question or issue is itself historically variable in a way in which the question, say, what is an organic compound or what is the sum of two numbers is not. What is political changes with changes in what we can and could do. In preindustrial times the weather is not in itself a political issue, subject to the caveats just mentioned above, but if we were able technologically to change and control the meteorological conditions, then it might very well become a political matter, in the weak sense, whether it rains on a certain day or not. That would mean that someone had decided to make it rain on that day *or had failed to decide anything*, leaving it up, as we might say, to "nature." Note that in the preindustrial period people were not *failing* to decide on the weather, since they had no control over it; it was just there as a brute fact, a matter not of politics but of natural necessity.

Third, suppose it really is the case that politics concerns things that are either in fact in our power or at any rate that we could imagine might come to be in our power, and suppose then further that any state of affairs that cannot be other than it is (such as whether a certain number is prime) stands outside the domain of political deliberation. If, then, I have a special interest in maintaining some feature of the present social or political regime, for instance, because it differentially benefits me, I may have a strong interest in trying to present this feature as a part of the order of "natural necessity." Think of Margaret Thatcher's constant refrains about the ineluctable necessity of tolerating unemployment as a means to controlling inflation or of bowing to the imperatives of the market. This is the point at which it is sometimes tempting to appeal to claims about the objectivity of scientific results, and, of course, there often are well-supported scientific results that are relevant to political decisions, but it is also the

case that sometimes political agents have a strong motivation for presenting as the only possible reading what is in fact only one specific reading of the existing evidence among others, namely the reading that seems to give support to their own projects and interests. The appeal to "objectivity," whether justified or not, is so effective because it is responsive to deep-seated and perfectly comprehensible human needs. We seem to have good inductive reasons to cultivate our existing desire not to be grossly deceived about the world in which we live, if only because in most cases we have found that complete illusions turn out to have very painful consequences for us. This comprehensible desire for what we call "objective truth" can often come into a sometimes slightly unholy connection with our human need to find, or invent, determinacy, stability, and fixity at almost any cost. The world is unstable and insecure, and our life in it is uncertain. It is painful for us to confront this fact. It also is exhausting having constantly to calculate again, to exercise context-dependent judgement or reopen questions apparently definitively settled. In the face of "objectivity" we can relax and succumb to inertia, simplifying some aspects of the painful process of decision by leaving it, as it were, up to reality itself. Unless the shoe pinches us *very* badly so that we cannot overlook it, we would like to think the form of the shoe that happens to be customary in our society is the natural one or the "objectively" given one. The idea that humans "naturally" like "freedom" or "choice," if that means that they like continually to have to exercise their unbridled judgement or make decisions under the conditions of great uncertainty, is unfounded. This does not mean, of course, that they like to be in painful bondage, and much of human life is an attempt to find a path through the world that is responsive to the two forces of avoidance of novelty and choice and avoidance of the painful consequences of failing to revise one's beliefs and attitudes when that is necessary.[3]

So much, then, for the first, the wider and weaker, which does not, of course, mean "less important," of the two concepts of politics. "Politics" in this wider sense is a matter of any form of coordinating

action regardless of the means used to achieve this coordination. Our more usual, or what I will call the "narrower," concept of politics contains some further components in addition to those that constitute "politics" in the wider sense. These are that the "political" coordination of social action makes use of at least the threat of recourse to coercion, force, or violence, and that there is some appeal to systematic forms of legitimation. So in the wider sense of "politics" I can speak of the politics in a chess club as people jockey for influence, a certain kind of power, and a certain advancement through established offices. However, this structure is not directly connected to the possible use of force. The chairman of the chess club may make decisions about who plays which game against whom in which room and at what time, may adjudicate disagreements, and so forth, and in these matters his word may be Law, but he cannot whip, or probably even threaten to whip, any of the members or lock them up against their will. On the other hand, a gangster can assault me, lock me up, and take away my possessions by force but does not make a claim that what he is doing is either morally good or politically legitimate. The full and narrower sense of politics comes into play only when the use of force or the threat of the use of force is a possibility, and when the potential recourse to coercion, force, or violence is presented as being not merely a fact to be accepted but in some way "legitimate." The major agency in the modern world that makes this claim to legitimate use of coercive power is the state. "Political" in the narrow sense means having to do with coordination of action through the use of state power or with the attempt to influence, infiltrate, or put oneself into a position to exercise that state power.[4]

"Architecture," too, is a term that is used ambiguously, although the ambiguities are comparatively harmless. Thus it can either mean a certain skill, craft, or artistic ability or the exercise of that skill or craft in the activity of designing and constructing physical objects of a certain kind. Or finally it can refer to the objects thus designed and constructed themselves. Architecture seems to be different from many of the other arts in several ways. First, architectural objects are pal-

pably physical and inherently public: they are large objects, literally almost always bigger than any individual person, and they stand out, form physical obstacles to free movement, and shape the very space in which we live. Of necessity, then, they affect us in a way that is different from the way in which most novels, pieces of music, or easel paintings affect us. If I do not like the novel or poem I am reading, I can shut the book; if the picture displeases me, I can turn my head away. I cannot so easily exit from a large cathedral in which I find myself placed or change the properties of the houses that face onto the streets down which I must pass to get to the city centre. This at least mildly and potentially more coercive feature of architectural objects makes them more political than the products of the other arts. It could, of course, be argued that every painting I see shapes my perception in a potentially permanent way and therefore makes me see everything in the world in a different way. Still I do not usually have to look at any particular painting, but I do have to live in whatever building or part of the city I happen to live in. I can, of course, choose to live in one kind of building rather than another and can change the building I live in either by moving or by reconstructing it, but I cannot in the twenty-first century simply do without some built surroundings, as I can do without easel paintings. It is, of course, true that this difference between architecture and other arts became even more pronounced during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, when forms of literature, music, and aspects of the graphic arts became highly privatised, than it was in some previous periods. Thus in the ancient world the basic form of consumption of what we now call "literature" would not have been silent reading in an empty room but the massive choral singing and dancing that was characteristic of the performance of a tragedy in Athens, or a public performance of epic by a rhapsode, or the reading of a speech or dialogue by a slave to a group of gentlemen of leisure. Still a constructed object like a house had in one obvious sense a firmer place as an opaque, solid, intransigent, three-dimensional part of the public fabric of a city than any ephemeral grouping of citizens did.

There is, therefore, an important further political issue here. Should buildings be unobtrusive, retreating into the background to allow agents to pursue their own self-chosen goals, as far as possible without *apparent* obstruction? If one has the view that *any* building in one way or another structures the space in which it stands, then this might seem slightly dishonest, a way of covering up what is in fact a choice about structuration and allowing it to pass unnoticed. The building may come to be taken as "a fact of nature" in the urban landscape rather than the result of distinct intervention. Surely, however, one might think, the consequence of this should not be that buildings should be hyperassertive, constantly calling attention to themselves and their effects. There is no optimal resolution to this tension. Perhaps for that reason reflecting on and theorising about architecture will always have a place in our intellectual life.

Furthermore, given the persistence of the material from which most buildings are made, the structuration of the environment they produce also extends into the indefinite future and thus concerns an indeterminate number of "anonymous" other humans, who by the very nature of the case cannot be consulted. Completed architectural works now impose on future people a way of living by channelling the way human activities will be able to proceed. It is, then, coercing them at any rate in a minimal sense, making it *easier* for them to live in *this* way, and more difficult for them to live in *that* way, so any present construction is an act of political faith in a certain possible future.

Architecture has also often been held to be different from other arts in that it straddles the distinction between craft and fine art, between producing practical objects of use in a relatively predictable way, which is assumed to be the basic characteristic of a craft, and producing potentially unique aesthetic objects, which is associated with our modern idea of fine art. This dichotomy might also be associated with the distinction between being a "mere" builder and being a proper architect. There is a functional dimension in architecture and an expressive dimension, and much of the discussion at least

during the past two centuries or so has revolved around the proper understanding of each of these dimensions and, most important perhaps, the proper relation between the two of them.

It is also an important fact about our society that people do not simply engage in the activity of designing and building, but some of them also do this *as a profession*, and in our society "profession" designates a very specific social role with associated legal rights, social and legal duties, and expectations.[5] As a professional architect in our society, one is embarking on a life of entering into contracts with people to build things that they, within certain limits, specify. This immediately raises straightforwardly political issues. Do you enter into contract with just anyone, on what conditions, for whose benefit? Last month I happened to meet and have a conversation with a German engineer whose family had built up the oldest and largest cement works in Central Europe (Dyckerhoff) and who were understandably very proud of the extremely high quality of their cement. During World War II they had provided the cement for the building of the "West Wall," the line of German fortifications on the coast of Western Europe designed to protect the Continent from Anglo-American invasion. When my new acquaintance's grandfather was called to account for this by the U.S. occupation authorities after the war, the elderly patriarch produced the original set of specifications and contracts for the building of the large pediment on which the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor rests. In these contracts it was specified that the pediment must be made of Dyckerhoff cement ("or cement of similar quality," as the contract apparently specified). In fact Dyckerhoff & Co. provided the eight thousand "bins" of cement from which the pediment was constructed. This line of response was apparently immediately accepted by the occupation forces without further question. Regardless of what one might think of the substantive rights and wrongs in this case, the issue is not whether the occupation forces ought to have accepted what might seem to us to be something too pathetically weak even to be called an "argument." It was merely an attempt, successful as it turned out, by the accused to

evoke certain sufficiently strong positive sacral associations in the mind of the accusers as to blind them and deprive them of the use of whatever weak ratiocinative faculties they may have had in the first place. The real question, however, is what this tells us about the nature of our own conceptual space. These are in no sense irrelevant or unimportant questions, but they have more to do with the social role "architect" than with the inherent nature of what the architect does. We might think that a doctor is, or should be, by virtue of his or her very role immune from politics. A military doctor should care for *all* the wounded on the battlefield, friend or foe, and civilised countries make it a point of pride to provide equal care for all combatants and for civilian victims including those who are now usually subsumed under the rubric "collateral damage." This does not mean that there is no politics in being a doctor but only that we have decided that it would be a good idea, *not* an idea proposed to us by any notion of "justice" but by such notions as humanity, decency, charity, benevolence, and also probably by various utilitarian calculations, artificially to *insulate* the practitioners of the medical profession from making certain everyday political discriminations.

There is yet a further way in which architecture was traditionally distinct from other arts, and this is in the more inherently social, and potentially political, nature of the activity itself—the activity of collective building. Aristotle's architect had the power to exercise a kind of social control, namely to give orders to the people who actually do the building. This power was not arbitrary, it did not come from nowhere, and it was not unlimited. It was a power based on the authority purportedly provided by knowledge (and perhaps also secondarily by experience, although many builders have more experience of construction than younger architects do). This immediately raises the question of what kind of knowledge there can be in this area. This question is especially pressing for architecture, more perhaps than for many other areas of human endeavour because precisely of the binary nature of the enterprise, that of designing and producing practically useful *and* aesthetically pleasing buildings. We do not have much dif-

ficulty in understanding the kind of knowledge that will contribute to making it likely that the building will be useful. It will have to stand up, and the technical discipline of statics gives us a relatively straightforward answer to that. But what notion of "knowledge" underlies the claim of the architect to produce an object of great expressive value?

The problem for the architect, then, is that if his authority is based on knowledge, the builder and engineer *also* have *that*, but if what makes him distinct from the (mere) builder, and hence entitled to some special kind of authority, is the aesthetic or expressive dimension of the product, *that* seems more reasonably to be construed as having to do with faculties like that of "taste" rather than with any form of knowledge. How does "taste" give authority? It is completely unclear what kind of authority an architect can deploy and in particular whether the architect has any *coercive* authority at all.[6]

In the previous discussion of "politics" in the narrow sense, I left one important aspect of the concept unexplored. I spoke in a vague way about politics as being a realm of coercion, force, or violence, as if these three things were the same, or at any rate did not need to be distinguished. It is not obvious, though, that coercion and violence are at all the same thing. I can be reasonably said to have been "coerced" to do something in many kinds of circumstances *even if* no one uses anything we would naturally call "violence." If you lure me into a room and lock the door, you have forced me or coerced me into staying in that room until you unlock it, but you do not seem to have used "violence" on me in the same way you would have had you picked me up and thrust me into the room. Similarly, it does not seem odd to say that by lying to me you can "force" me to do various things, in the sense that if I believe you, I might think I have no alternative to the course of action you wish me to take. Still, it seems a stretch of our current linguistic usage to call "lying" a form of violence.

A further relevant distinction is that between active and passive or doing and permitting/allowing to occur. This distinction is highly

controversial among philosophers, or rather it is controversial whether it has any deeper significance. At an everyday level it is perfectly clear:

(a) active: I push you into the water so that you drown
(b) passive: I fail to respond to your cries for help even though I easily could

The reason this distinction is of relevance to this discussion is that political theory, especially of a liberal kind, has tried to focus on active, even deliberate human intervention. Politics, then, is construed as in the first instance about preventing other people from actively using violence on others. The result, however, is to skew the political realm. This is especially important for architecture because a building was historically an archetypically inert but persistent structure. I, or rather the builders, may have been active in putting it up, but once it was up, it was just there, and could be expected to stay there, if it was properly built, for a very long time. It can change its function over time, as when buildings originally constructed as fortresses become prisons, so whose deliberate intentions are significant, the person who built or those who now use? It is the very geometric structure of the building that forces people to act in one way rather than another, and also to fail to act in certain ways; if the structure works, it prevents the inmates from "escaping." This passive nature makes coercion "softer" and harder to see, as it were, from the outside, although not to feel, if one actually must live in such a structure. It makes it also no less effective, and the question is whether it is not equally reprehensible.[7]

I have spoken of important ambiguities in the concept of "politics" and of various different ways in which we speak of "architecture" as a skill, an activity, a kind of object, or a profession. It will then come as no surprise that I also think that the concept of "justice" is multiply ambiguous. I would like to distinguish at least four rather distinct notions.

First of all, "just" designates that which accords with existing, established, legal codes. Second, we call that "just" which accords with

what we—whoever "we" in each case happen to be—think "ought" to be the enforced legal code. Third, "justice" is used simply, as Aristotle put it, to refer to "all the human excellences together."[8] That is, in this third sense "just" refers in a rather indeterminate way to that which is socially excellent, desirable, and so on in whatever sense and for whatever reason. I note that it is extremely important not to confuse this third sense of the term with the second because there might well be things we think are *socially desirable* that we also think cannot for various reasons be formulated in a legal code. Thus I might think it highly desirable that people in a society be grateful to those from whom they have received benefits, but I might also think it completely wrong for this to be formulated as a requirement of any kind of *legal* code. First of all, a legal code must be enforceable by reference to external indicators, and I might think "gratitude" is not the kind of thing that is sufficiently close to any external indicators to figure in a legal code. Second, I might think that precisely an important part of the value of gratitude is that it be exhibited *without* it being the case that it is legally required and would be sanctioned. Its virtue is that it is extralegal, not forced, and so forth.

The fourth conception of justice is one that focuses on questions of distribution. There has recently been significant disagreement among theorists about what it is that is supposed to be distributed, whether goods, welfare, opportunity, or the possibilities of agency, and there is a similar disagreement about whether the principles of distribution should be some version of equality or of proportionality, for instance, that goods and benefits should be distributed equally to each or to each proportionally to their perceived merit or contribution, whatever "merit" or "contribution" means.

Recently (meaning during the past forty years or so) there has been a strong tendency to understand politics in a highly artificial, restrictive, and impoverished way. Following John Rawls, many theorists have essentially tried to construe politics as a form of human behaviour devoted primarily to the attempt to realise one particular social ideal, the ideal of justice.[9] They have then further eviscerated the

concept of "justice" so as to construe it merely as some general property of the distribution of goods and services in society.

I think that this multiple ambiguity in the concept of "justice" has been a source of almost inestimable confusion. If "justice" is used in the third sense, namely that is just which is in any sense socially desirable, then, of course, it is no news that all politics is about justice. It is no news because it is just a tautology. However, it is easy to move, without noticing it, from that tautology to something that is by no means a tautology, namely to the claim that all politics is appropriately construed as concerned with the equitable or proportional distribution of preexisting goods and benefits.

If one starts from the notion of politics I sketched at the beginning, it is not difficult to see that not all politics is about justice but also *at least* about the coordination of action, the exercise of influence, and the control of the use of force (among other things). Arguably, "justice" is not even one of the more important human values that can be instantiated in the political or social sphere. This is particularly clear in emergency situations, but, putting them aside, think, for instance, of welfare, efficiency, humanity, activity, security, dignity, and decency, not to mention creativity, a sense of self-affirmation, and aesthetic grace. All of these are important social virtues, and none of them is self-evidently completely detached from the world of the political (at least in the wider sense).

In short, then, two associations of the concept of "justice" seem to me unfortunate and unhelpful in the context of architecture. The first is the presumption that justice will have something to do with codes, rules, and conformity to such existing codes or, for that matter, with conformity to a better set of ideal rules. The second is that justice has to do with properties of distribution of goods that are considered to exist antecedently. When Marx in the nineteenth century attacked the focused attention the political theory of his day turned on "justice," it was because justice-centred theories took the goods in question at face value, as objects that had come into existence in ways

that it was irrelevant to discuss.[10] Rather, Marx suggested that political theory should look carefully at the activities through which such goods were produced in the first place and at the social relations that structured those productive processes. These, he thought, were the most important features of any society, and the rules of distribution, that is both justice in the sense of conformity to a legal code and justice in the sense of some scheme of distribution, were secondary.[11] What I would like to suggest is that architecture would do well to concentrate on the generation and fostering of varieties of free activity and on the structure of the relations that will hold between the humans who need to interact, rather than on justice in the sense of either conformity to some code or the distribution of goods.

It has become commonplace nowadays to assume that justice is fundamental to our notions of societal order, that is, to the order sustained between ourselves without recourse to force. When I say I disagree with this, I do not mean to say that I think that this assertion is incorrect in the sense in which it is, for instance, incorrect to think that the sun moves around the earth. Rather I disagree with it because it gives the strong impression of being a clear substantive claim, but on closer inspection it turns out to be no such thing. On some of the readings it expresses an unobjectionable or even tautological claim. If what it means is, "We tend to use the word 'justice' to refer to whatever we discover is essential to the maintenance of our social order," then this may be true, but it is uninteresting. Even here, to be sure, one might wonder whether we wish to say that justice is whatever is fundamental to our existing social order or whether what we really have in mind is that justice refers to what would be essential to some ideally desirable order we can envisage. The trivial readings of this claim about "justice" are, however, easily confused with other uses in which the statement expresses a highly contentful and controversial claim, for instance, that equal (or proportional) distribution of goods is in fact fundamental to our social order or to an ideally "good" social order. In addition, I might add, what is so special about

"*our*" notions of societal order? Are we to be satisfied merely with recognising that they are the conceptions we, for whatever reasons—good, bad, or indifferent—happen to have acquired?

Note, too, that this formulation seems to make the tacit assumption that societal order is good in itself, and "our" conception of social order especially good, and that force plays no major constitutive part in our society. I take it that tacitly this includes the *threat* of the use of force. What if some use of force turns out actually to be required to maintain "our" social order? This possibility does not seem even to be canvassed. So there is a highly specific set of liberal assumptions built into the very way in which this text is formulated that I, for one, would be inclined to reject.

I spoke earlier about our horror at the uncertainty of human life, about the vertigo we experience in the face of the indeterminate, and about our anxiety at having to exercise judgement and decide in each case afresh how to act towards our world. This is part of the strongest motivation for the focus of politics on the concept of "justice," as it is part of the motivation to cling with limpet-like inertia to theories we have once committed ourselves to, even when they have revealed themselves to be seriously flawed. This is also part of the origin of our tendency to exaggerate the level of determinate objectivity we have been able to discern in our world. To start from "justice" gives one the illusion that there is at least one distinct kind of determinate thing out there to which all the multiform indeterminacies and incommensurabilities of our forms of valuation can be reduced. If that were the case, we think, to some extent we would not need to exercise judgement. This, however, is exactly the problem with trying to reduce politics to discussion of "justice." This does not, in turn, in any way imply that political discussion is merely indeterminate or merely a matter of arbitrary choice. There are things that at any given time we have no real alternative but to accept, and valuing one thing is often really incompatible with valuing something else equally. No one can be a champion boxer in the morning and a subtle and accomplished violinist in the evening. Merely employing the term "justice"

to cover whatever we find of value will not in itself either solve any problems or cause there to be more unity and coherence among what we value than there otherwise would be.

To return once again to Aristotle, he thought that politics was in itself a constructive and "architectonic" activity. It was really about creating the conditions for free, valuable action and the social genesis of the right kind of person, the proper citizen of the city-state. Aristotle also thought that the city-state was the only social form within which the highest and most complex kinds of human activities could be carried out. One can accept Aristotle's general claim that politics and (by extension) architecture are about enabling positively valued forms of collective human activity and about creating a certain kind or type of person without necessarily accepting his hierarchical views about human activities or the further claim that the most valuable life is possible only within the rigid format of an ancient city-state.[12]

Of course, the routine tasks of everyday building have to go forward, and of course architects have to honour their contracts, take care for whom and with whom they build and what effects their building will have on the minimal provision of necessary goods, but architecture might also be seen, and has in the past been seen, to have an aspirational component, to be attempting to be "constructive" in more than just the literal sense. In the nineteenth century some philosophers spoke of the basic task of the architect as being to build a dwelling suitable for God.[13] We twenty-first-century atheists don't use this kind of religious language anymore, but it is not difficult even for us to associate a clear and plausible meaning with that thought.[14] Architects should try to create structures that by channelling human energies in novel ways focus and intensify some of them while thwarting and dispersing others. We have a variety of complex reasons for judging that the intensification of some activities has made our lives richer and more worthwhile, or that, alternatively, it has been a huge mistake. Thus we judge that forms of human interaction, of relation to self and other, have become more or less efficient, more or less focused and intense, more or less socially aware and benevolent, more

or less constructive in relation to other valued outcomes, and so forth. Some of these ways of evaluating it we call "moral." Also there is no particular reason to expect that the standards or criteria we now use for judging will never change. In some cases they will change as a result of interventions we make. If I were an architect it would be the high point of my life to discover that people who antecedently knew, as it were, all there was to know about the building I designed for them and who thought they had good reason to detest it came through living in it to change their minds and love it. I would have helped them change their way of looking at the world, their standards for evaluating what is good, and their taste. Perhaps one could appeal to various systematic considerations to argue that some particular change had not been for the better—after all, sheer habituation has caused people to come to think they liked some extremely peculiar things—but the argument would need to be made in detail and evaluated on its merits.

Not all the evaluative standards we use in political philosophy, then, can reasonably be thought to be subordinated to a single notion of "justice." If the demand that architecture should take account of "justice" is merely an exhortation to architects to look beyond their fees and consider the different ways, for good or for ill, in which their buildings will be used, and the different ways in which those buildings will encourage or discourage certain uses, then this is unobjectionable, but also rather trivial. To put emphasis on its aspirational and humanly constructive component is to try to think about architecture in a way that very much goes beyond the framework of thoughts about "justice."[15]

9

The Future of Theological Ethics

If one looks at a human society from a sufficient distance, it presents itself as a complex structure of informal practices and formal institutions, such as armies, churches, families, corporations, political parties, and so forth. These institutions are kept alive by the participation of human individuals, but they also structure and give substance and content to the lives individuals lead. A life outside a set of structured social institutions is for all save the most unusual individuals not much of a life at all. Despite this, it is individuals rather than institutions that have come historically to occupy centre stage in much of traditional philosophy and, I daresay, theology.

Individuals in complex societies swim in a veritable sea of social expectations and claims that are made on them by overlapping institutions. I am legally obliged to repay my debts even to reprehensible financial institutions (that is, to virtually any now in existence), my friends expect me to treat them decently, I should cover my nose and mouth if I sneeze in a public place, in some societies religious groups may require me to attend services regularly, and so forth. These claims are of differing kind and origin, and of differing degrees of peremptoriness. Most of them are accompanied by—or can easily be provided with—a(n ostensible) "reason." I should cover my nose when I sneeze *because* this prevents the spread of germs; I should vote in the General Election *because* the stability and legitimacy of our polity depends

to some degree on at least minimal levels of participation; and so forth. Giving one "reason" is often not the end of the story but merely gives rise to another question and a request for a further reason. *Why* should I wish my society to have stability and legitimacy?

Philosophy begins when Socrates tries to construe the asking for and giving of reasons as a freestanding domain that can be treated purely on its own terms. The question that exercised Socrates is what life the individual should lead, which eventually gets transformed into the question of which individual action from among those available to me I ought to perform. Socrates, or at any rate some of his immediate followers, called this method of scrutiny via a (purportedly) self-contained process of the presentation of reasons, the critical questioning of those reasons, and the attempt to respond to critical objections, "dialectic." Behind the dialectic lay the Socratic demand for "autonomy" of enquiry, that is, the demand for a form of discussion that was self-contained and did not depend on the support of any *other* discipline or form of external authority, or on the constant inflow of the results of new empirical research. The hold that this demand has exercised on Western thought should not be underestimated.

So the initial situation that is assumed in Socratic discussion is like that of an autonomous consumer in the ideal world of neoliberal economic theory who is faced with a free choice among an array of options. The ideal consumer is assumed to be autonomous in his or her choices, that is, able and willing to choose *for herself* or himself, and adequately informed about the nature of the product chosen and about his or her own preferences and interests. The participant in Socratic dialectic is similarly assumed to be in a position to bring up and discuss any opinion or belief freely without needing any further (mere) information or support for any external authority, and to be able to settle on and adopt whatever views eventually recommend themselves. To be sure, Socrates' interlocutors need to satisfy an additional condition that does not hold for the consumers. The consumer need only choose; Socrates' interlocutor must choose *and also*

give an account of his/her choice that will stand up to Socratic argumentative scrutiny.

There are, however, one might imagine, a number of important features about human life that the Socratic form of reflection ignores or seriously underestimates. These features can be grouped into three broad categories: information, autonomy, and action. First of all, one can ask whether I ever have adequate information about how I should live that is in any enlightening way like the adequate information I might have about the limited choice of some human product. More important, one might ask whether it is sensible to *isolate* the asking for and giving of reasons for action from the process of acquiring further information or knowledge. Perhaps "ethics" and "scientific enquiry" cannot be as neatly distinguished, or pursued as independently of each other, as Socrates seems to presuppose.

The second kind of question concerns autonomy. Am I really an autonomous chooser? If I am, how did I become one? Why do I find myself with *these* preferences and confronted with *these* options rather than others? Is it always for the best for me to construe myself (and others) as such autonomous choosers? What if communal coherence is more important than individual autonomy? What implications does it have for society if some people begin to see themselves as completely autonomous choosers? What does it mean if *everyone* sees him- or herself as such a chooser? What does it mean if everyone sees him- or herself as *nothing but* autonomous choosers? The Athenians were sufficiently worried about this to kill Socrates, and it seems pretty clear that they were right to see him as a threat to their way of life.[1]

Furthermore, human life may not really be so easily divided into two distinct parts: first, an early limited period when I am "growing up" and thus subject, for instance, to parental (and other) authority, and then a period of "mature autonomy" when I am not, and may not permit myself to be, subject to anyone's authority at all. However, even as an adult if I wish to learn Arabic, I am dependent on the authority of native speakers, I am forced to trust in the expertise of the

medical profession every time I go to see a physician, and I depend on the testimony of others every time I trust what I read in a book about a country or city I have never myself visited or about any historical event. It is conceivable, then, that there is some less perspicuous, but more intimate, interconnection between autonomy, expertise, authority, and testimony than the Socratic model suggests. Perhaps, just as it might be good to construe the discussion of reasons and the acquisition of new knowledge as related sides of a single process rather than two utterly distinct things, it might also be good to see autonomy, trust in expertise, and dependence on authority as ways of describing interrelated phases in a process of moral development rather than distinct, self-contained modes of life.

Finally, Socratic dialogue is considered to be isolated from the world of events and the requirements of action. Plato's dialogues, to be sure, are full of people hurrying off when the discussion gets too hot,[2] and this realistic touch is part of their overwhelming literary charm, but the ideal type to which Socratic dialogue aspires is something more like the *Symposium* in which the narrator wakes up the following morning to find Socrates and his interlocutors *still at it*,[3] or the discussion in the *Republic* which because of its very length could not have run its course during a single night. Human life is not usually like this, however. At some point the cruise missiles begin to fall on the city centre, the sailors in the naval base riot, one's interlocutor is guillotined,[4] Judas arrives in the garden with a group of armed men, or the security forces, to everyone's surprise, refuse to fire on the demonstrators. The proper conclusion to be drawn from this is not, of course, that it makes no sense to discuss the possible reasons for action at leisure and for as long as it takes but that it is unlikely to be clear at any given point in history to what extent events and the demands of action have informed or deformed any given line of argument.

Hegel suggests that traditional philosophical ethics in the Socratic mould tells us both too much and too little. In "normal" situations it is redundant—as Hegel says, if you want to know what to do, ask

your local priest or your lawyer—and extraordinary situations are characterised by the breakdown of precisely those tacitly presupposed structures that give the usual form of "philosophical" reasoning its purchase. How, in addition, is one to know whether any given situation is "normal" or "extraordinary"? If Christianity is right, the Incarnation is an extraordinary event that brings about a radical change in human nature and its possibilities so as to render the wisdom of the philosophers' "folly"[5] (μωρία). If Marx is right, forms of rationality are bound up with social forms in a way that does not permit simple extraction of a substantive universal form of "Reason." It is no refutation of either of these views to appeal to an assumption it rejects, namely to the universal validity of argumentative forms that have their origin in Socrates' dialectical analysis of Greek common sense. Thus for Christians there is a "revelation" that is fully accessible only through faith—which not everyone has—and for Marx the results of Socratic "dialectic" depend on what bits of knowledge and opinion are the starting point, and certain forms of knowledge—such as knowledge that human labour can be construed as a sequence of homogeneous, temporally extended units of exercised labour power—are available only in certain highly developed societies, because only in such societies does labour take that visible form.[6] This does not, of course, mean that Christianity or Marxism automatically wins the argument, just that the discussion is not already settled before it has properly begun.

Whether considerations like these open a space for a "theological ethics" depends in part on what one might mean by that term. Does "theological ethics" constitute what we might call a natural kind—that is, do *all* forms of theological ethics have something important in common that distinguishes them from nontheological forms of ethics—or is "theological ethics" just a term that collects a number of different positions that really have little in common but are grouped together only as a convenience to contrast them with something else, such as "secular" or "nontheological" (or "nonreligious" or "nonmonotheistic") ethics? By virtue of what does an ethics count as

"theological"? Does theology give us merely a new way of understanding (and perhaps "grounding") what we already recognise as "our common, agreed-on morality," or does it require us to change our moral beliefs and practices?

That is, is there such a thing as a corpus or code of what Trotsky calls "generally recognized . . . elementary moral principles . . . [which are] necessary for the life of every collective body"[7] and which, therefore, are common to the adherents of the various religions and to atheists? Is it then the case that *only* some theological assumptions will allow humans to *understand* these principles, so that we atheists are just internally confused and don't understand the nature of our own form of life? Or perhaps there is more than one way to understand common morality: as it were, as the law of the city of man and as the law of the city of god (although the moral code itself is the same). This might be a bit like Rawls's dream: a common morality (in his case a political morality) that is agreed on, although *understood* in different ways by the members of different religious and secular groups who comprise the society. Or is it that we all *understand* the common principles of morality well enough but only theological analysis will "justify" these principles to us? (If that is the case, what does "justify" mean, and does it mean the same thing in "justify to an adherent of religion" and "justify to an atheist"?)

A further possible claim is that there is a common core of shared human morality, but theology allows us to supplement this with an additional set of additional demands or ideals. Thus: "'They said to you of old 'Do not kill', but I say to you 'Do not even be angry.' "[8] Or is it the case that there is *no* common moral code for all people, and so the theological project is not merely greater understanding or firmer justification of what we all agree on but revolutionary *change* in our moral views. Theology is necessary for us to see that we must change the way we live and evaluate ways of life.

Or is theology not directly relevant to the whole of our moral life, but merely to a special sector of it, constituting the origin or ground

of some new demands or ideals we would otherwise have no access to? So might there be special theologically based demands of ritual purity or symbolic manipulations of ritual objects that did not much impinge on everyday life but were thought to be important, like the fetishistic treatment of flags or other symbols in certain forms of contemporary civic religion?

In any of the above-mentioned cases it would be of extreme importance for the prospective proponent of a theological ethics to be able to say what exactly "ground" means when one speaks of theology as "grounding" a form of ethics. In this context it is not sufficient to make a vague gesture in the direction of "anti-foundationalism." "Anti-foundationalism" does not mean abandoning all attempts to give an account of what one believes or practices.

One might well ask whether Christian ethics can sustain a commitment to global justice. Does "sustaining commitment" here refer to some kind of psychological, motivational, or social process or to something more like giving a valid justification or giving a good reason? (Or to all of these? If all of them, how are they related?)

To whom is theological ethics addressed? One might think that there are several distinct audiences and that theological ethics has a number of different tasks. First, there are people who are already Christians. The task of theological ethics here would be to give such people theological reasons to be concerned with social justice. Second, there are those who are not Christians but who have an interest in social justice. Here the task would be, presumably, to show that an interest makes sense only if one accepts certain theological views. Thus, I think I already have reason to be committed to social justice, although I have no theological beliefs. Am I being incoherent? Would I only understand myself and my commitment correctly or fully if I had the right theological views? Would the right theological views give me, in some sense, "more and better reasons" than I already have to favour social justice? What exactly would that "more" amount to? A third possible audience would be *all* persons of good will, regardless

of their religious affiliation or lack of affiliation, and theological ethics here might also address the task of exploring the possible modes of practical cooperation between believers and nonbelievers.

I believe that Christian theologians use the term "apologetics" to refer to discipline directed at giving some kind of justification or defence of Christianity to nonbelievers. However, I would note that even this way of construing the discipline contains within itself an initial structuring of the discussion that not all will find appropriate. Plato (and Xenophon) could write "Apologies" for Socrates because he was accused in a court of specified crimes. To assume that the task for a Christian theologian is to "defend" Christianity against some specified set of theoretical objections to it seems slightly unmotivated. Parish-pump atheists still exist, but I suspect that the real danger for religious believers nowadays is not counterbelief or theoretical objections but indifference. Richard Rorty, whose grandfather was a Social-Gospel theologian and whose father was a Communist poet, notoriously claimed that he was neither a believer, nor an atheist, nor an agnostic because all of those were considered positions one could take on religion; he simply wished not to have to take a position on this topic one way or another at all. In his own inimitable phrase he simply wished people would *completely stop talking* about religion,[9] whether they wished to defend, to attack, or to reform it. This increase in sheer brute indifference—Why should we care *one way or the other*?—rather than active unbelief or unwillingness to listen seems to me to be the social phenomenon that constitutes the greatest threat to traditional forms of monotheism.

Some theologians seem admirably aware of the *political* dimension of the task of addressing and coordinating the potential action of believers and nonbelievers, but if shared (or parallel) religious experiences are neither necessary nor sufficient for understanding of or commitment to equal human dignity, then the political task of coordination seems rather anodyne. We seem to be just back to the old liberal treadmill of "seeking consensus among people of good will, but different opinions." There is perhaps nothing wrong with liberal-

ism, if, for instance, the alternative is some form of extreme authoritarian despotism, but one would hope both philosophically and politically for something more and a bit stronger than that.

Furthermore, what is the relation between "theological ethics" and "religious ethics"? Prima facie, after all, if one thinks of theology as a *systematic* and *discursive* treatment of certain beliefs, and religion as having to do with human modes of experience and action, institutions, and forms of cultivation, worship, or reverence, then it is easy to imagine the theological and the religious as diverging.

A theology has to have something like an argumentative structure. Simply sitting around meditating, occasionally muttering "Oum, oum, oum," or shouting out loudly "alleluia" or "alahu akhbar" in moments of excitement may (or may not) be a worthy form of religious activity, but it is not yet a "theology." To put it crudely, anything correctly called an "-ology" has to be structured around something like what the Greeks called "λόγος" that is, it must be something like an argument, a dialectical sequence, a set of logically connected propositions or something like what we now call a "science" (in the broadest possible sense), and it is not self-evidently clear that *all* forms of religious experience require or even admit of such treatment.

Thus in the ancient world the Epicureans had what was in one sense a "theological ethics" in that they thought that if you wished to lead a good life, you had to have the correct theoretical views about the gods. The view of the Epicureans, though, was that the gods were indifferent to humans and therefore were completely inappropriate objects of reverence or fear. So that would be an instance of a theology without a religion. But equally there might be religious views or views about religion that were non- or anti-theological. Thus the modern world has seen a number of anti-theological thinkers, for instance, the Pascal of the "God of Abraham, not of the philosophers"; Feuerbach, who proposed religious practices based on a fully re-anthropologised theology; Heidegger, who construed early Christianity as a religion without a theology and envisaged a kind of quasi-religious, but atheological ethics; and finally Wittgenstein, who seems

to have thought that some religious experiences were very important but that there was nothing one could *say* about them. All of these thinkers were trying to rehabilitate the unvarnished religious life *against* what they took to be the distortions of it by theology. Roughly speaking, it seems plausible that the more vivid, explicit, and restrictive a view you have about what counts as "theology," the more likely it is that some people will reject the claim that any particular theological view is adequate to encompassing their religious form of life.

Perhaps a theologian might wish to try to emphasise the role of theology in sustaining cultural and community identity. Here I would like to point out what seems to me a significant structural difference between traditional Christian theology and the various claims that are made about modern "cultural identity." In the modern period "cultures" are thought of as being plural, constructed, and nonobligatory, even if one also thinks that many cultures have a tendency to secrete around themselves claims to uniqueness, to being "natural," to being superior to all others, and so forth. Traditional Christian theology, though, unless I am mistaken, was committed to presenting not one of a plurality of possible ways of living but a unique, non-negotiable truth. It is hard to see how these two perspectives can effortlessly be combined. I would urge resistance to the temptation to reconfigure theological beliefs as mere cultural formations: if "theological ethics" is going to have any purchase at all, it will have to make some claims to truth that go beyond merely saying "This is my cultural identity." The letters of Saint Paul, however, strongly suggest that Christianity at least is not supposed to be a *cultural* identity at all but something else.[10]

Is it really *theology* in the sense of an *argumentatively structured* set of general beliefs that gives the impetus to social ethics or is it religion in the broader sense of the general ethos associated with a set of human practices?

I have always found it very odd that mainstream Roman Catholicism clings so fervently to the philosophy of Thomas, given that the

philosophical framework he inherited from Aristotle has certain signal defects for any Christian. So although Aristotle had a concept of development, in the sense in which, for instance, an acorn develops into a tree, he had no concept of "history," at least not in the robust sense in which many Christians have understood "history" (*Heilsgeschichte*). Again, the Incarnation, so the Christian view went, changed human nature radically and qualitatively.[11] Thus one's location in a uniquely specified historical time sequence—before the Incarnation or after—makes a tremendous difference to what kind of life one can lead, and thus to morality. It is hard to see how this archetypically Christian view can be accommodated within an Aristotelian account of a historically uniform human nature.

Aristotle's lack of a concept of history was a serious defect, but his lack of another concept that has become central for modern thought was actually a great advantage, because that concept is confused and we are better off without it. I am speaking, of course, of the concept of the "will," which is very strikingly lacking in Aristotle, and which luxuriates in proto-baroque splendour in the philosophy of Aquinas,[12] throwing out its obfuscating tendrils in all directions. Although Aristotle had no concept of the "will," he had a concept of human choice and that is all that one really needs. Roughly speaking for Aristotle, if I do X and have not been externally coerced into doing it, that will be because (a) I chose to do X (προαίρεσις), or (b) because I acted on some impulse (ἐπιθυμία). That is for Aristotle the end of the story. There is no "choosing" to act from choice or from impulse, and nothing like the modern "will" is involved in the process. The only thing Aristotle has to say beyond that is that if I am a good ("virtuous") person I will generally choose rather than act on impulse, and the reason for that will be that I have natural aptitude to become a good person and have had the right upbringing. However, if I am a good person, I will—to put it paradoxically—have no "choice" about acting out of choice rather than impulse. That I habitually act from such choice is just what it is to be a good person. A good person, therefore, is not "free" in any interesting sense (apart from the *political* sense of

not being someone's slave). There is no room for "the will" or "freedom" in this construction. "The will" is constructed and introduced as a concept by the Stoics as an *anti-Aristotelian* invention to allow them to say something Aristotle never would have said, namely that the good person is "free."[13] It is thus much to be regretted that Thomas took this confused nonstarter of a concept "will" out of its context in anti-Aristotelian thinking and tried to graft it into a basically Aristotelian framework. Western philosophy suffered from the depredations of trying to make sense of the fictitious faculty "the will" until the time of Nietzsche.[14]

Finally, accepting Aristotelianism means Christianity gets itself unnecessarily involved in trying to offer an alternative cosmology to natural science; this, however, is an argument it lost long ago, so it would seem more honest to acknowledge that and draw the consequences.

My first and narrower suspicion, then, is that if there is a future for theological ethics in the Roman Catholic tradition it will certainly not be Thomist. My wider conclusion is a strong suspicion that whatever the prospects of religion in the future,[15] those of the purported discipline of "theological" ethics are doubtful, if only because of the strong categoricity of our conceptions of reason and argument. It is hard to see how anything could conform to them, as "theology" is supposed to do, while yet being appropriately distinctive. What over a thousand years of strenuous exertion has signally failed to find is probably not there.

10

Did Williams Do Ethics?

Bernard Williams came to bury ethics, not to criticize or revise it. He did not, of course, mean by that that there was *nothing* in traditional forms of ethical thinking (or nothing in traditional moral injunctions) that was of any substance or of any use or significance for human life. He did, however, think that the traditional notion of "ethics," namely as an autonomous, knowledge-based, reflective, discursive doctrine that could give completely general and rationally persuasive answers to the question, "How should one live?" was unsalvageable.

What, then, should replace ethics? First of all, perhaps *nothing* will or should replace it. Instead of a single hegemonic discipline, which gave us answers or the framework for finding answers to the question how one should one live, there will just be a variety of *different* things. Perhaps human life is characterised by a welter of different goods that form no cognizable unity; perhaps the very idea of a single, or a single dominant, notion of "normativity" just is a mistake. After all, the very term "normativity" is a recent invention—it has no entry in the 1933 edition of the Oxford English Dictionary and its currency as a technical term in philosophy can scarcely date back to a period earlier than the 1980s. The fact/value or "is"/"ought" distinction is older than that, and the adjective "normative" has sporadic earlier uses, but the idea that there was a single "thing" or phenomenon

that could be designated by the single term "normativity" may be thought to represent not a mere verbal quirk but a not-insignificant step in giving the discussion of substantive issues a particular turn or slant or structure.

Perhaps then instead of any kind of single overarching "normativity," all there is are simply different—and possibly changing—human practices with different goals, associated conceptions of excellence, and resultant goods; and human life consists of an art or skill in negotiating a way through, which is partly constituted by these practices, partly a matter of making use of them for other ends. What replaces ethics then is not another intellectual discipline but forms of action, which may be skillfully or less skillfully performed. The art or skill involved, however, might not—without significant loss—be reducible to anything like the object of a cognitive discipline. Nietzsche in some of his moods seems to take a tack like this, adding that the art or skill in question would have an extremely strong component of a type we would be likely to call "aesthetic," and that the human emotions of admiration and disgust would play a constitutive role in it.

The basic idea that ethics as a purportedly freestanding philosophical enterprise was a mistake is not in itself novel or unusual. I once heard the president of a large and very well-regarded university, whom I will call "Zmith," ask the academic members of one of his advisory boards why his university needed departments of philosophy and political science at all. After all, he remarked, the university had a flourishing law school and a distinguished department of economics, and surely they could satisfy any reasonable human cognitive need. Zmith's remark was, to be sure, part of a micropolitics of bullying, of trying to intimidate the assembled academics and show them who was boss,[1] but it would have had no chance of being effective if there had not been at least the shadow of a suspicion that Zmith might actually *believe* what he was saying and that some other influential people might come to believe it, too. Compare this case with that in which Zmith asked why a philosophy department was needed because his university already had a renowned archaeology programme

and a music school. Actually, the idea that ethics as a subdiscipline of philosophy might simply be replaced by something else, by some part of economics or law (or some combination of both), is not in itself completely daft. It would, of course, require some changes in the existing disciplines of law and economics. It would require law to stop being the kind of cognitively disabling enterprise it now is, designed to turn intelligent young people into pliable mouthpieces for corporations; and it would require economics to establish at least some tenuous, nonwhimsical cognitive relations with the real world of a kind it has not yet been able to manage, but that might be possible, if the world itself changed. This, of course, is an old idea of Marxism, that if the basic economic structure could be rationally and transparently organized, it would be possible to have a proper *theory* of economics rather than the current hocus-pocus, and that would render a separate ethics as a philosophical discipline otiose. There might be some low-level "ethical principles," as Trotsky suggests, but they would be commonsense rules of thumb about how people best get along together, known clearly to everyone and having the status of banalities, not profound philosophical truths.[2]

Williams did not take this line, but rather one that arguably had its origin in Aristotle, who begins one of his ethical treatises by describing ethics as a subordinate part of political science.[3] What should replace philosophical ethics, in Williams's view, was politics. This, of course, makes his view completely different from the Marxist view, which is that in a free and developed society, "politics" as we know it would not exist, only administration. That is *not* to say, I take it, that there will be a relatively abstract political philosophy, a fixed theory of a more or less traditionalist kind, and that a subordinate part of this will be devoted to individuals in society, but rather that ethics will be replaced by "real politics." Politics has its own dignity, imposes its own demands on action, and both opportunistically consumes and fecundly generates concepts, convictions, theories, and forms of reflection. Some of these will concern individuals, their properties, dispositions, aspirations, and modes of behaviour; and these might

be called "ethical," but they have no standing on their own. When Williams says that politics should replace ethics, he does not, of course, mean by "politics" either a purportedly nonintentional and fully value-free form of human action or the object of a value-neutered pure science. Politics clearly is concerned with human agents who have goals, intentions, values, and conceptions of the good, and the study of politics will itself also be informed by forms of evaluation that will not necessarily be the same as those of the agents being studied. Traditional ethics, though, makes the mistake of trying to isolate these goals, intentions, and forms of evaluation and construe them as the possible subjects of a distinct discipline. In addition, when Williams says that politics should replace ethics, he does not mean "should" in a (strictly) ethical sense. Rather, he thinks that ethics always *has* in fact been a part of politics. Historically, any given ethics has usually been the theoretically congealed residue of a previous political practice that represents an attempt on the part of that past to stretch its dead hand out over the future. So "should" means that, overall, it is likely to be better for us to recognize this than to continue to pretend it is not the case. This, Williams thought, was the significance of Nietzsche and constituted one of the important reasons for studying the ancient world. Nietzsche had first allowed us to see the politics behind the superficial appearance of autonomy in ethics, and he had seen it most clearly in evidence in his study of the ancients. We cannot go back to ancient conceptions or institutions—Williams was historicist enough to think that this was virtually self-evident—and we wouldn't want to practice ancient-style *politics* even if *per impossibile* we could do so. But by studying the ancients, we can learn one of the few rather general truths accessible to us in this area, namely, a truth about the primacy of politics. The very fact that Plato struggles with such relentless energy to establish the standing and authority of something—philosophy—that is purportedly prior to politics might actually be taken to reinforce this lesson from the ancient world.

If we cannot go back to ancient politics, what would a modern politics look like? One common way of proceeding is through so-called democratic theory: modern politics is democratic politics, and we can explain, understand, and criticize it with reference to the ideals of "democracy." Of course, if politics is really an art, there may be narrow limits to the kind of positive account one could give here. A monograph-length treatment of modern politics by Williams was never forthcoming; perhaps the book on Nietzsche he seems to have been planning to write at the end of his life would have contained some material about this, but of course we shall never know—but if there had been a book, I would have expected it to be very historical in its approach and to have little in common with approaches based on "democratic theory."

Williams took the central question of ethics to be that of Socrates, which he formulates as "How should one live?" but which one might gloss as "How is it needful to live?" (τίνα τρόπον χρὴ ζῆν; *Politeia* 352d). I merely note *en passant* that there are other possible questions one could take as lying at the heart of the Socratic search. These include: "What is the *good* life?" "What is the 'happy' (or successful or flourishing) life?" and "Who am I?"[4] One rather austere or minimalist way of trying to answer the question "How is it needful to live?" might be: How it is needful [for me] to live is what needs to happen in order that I live at all. Thus Voltaire complained to the royal censor who proposed to destroy his livelihood by banning the (satirical) publications on which his income depended: "Mais, Monsieur, il faut bien que je vive." This historically recurrent type of complaint is not, as one might expect, an indefeasible moral argument but has as its irrefutable response the reply of the censor: "Je n'en vois pas la necessité."[5] This dramatic scenario—which is played and replayed through the centuries between Carthaginians and Romans ("Carthago delenda est"), Louis Capet and Robespierre ("Louis doit mourir parce qu'il faut que la patrie vive"),[6] Herero tribesmen and German colonial administrators,[7] the Ukrainian peasantry and Stalin—

with different roles assigned historically to different individual and collective actors, and agents acted upon by others, has a first-person reflexive correlate. One might even say that the formula for any kind of human progress, not just for progressive and revolutionary change, is the thought that "What would be for the best would be if we—and people like us—simply did not exist." So before the establishment of the National Health Service in Britain, one can imagine large swathes of the population thinking that it was necessary for them to live in a certain way, for instance to learn to make hard choices between buying food and buying medical care for the members of their family; but they might also be capable of reflecting that it would be for the best if people of their kind—people who needed to learn what they had to learn and who then had to act accordingly—simply did not exist. Equally, one could imagine slaveholders or bankers or property developers thinking that it would be better for people like themselves not to exist. For that matter, one could imagine a "free man" in a society with slavery thinking that it was no criticism of *him* that he did not live the life of a slave but that also it would nevertheless be better for his whole class of people not to exist in the sense that it was defined, as the class it was, only by contrast to the enslaved population.

Williams used to say that the United States was the most eighteenth-century country in the world; it was, he thought, politically, socially, and culturally caught in a kind of time-warp, an apparently eternal present that was actually represented by some point in time in the 1790s. Williams never expatiated on what exactly he meant by this statement—I assume that the reason for this was he thought that this was a particular kind of interpretative statement: if you did see the point of it, you required no further elaboration because it would immediately ring true to certain experiences you had had, putting them in a certain intelligible order; and if you didn't see the point of it immediately, then no amount of further elaboration on his part would convince you. And then the statement might actually have a more potential long-term effect, if it was simply dropped so as to shat-

ter on the floor like a huge bit of unwanted crockery and the noise was allowed to reverberate through the room *sans commentaire*. Presumably part of what he meant, though, was that the country had never been able to move beyond a particularly archaic form of the struggle of the Enlightenment with its enemies. Nothing after Adam Smith and Kant really survived the Middle Passage to take root on the western side of the Atlantic, so the culture was stuck in a state of trench warfare between a party that identified itself (in some way or another) with Enlightenment Reason (either through commitment to the ideal rationality of "free markets," to technologically rational solutions to all problems, or to vapid Kantian "norms") and an obscurantist religious fundamentalism that was all the more dark for defining itself in contrast to reason. The relatively recent formation of a united front between some religious fundamentalists and free-marketeers is a politically significant development, a shift in a local tactical alliance, but it is not yet clear that it has any further significance.

To say that the United States is an eighteenth-century country is to give a historical interpretation and perhaps also express an attitude, but it is not, of course, to make a moral judgement in the technical sense in which some have wanted to construe the term "moral judgement." It is not to say that the population is vicious or the institutions corrupt. It is not the kind of statement one is liable to encounter in a book on "ethics" but rather the sort of thing someone like Herodotus would have said (if he had had a suitable concept of history and historical framework at his disposal). In his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness*, Williams tries to develop a theory about the relation between factual data and interpretation, which has always struck me as very close to the theory of the "constellation" one finds in Benjamin and Adorno. The stars that compose a constellation are physical objects of a certain kind and each has a set of empirically specifiable properties, a location in the sky, a certain relative magnitude, perhaps a colour. A constellation is not a mere collection but an organization of a set of stars into a recognizable and perhaps significant pattern: a bear, a hunter, a wagon, a set of twins. One cannot, of

course, create constellations *ad libitum*, using stars that are not already there, putting together stars that are too far apart from the human eye to see synoptically, or creating patterns that make no sense to us. So we—and what we are, as the historically located creatures we happen to be—partly determine what constellations there can be (for us) by virtue of setting out the limits of what can make sense to us. "What can make sense to us" is neither completely pre-given nor fully indeterminate, and to the extent to which we can change it, this can be done only over time, and probably only collectively. The sheerly physical data about the distribution of stars does not *require* us to group them into *this* set of constellations rather than some other, and in fact does not require us to group them into any constellations whatever. We don't invent or create stars by organizing them into constellations. Still—and this is the claim Adorno and Benjamin make—at any rate, in the realm of collective human action, culture, and politics, we are guided by constellations, not by the analogues of raw or theoretically manipulated astrophysical data, and there is no real alternative to that. It just is not possible to do without something like constellations. Similarly, Williams thought that there were facts that had the hard, unmalleable character we usually attribute to them and that could be discovered by "empirical" means (whatever they turn out to be). The U.S. Constitution had x-number of articles and article z was passed on such-and-such a day. On the other hand, the "positivist" dream that one could dispense with any interpretation and simply let the facts speak for themselves was just that—a dream. Similarly, no set of "facts" requires one to adopt a particular interpretation, but no interpretation that anyone would take seriously simply floats unconnectedly above the data or connects them in merely arbitrary ways.

Williams must have known that in asserting that the United States was an eighteenth-century country he was doing something that was very close to committing a modern American analogue of the *crimen maiestatis* by violating a central taboo of the state religion that holds the country together. This requires one always to assume that the

United States, at least in some idealized form, is the very model for modernity, progress, rationality, and so forth—not something itself to be evaluated. Of course, one can criticize individual performances of the government or even subordinate institutions, but only as a form of internal criticism, that is, only relative to the absolute assumption that the performance or the institution is a momentary falling short of the ideals the United States itself proclaims and fundamentally instantiates. I recall Williams making this claim in a series of lectures at Princeton in the 1980s—and the audible intake of breath among the members of the audience. I suppose that he was not being gratuitously offensive but was trying to make a constructive political intervention aimed at warning those of them who were susceptible to using their theoretical imagination at all that the exceptional conjunction of geography and history that had permitted the unparalleled prosperity particularly of the period between 1945 and 1975 would provide only a brief respite from history. Presumably, Williams saw that, by the mid-1980s, the layers of insulation were wearing sufficiently thin for him to propose to his audience that it might be advisable to prepare for the changes that were inevitably coming, even if this required them to think what was for them almost unthinkable.

Perhaps political and historical interpretations like this are a part of "moral and ethical thinking" in the wider sense which Williams tacitly accepts, and which he contrasts with the traditional academic study of "philosophical ethics." Williams, of course, as the last part of his comment on Christine Korsgaard's Tanner Lectures indicates,[8] does seem to have considerable sympathy for historicist ways of thinking, that is, for parallelization of "individual rational reflection and historical development"; and he had himself taken account of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, at least to the extent of being a serious student of Nietzsche, for whom the meaning of the individual human life is a central concern. It is not, however, obvious that he ever really gave Hegel a proper chance, and figures like Heidegger and Adorno—not to mention Deleuze and Guatarri—were effectively

outside his ken, meaning not, of course, that he didn't in some sense "know" who they were but that they were not sufficiently close to him in temperament and traditional intellectual formation for him to have interacted with them in a philosophically productive way. To be sure, in 2002 he agreed, after a certain amount of coaxing, to come and give a paper at the Frankfurt Conference on Adorno, which was to take place in 2003, but his final illness and death brought that possible line of development to a close. The argument that finally convinced Williams to come to Frankfurt was not the one for which I had had the highest hopes, namely, that he would find in Adorno, if he looked closely, a philosopher who was as interested as he was in taking up a position equidistant from the self-serving "liberalism" of the Anglo-American political world and the brutal practices of "really-existing socialism." This line of thought had no purchase, because I had completely misunderstood Williams. I took his adoption of some of the vocabulary and the motifs of liberalism to be a bit of intellectual realpolitik or perhaps protective coloration, but this was a complete misconception, based no doubt on an incorrect, wishful projection of my own attitudes onto a philosopher whose work I admired. Even to the end of his life, Williams showed flashes of what are now called "Old Labour" attitudes—"profits" for him were always inherently suspect and the fact that a particular legal, administrative, or economic reform would result in large profits for a corporation or a private individual was prima facie a good reason to oppose it. However, it was also the case that he felt as naturally comfortable paddling about in the tepid and slimy puddle created by Locke, J. S. Mill, and Isaiah Berlin as he did in most other places. In general, he was a man who was remarkably comfortable in his own skin and who fit in easily with the existing world of politics and academic society, despite his high scepticism about many of the purported theoretical pillars of that world. This, in fact, was perhaps one of the basic ways in which he was different from Adorno, who notoriously lived a life of great, not to say extreme, self-indulgence but made a point of not feeling comfortable in it. Adorno, in fact, insisted that it was a sign

of minimal human decency "not to be at home" in the world of late capitalism.[9]

What did finally move Williams to think it might be a good idea to come to Frankfurt was the prospect of discussions of Adorno's views on Wagner and on the philosophy of music. Williams had a keen interest in music, particularly opera, and was steeped in the music of Wagner. One of my most vivid recollections of him is of discussing with him the concept of "pornography" while he hummed "The Ride of the Valkyries" and spun his two hands around, imitating an old-style propeller-plane about to take off. The last lecture I heard him deliver was on Wagner's *Ring* in the Cambridge Music Faculty.[10] He had placed behind him the full University Orchestra—about a hundred players—who sat silent and immobile onstage during his lecture. After he finished speaking, Williams withdrew to a large high-backed chair with thick green upholstery and cushions, to the right of the players, and sat listening intently as the orchestra played Siegfried's Funeral Music. The chair was so large and Williams in his elder years had shrunk physically so much that he seemed like a kind of Bloomsbury Mime—Mime, the proper name of the dwarf in *Siegfried*, not the English word for a kind of silent actor—squatting on a throne in the afterlife, while looking down and listening in order to discover what had finally become of his nemesis Siegfried.

What interested Williams was the relation between political and moral success and failure in Wagner's *Ring*, and aesthetic success (or failure). Clearly, if Siegfried is intended to be a model, or even a specimen, of the Young Hegelian emancipated human being, free from the world of conventional morality and commercial "contracts" (*Verträge*)—that is, if one will, from Adam Smith and Kant—which still cripples Wotan, he is not a very convincing advertisement for the future. He is brutal, uncouth, empty-headed, and often simply nasty, and his life is a series of violent episodes that end in nothing much. Much of what he does, he does out of pig-ignorance or because he is being manipulated by others for their own ends. Few of his actions have the long-term or even medium-term results he intends,

and few of them end pleasantly for him. Presumably he enjoys sleeping with Brünnhilde (when he finally takes off her breastplate and discovers she is a woman like his mother and not a man); this interlude, however, seems to be very short-lived indeed—although, given that it takes place, as it were, "off-stage" between the end of *Siegfried* and the beginning of *Götterdämmerung*, one cannot actually be sure; but the composer of *Tristan* (Act 2) would certainly have had at his disposal the artistic means to indicate a lengthy period of happy dalliance, had he so wished. Instead of that, before you know it, Siegfried is off down the Rhine "zu neuen Taten," as Brünnhilde sings (*und neuen Katastrophen,* as we may add). This is the rather gloomy interpretation that Williams propounded. The question for him, then, was why the funeral music for such a "gescheiterte Existenz" was still so profoundly moving, despite the fact that it celebrated a "hero" whose heroism was of a particularly empty kind. This sense of the impressive combined with the not-really-fully-substantial recurs in discussions of Wagner's work. The musicologist John Deathridge describes the music for the entry of the gods into Valhalla at the end of *Rheingold* as "triumphant, but decidedly hollow."[11] Many listeners have this experience of it, and, in fact, it is possible that this effect was *intended* by Wagner. Despite his own megalomaniac tendencies and the desire for total domination of the audience, Wagner was perfectly capable of producing calculated effects of distancing within the overall aesthetic experience. After all, the "intellectual" in *Rheingold*, Loge, interrupts the relatively smooth-flowing waves of D-flat major to remark that the gods are so deluded and so self-destructive that he is almost embarrassed to associate with them ("Ihrem Ende eilen sie zu, / die so stark im Bestehen sich wähnen. / Fast schäme ich mich, / mit ihnen zu schaffen"; *Rheingold*, bars 3807–12).[12]

Siegfried's life and death are not, of course, meaningless in the sense that they have no important *effects* in the world. After all, *Götterdämmerung* ends with the image of Valhalla—that is, the capitalist world in which we all still live—in flames. That is one good result of what Siegfried has done, although it is not anything he intended.

Wagner reports in his autobiography that as he stood with his friend Bakunin on the barricade in Dresden during the revolution of 1848, Bakunin explained to him at great length and in detail why the joy in destruction was also a creative joy.[13] Williams, of course, had studied Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* very carefully and had a keen appreciation of ancient tragedy, but the Dionysian pleasure of the child on the beach who enjoys smashing up the sand castle he has just built[14] seemed to play no role in his writings on politics, which generally still breathe the air of the usual liberal platitudes. Williams's cheerful disposition and his successful life in the more comfortable regions of the Anglo-American establishment put him at some distance from a visceral sympathy with Bakunin. In this, too, he differed significantly from Adorno, who was much less impressed with Wagner's music as *music* than Williams was, and was therefore less puzzled than Williams by the (apparent) discrepancy between the failed and empty "heroism" of Siegfried and the quality of Wagner's musical treatment of it.[15]

There is, of course, another obvious way to read Siegfried's character and fate, which is different from the one Williams favours. Williams's interpretation depends on hearing the music as basically celebratory rather than merely elegiac, and so it was perfectly appropriate that his lecture ended with a performance of the passage. If one takes it as something closer to a threnody than a eulogy, it is possible to connect it not with Wagner's failure to present a fully convincing New Man but as a melancholy comment not on Siegfried in particular but on the whole world of the *Ring*. That Siegfried and his life are so unsatisfactory can be seen not as a form of failure on Wagner's part—failure to create a plausible artistic image of the new and emancipated individual—but rather as a success in representing what Wagner *intended* to represent. Perhaps Wagner's intention is precisely to dramatize the *necessary* failure of individual heroism and of manipulative projects of individual emancipation like those Wotan seeks to realize. Perhaps individual emancipation will never in our historical period and our economic system be able to develop into anything but

the radically defective version of "empty heroism" we find in Siegfried. One might, that is, take the *Ring* to instantiate one of Adorno's more spectacular claims, namely "Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen."[16] "There is no 'right life' in the false life" (i.e., there is no way for any individual to lead a "right/good life" in a social formation that is itself repressive, duplicitous, and alienated). Adorno uses "false" in a nonpropositional way, as the Rhine-maidens do when they describe the whole world of the gods as "falsch und feig": "Traulich und treu / ist's nur in der Tiefe; / falsch und feig / ist, was da oben sich freut!" (*Rheingold*, bars 3858–68). "Es gibt kein richtiges Leben im falschen" is Adorno's version of the old maxim that one cannot be communist man in a capitalist society. This, then, is part of the reason it would be a mistake to try to think about the case of Williams, or that of Adorno, through the lens of the moral category of "hypocrisy" in any straightforward way. The moral category designates an individual failing of some kind, which makes some sense primarily in contrast, for instance, to possible sincerity, but what is at issue here is a structural feature of society—if in fact Adorno is right—which makes a fully satisfactory life of complete consistency and sincerity impossible. One can analyse the different ways in which individuals deal with this impossible situation, and even have a more or a less sympathetic reaction to their predicament and to their perhaps different ways of responding to it. If Adorno is right, *their* predicament is also *our* predicament and, more pointedly—for me—*my* predicament. Analysing this situation and discussing attempts to deal with it—*all* of which are, Adorno believes, failures—seems a very different matter from merely diagnosing "hypocrisy." Had he been able to come to Frankfurt, it seems unlikely that Williams would have been able to avoid taking *some* explicit position on this.

At the beginning of *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, Williams writes that his position differs from that of most others in that he is more sceptical about the powers of philosophy and about ethical thought as a whole than most of his contemporaries are (3). At the end, however, after holing below the waterline views that depend on

too robust a theory of human nature or of rationality, Williams finds himself left with three sparks of optimism: optimism about truth, optimism about truthfulness, and optimism about "the meaning of individual life" (198). To lead a life in which a commitment to truth and truthfulness (of one kind or another) plays an important role (to one degree or other) is, of course, a less rigorous demand than living the Stoic or Kantian "life of reason." Even if we are capable of truth and capable of truthfulness, and even if these are important human goals, they are not the only human goals or possibly even the most important ones. As Nietzsche pointed out, the pursuit of truth for its own sake as a value in itself above all others requires a very peculiar configuration of the human soul, one that is not in all its incarnations irresistibly attractive.

Adorno shared Williams's high regard for Nietzsche, remarking in the 1930s that there was "more truth in the *Genealogy of Morality* than in [Bukharin's] *ABC of Communism*."[17] However, one of the points of *Minima Moralia* is that a Nietzschean focus on the individual life as an independent unit of meaningfulness is inappropriate in the social world in which we live, so Williams's relative optimism about the meaningfulness of such a life is not something that should be taken for granted.

Williams took an extremely dim view of the powers of reason to persuade. He once told me he had only one time in his life seen a case of a person convinced to give up a deeply held belief by the force of rational argumentation. This was when he was the chairman of the Royal Commission on Pornography, one of whose members was a former military man who was completely uninterested in any restrictions on sexual relations between humans or the depiction of such relations but was deeply anxious about bestiality. Men and women could do what they wanted with each other, as far as he was concerned, but what about pictures of men with sheep or cows; surely that could not be allowed. He was finally convinced in a lengthy, emotion-filled session that various arguments that he himself had presented implied that there should be no legal regulation of representations of bestiality

either. This man's conversion by the sheer power of reason was so unique in Williams's experience that he never forgot it. Nevertheless, I had high hopes for Williams's own motivational sensitivity to argument and thought that when confronted with Adorno's views in a form in which he could recognize them, he would himself gradually move closer to a more fully socially contextual and less individualist view of meaning and significance in human life.

This leaves us with no answers and a number of open questions, a result that should not in itself be lethally discouraging if Socrates rather than Kant or Bentham is one's guiding star. Socrates' enquiry is still pre-dogmatic, and although it can be seen as in some sense the origin of "ethics" as a discipline, it still stands outside the closed circle that ethics becomes. "How should one live?" is amenable to a collective response and the quest for such a response is potentially open-ended.

Among the open issues is the Hegelian/Marxist question about the very possibility of a cognitively significant study of the meaningfulness of a mere individual life, if that is undertaken without reference to the wider social context. On at least one reading of the main thrust of this tradition, the question of the meaningfulness of individual life is by no means a universal one but rather arises only under specific social conditions; and what answers, if any, are available to it also depend on historical circumstances. For Marx, in particular—if the question even arises as a "real" question, that is, one that grips people—that in turn means that society is deficient. If society was fundamentally in order, the question of meaningfulness would not even arise: either it would be truly incomprehensible or it would be experienced by those living in the society as a merely peculiar oddity, or a form of mental disease, not as something with an existential grip on them. From the fact that in the Soviet era this thought was misused to incarcerate political dissidents in mental institutions, it does not follow that *no* version of the underlying thought is at all sensible. That the question of the meaningfulness of life does not arise, of course, would not mean that human life in such a society would be a

bowl of cherries, for there is presumably a difference—all the difference in the world, some might think—between being sad and being existentially gripped by the meaninglessness of it all.

So the short, and perhaps all too obvious, answer to the question posed at the start of this chapter is "yes" and "no": at least during his mature period, which started in the 1980s, Williams was not doing "ethics," if one means by that trying to provide a fully general, rationally based doctrine (a *Lehre*) that would answer the question "How should one live?" Certainly there could be no general doctrine of the good life or of how to live that was based on either of the two traditional central concepts: human nature (as the Aristotelian tradition would have it) or "rationality" (in the modern world, perhaps most closely associated with one or another form of Kantianism).

"How should one live?" might itself be more ambiguous than traditionally thought, and in any one of its incarnations might be only one of a variety of different practical questions we might sensibly ask, not the hegemonic one dominating all others. All of these questions will have a distinct political dimension, and if one were to insist that part of the point of "How should one live?" is that the answer to it would have to give us a general orientation in life that in some sense trumps others, the way to discuss that question would be through a study of history and politics, and the only "answer" to this would not be a doctrine but a form of political engagement. "Universal Reason" or *abstract* rationality, to the extent to which it was meaningful at all, was too thin and anodyne to be of any substantial help here. So the forms of traditional ethics Williams is furthest away from are Kantianism, Divine Command versions of Christianity, and utilitarianism; and the form that is closest to him would be some form of Aristotle, or of that modern extended version of Aristotle that Hegel developed. What would, however, finally constitute a barrier between Aristotle and Williams would be the recognition of the role of history. Aristotle had a notion of teleological development, to be sure, but no notion of history and certainly nothing even remotely like the modern idea of a "historical consciousness." This meant that there

were very strict limits to an Aristotelian's ability to be fully and appropriately aware of his or her own location in the world and to his or her ability to take a nondogmatic view. Hegel in one sense did know about history, but also assumed it was closed, and connected it with an implausibly powerful and determinate notion of Reason. Ethics, or rather *Moralität* and *Sittlichkeit*, play an appropriately subordinate role in Hegel's system, and one might argue that Hegel's achievement lay precisely in showing that a construct like "the System" in all its glory was the price one would have to pay for retaining a determinate "philosophical ethics" of any kind in the modern world. Suppose now we decided to abandon the narrow limitations imposed on us by traditional ideas of what a "philosophical ethics" could (and must) be. Then one could imagine ways of orienting ourselves in the world that went beyond the sorts of things envisaged and discussed in traditional forms of ethics. So general discussions about ourselves, our world, and our place in that world might come to encompass not just the usual tired discussions about what is rational, what has utility, or what is right but also such things as what is an "eighteenth-century" social and cultural system, and whether the United States essentially instantiated such a system, whether Siegfried's funeral music was celebratory, elegiac, or something else, and what that might tell us about certain conceptions of individualism. These discussions could be perfectly legitimate successors to the original Socratic enquiry, without being forms of thought that could sensibly be pursued within the confines of philosophical ethics.

It is Plato's *claim* that there can be no secure discrimination between good and bad without something like a philosophical ethics, and most philosophers for two thousand years accepted this claim. As Williams points out, though, there seems to be reason to have—to put it mildly—strong reservations about this claim. In the *Ion* (537a–b), Plato's Socrates discusses the passage in Homer's *Iliad* (23.335–40) in which Nestor gives Antilochus advice about chariot racing: When you come to the turning post, lean over to the left of the horses, and be sure not to graze the posts with your wheel. Socrates gets the rhap-

sode Ion to admit that a charioteer would know better than a poet whether this is good advice or not, but the next step in Plato's argument, about which he is very coy at the end of *Ion* but which comes out very clearly in other dialogues, is that a philosopher who ex officio is an expert in ethical theorizing would know *even better* than a charioteer whether this is good advice. This further step in no way follows and is inherently highly implausible.

"Ethics" in the sense he finds objectionable is defined by Williams as motivated by a tacit affirmative answer to the question: "[Is there] beyond some things that human beings have themselves shaped . . . anything at all that is intrinsically shaped to human interests, in particular to human beings' ethical interests?"[18] Western "ethics" holds that the universe or history or the structure of human reason can, when properly understood, yield a pattern that makes sense of human life and human aspirations. Sophocles and Thucydides, by contrast, are alike in leaving us with no such sense. Each of them represents human beings as dealing sensibly, foolishly, sometimes catastrophically, sometimes nobly with a world that is only partially intelligible to human agency and in itself not well adjusted to ethical aspirations.

The assumption on which "ethics" rests, that "at some level of the world's constitution there is something to be discovered that makes ultimate sense of our concerns," is illusory.[19]

On the other hand, the demise of ethics as a philosophical discipline will still leave much of our usual evaluative discourse unaffected. Achilles will still be able to berate Agamemnon as a dog-eyed bundle of shamelessness, ever-greedy for gain (*Iliad* l.148–71), Solon, feigning madness, will still call upon the Athenians to fight for Salamis (*Fragment 2*), Pindar will still proclaim the respective virtues of water and gold (*Olympian 1*), and Thucydides will still be able to discuss the merits of the grand strategy of Perikles during the war with the Peloponnesians (2.59–65) and the character of Nikias (7.86).

Williams was very taken with Goethe's translation of the beginning of the gospel of Saint John, ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος as "Im Anfang war die Tat," but that is only half the story. The other half is given by Marx

in the *Theses on Feuerbach*: "Die Philosophen haben die Welt nur verschieden *interpretiert*, es kommt darauf an, sie zu *verändern*" (11). We are not, of course, now in a situation in which it is realistically possible for us to envisage any fundamental change in our world that we could ourselves bring about by our own efforts. That perhaps is part of the reason so much of contemporary philosophy seems merely scholastic. Since I also suppose that the operation of various long-term processes will soon make most of the people in the world significantly worse off than they now are, this situation of enforced immobility is extremely unlikely to last long. There is, to be sure, no guarantee that, in the future, constructive change, whatever that will turn out to mean, will in any way be open to us.

11

The Wisdom of Oedipus and the Idea of a Moral Cosmos

In the spring of 1989 the distinguished philosopher Bernard Williams gave the Sather Lectures to the Department of Classics at the University of California at Berkeley, and these lectures were in due course published under the title *Shame and Necessity*. Many people, including me, consider this to be Williams's finest book, and it is a striking fact about it that it both begins and ends with quotations from the poet Pindar. The exergue, the very first part of the printed book a reader will encounter, is three very famous lines from a poem that Pindar seems to have written very late in his life, the Eighth Pythian. In fact there is some reason to believe that this poem is not just late but the very last poem by Pindar that is extant.

> ἐπαμέροι· τί δέ τις; τί δ᾽ οὔ τις; σκιᾶς ὄναρ
> ἄνθρωπος. ἀλλ᾽ ὅταν αἴγλα διόσδοτος ἔλθῃ
> λαμπρὸν φέγγος ἔπεστιν ἀνδρων καὶ μείλιχος αἰών [ll. 95–97]

Williams leaves these three lines in Greek without translating them. They aren't actually cryptic in the way in which some parts of poems by Pindar are. That is, it is not the case that one does not know at all what they mean; the general sense is clear, but the mode of expression is exceedingly condensed, polysemous in detail, and pleasingly harsh. Pindar has been drawing the listeners' attention to the instability of

good fortune, prosperity, and the pleasures of life (τὸ τερπνόν, l. 93), then comes the cited passage. A prose paraphrase might run:

> We humans have a very brief time of life; we live for only one day. What then can any human being ever finally amount to? And what is forever beyond our grasp? Man is the shadow of a dream. But when a god gives him glory, a bright light plays over him and the span of his life is easy to bear.

It is easy to romanticise "last words," for instance, to assume that one can find distilled in them the wisdom of a lifetime. We are not, however, absolutely sure whether this is a "late" poem by Pindar, and a fortiori we can't be sure it is the last even of his extant works. Why, in any case, assume that final thoughts are better than earlier ones? However this might be, the sentiments expressed here do not seem to be in any special sense the specific products of the reflections at the end of a long and active life, but are meant to formulate an attitude towards life and the world that we can trace everywhere in Pindar's work from the earliest to the latest poems (whichever these are): Human life is essentially both insubstantial and grim; if this seems not to be the case in some particular instance, that is because something outside our control—a god—has for a brief moment given some individual the gift of shining a ray of light on him; we know that that light won't last.

In contrast to the exergue, which might, but more likely does not contain some special "last words" of Pindar, it is natural to think that the very last words of a book are intended to be particularly important, perhaps, in a book of philosophy, to be something like a conclusion. Williams ends *Shame and Necessity* with a passage from Pindar's Fourth Pythian, which is cited in his own translation

> *Take to heart what may be learned from Oedipus:*
> *If someone with a sharp axe*
> *hacks off the boughs of a great oak tree,*
> *and spoils its handsome shape;*

although its fruit has failed, yet it can give an account of itself
if it comes later to a winter fire,
or if it rests on the pillars of some palace
and does a sad task among foreign walls,
when there is nothing left in the place it came from.

This is a peculiar way for Williams to end his book for several reasons. First, it is strange that a major philosopher like Williams would end his own book with *someone else's* words. In addition, although it is not absolutely unprecedented, it is not exactly usual and customary for a philosopher to end a book by citing a bit of poetry;[1] after all, ever since Plato[2] philosophers have repeatedly tried to establish themselves as practitioners of a discipline which, whatever its form and content, was certainly *not* a kind of "poetry." Finally, it is extremely odd to end a philosophy book, especially a book of "analytic philosophy"—if one accepts that that term has any distinct meaning and that Williams belongs to the tradition of analytic philosophy—with a literary fragment that is itself rather obscure. Analytic philosophy prides itself on its commitment to clarity, so conceivably it might *begin* with some traditional dark and difficult sayings with the intention of "clarifying" them during the course of its own treatment, but it wouldn't, as it were, lead up to and conclude with an enigma. So what exactly does this fragment from Pindar mean and why is it there?

One of the main theses Williams propounds in all his work on the ancient world is that we cannot go back to a past world and shouldn't even regret too much that we cannot do that. But, he says, "if we find things of special beauty and power in what has survived from that world, it is encouraging to think we might move beyond marvelling at them, to putting them, or bits of them, to modern uses. An image of Pindar's is right."[3] Then comes the text just cited above. I should like to ask first what Williams takes this image of Pindar's to mean and why he thinks it is marvellous and "right," and then say a few words about "modern uses" to which it might be put.

The meaning and significance of the image becomes clear only in the context of the poem as a whole. The Fourth Pythian is an *epinikion*, a choral poem for public performance celebrating the victory in the chariot race won at the Pythian Games by Arkesilaos, the king of Cyrene, which was a small Greek πόλις in Libya on the north coast of Africa. It is by far the longest choral poem that has survived from antiquity, comprising thirteen triads, and its political character is also particularly explicit. This ode has an extremely complex structure, and a proper account of it as a work of literature would need to reflect that, but for the purposes of *this* discussion it is enough to say that it falls into two very unequal parts. I assume here that it is legitimate to divide up texts in different ways depending on the interpreter's purpose. The first part is the standard Pindaric praise of Arkesilaos and his family, mixing together what we would distinguish as real historical stories about his illustrious recent ancestors and the colonisation of the city of Cyrene with what we would call "mythical stories" about the exploits of some of his supposed further ancestors back to the time of the Argonauts.[4] The emphasis in this first part is on the continuity of the family to which Arkesilaos belonged and the divine origin of their claim to rule Cyrene. Pindar tells the story of an extremely convoluted series of adventures, peregrinations, and migrations, including the acquisition of a magic clod of earth from a god, a prophecy, and an oracle all documenting the warrant that Arkesilaos's family has to rule Libya, that is, he gives what one might call a "positive" genealogy of the Cyrenaic monarchy and Arkesilaos as king.

This first part is in itself longer, about twice as long in fact, as most of the other *epinikia* by Pindar that have survived, so, as it were, he could easily have stopped there. However, he does not, and after a brief transition passage Pindar talks directly to Arkesilaos about the current political situation in his kingdom. There obviously has been a *stasis*, an attempted uprising or coup d'état that has failed, and as a result various aristocrats have been exiled.[5] Although Arkesilaos and the monarchy have survived the coup, the political situation still

seems very unsettled. Pindar, or at any rate the "I" of the poem, makes a direct appeal to Arkesilaos to heal the political troubles by recalling one of the exiled nobles, Damophilus, to Cyrene. The passage that Williams cites constitutes the point of transition from the first to the second part. So the basic structure is:

Part I: Arkesilaos comes from an illustrious family and has a god-given warrant to rule Cyrene. In addition to this, the gods have made him quick of understanding.

Transition: This is the passage Williams cites at the end of *Shame and Necessity*: So if, Arkesilaos, you are as quick of understanding as your ancestors were, learn from Oedipus.

Part II: You can be your own physician for the troubles that beset you [ἐσσὶ δ'ἰατὴρ ἐπικαιρότατος (270)]; recall Damophilus from exile; despite everything, he is a good man. This will heal your polis.

To turn then to the passage Williams himself cites, the Greek text reads:

γνῶθι νῦν τὰν Οἰδιπόδα σοφίαν· εἰ
γάρ τις ὄζους ὀξυτόμῳ πελέκει
ἐξερείψειεν μεγάλας δρυός, αἰσχύ-
νοι δέ οἱ θαητὸν εἶδος,
καὶ φθινόκαρπος ἐοῖσα διδοῖ ψᾶφον περ΄ αὐτᾶς,
εἴ ποτε χειμέριον πῦρ ἐξίκηται λοίσθιον,
ἢ σὺν ὀρθαῖς κιόνεσσιν
δεσποσύναισιν ἐρειδομένα
μόχθον ἄλλοις ἀμφέπει δύστανον ἐν τείχεσιν,
ἐὸν ἐρημώσαισαα χῶρον

One immediately striking thing about Williams's version is that he seems to have translated the first line in a slightly idiosyncratic way: γνῶθι νῦν τὰν Οἰδιπόδα σοφίαν becomes not, as one might expect, "know the wisdom of Oedipus" but "take to heart what may be learned from Oedipus." What exactly is going on here? The term "wisdom,"

which stands out vividly in the original, becomes invisible in the translation.

What, then, is this wisdom of Oedipus, what should Arkesilaos learn from it, and what might *we* be able to learn from it? I suggest there are three possible ways of understanding "the wisdom of Oedipus."

First, then, the expression "the wisdom of Oedipus" raises the expectation that we will be told the content of that "wisdom," given perhaps a summary of all Oedipus had learned about life in a single pithy saying. This is not in itself an inherently unreasonable expectation. Interspersed with the praise of rulers and athletes, we find in Pindar's *epinikia* a rather large number of short, pithy, often slightly obscure or ambiguous general observations about the world, nuggets of wisdom, such as

> Νόμος ὁ πάντων βασιλεύς
> θνατῶν τε καὶ ἀθανάτων
>
> ["Customary usage is the King of both mortals and immortals" (Fr. 169)]
>
> σκιᾶς ὄναρ ἄνθρωπος
>
> ["Man is the shadow of a dream" (Pythian VIII, 95–96)]
>
> πιστὸν δ' ἀπίστοις οὐδέν
>
> ["Nothing seems trustworthy to those who are themselves untrustworthy" (Fr. 233)]

Wisdom-literature in general already had a long history by the time of Pindar. Thus Nietzsche cites the purported archaic "wisdom of Silenus" that life is inherently not worth living for humans,[6] but even earlier writers than the ones whom Nietzsche cites recognised a pantheon of seven wise men—they didn't agree on who these seven wise men were, but they were sure there were seven of them—and many of these men were associated with one or more particular pithy sayings summing up their respective forms of wisdom.[7] These ranged

from the profound ("Nothing in excess"; "Know thyself") through the homely ("Keep control of your tongue, your belly and your private parts"; "Resist anger"; "Honour old age"; "Don't laugh at someone who is down on their luck") to the cryptic or, frankly, weird. Thus Pythagoras had time between bouts of mathematical mania to issue specimens of wisdom such as "Abstain from beans." We don't know why he thought that only the bean-free life was worth living for man because he does not tell us, but then that is a general characteristic of much of this literature. It only occasionally gives any *reason* for the gem of wisdom. Diogenes Laertius cites Aristotle as giving five different reasons, including that beans look like the genitals, that each one was "like the nature of the universe" (τῇ τοῦ ὅλου φύσει ὅμοιον; D.L. viii.34), and that they are an inherently oligarchical food because they were used in some cities for choosing rulers, and Diogenes himself adds a sixth, namely their tendency to produce flatulence. The huge variety of reasons makes it clear that people did not really know and were just making up plausible-sounding theories for a prohibition whose original significance was lost. Some of these bits of wisdom had esoteric meaning. Thus we are told that "Don't poke the fire with your knife" was a saying of Pythagoras. As any little boy knows, there is good reason not to poke a fire with one's knife because the heat of the fire can destroy the tempering of the blade and make it dull. We are told, however, that this really meant: Don't further irritate someone who is already angry. Perhaps the prohibition of beans also had such an esoteric meaning.

Not all expressions of wisdom took the form of prohibitions or injunctions. Thus a sixth-century sage named Phokulides had the archaically charming habit of starting his pithy sayings, which were in verse, with the phrase using his own name and telling you that this is what he thinks: "This, too, is <a wise saying of> Phokulides." This would be a bit like Confucius saying in his own voice: "Confucius, he say." Some of Phokulides' gnomic verses do contain straightforward imperatives or warnings, but others take a less directly injunctive form, for instance,

καὶ τόδε Φωκυλίδου· πόλις ἐν σκοπέλωι κατὰ κόσμον
οἰκεῦσα σμικρὴ κρέσσων Νίνου ἀφραινούσης[8]

[This, too, is <a wise saying> of Phokulides: a polis on a rocky outcrop that is living according to proper order, even if it is small, is stronger than imprudent Nineveh.]

This saying does not tell you what to do to maintain good order in a polis—or how to establish a polis if you do not happen already to live in one—but it does give you a way of orienting yourself in action by presenting a comparative evaluation of two structures.

This notion of "good or proper order" is understandably central to early Greek thought. The expression Phokulides uses, κατὰ κόσμον—"in good order" or "conforming to the proper order"—is clearly very old and appears, for example, with great frequency in the Homeric epics. There it is often used to describe the effective marshalling of troops for battle: they are arranged in good and proper order for battle. An expression from the same root is used as part of a formulaic description of a leader. Thus, Agamemnon and Menelaus are δύω κοσμήτορε λαῶν (*Il.* I.16 [OCT, but punctuation changed]), two marshallers of the people. "Cosmos" usually carries with it laudatory overtones, that is, it is a good order. The same word "cosmos" is also used to refer to ornaments or adornments of the kind worn by women or put on the harnesses of horses. So it is an inherently beautiful, attractive, or otherwise pleasing kind of order. Diogenes Laertius tells us that the bean-fearing Pythagoras was the first to use the word "cosmos" to refer to the sky or the heavens (τὸν οὐρανόν, D.L. viii.48). We have no idea, of course, whether this is right. Diogenes is a notoriously relatively late and highly dodgy source, there are serious doubts in fact about whether Pythagoras ever existed,[9] and so a fortiori there must be doubts about whether he used the word *kosmos* in any sense at all; and even if we knew he did exist and did use the word in some more extensive way, we would not be sure what exactly he meant by it. It is, I think, significant that contrary to what one might have expected, the word *kosmos* does not occur in Hesiod. Even if Diogenes

is completely wrong about Pythagoras, it is important that he has the feeling that it is not natural, self-evident, or universally accepted that one may use the word "cosmos" in a more general way, that is, not merely to describe a certain trinket, or a particular form of order in a particular army or city, but to refer to the sky, the heavens, or indeed the world as a whole considered as a unitary, attractively ordered structure. Rather than being obvious, this, he thinks, needs some further explanation, and he thinks there was a time when people did *not* use "cosmos" to refer to the world as a whole, as they did by his time. So there has been, he thinks, a change that is a significant enough conceptual change to require some account of how and when that happened.

Historians of philosophy have shown a strong tendency to backdate the idea that the physical world at any rate is a unitary whole, sometimes as far back as Thales. I'm not erudite enough to have an interesting opinion on this, so I shall not discuss it, but when some Greek probably in the sixth or very early fifth century BC, whoever he was, first looked out at everything and called it a unitary, attractive structure, something changed.[10] When this idea gradually ceased to be the esoteric speculation of an isolated individual and began to put down roots and have an effect on the wider culture and society, this represents a significant transformation. There had been various stories about what our world was like and how it emerged, about the nature of the gods, about the origin of various human families, about the fate of notable human individuals and groups, and, of course, all humans, as far as we can tell, make certain general assumptions, often unarticulated assumptions, about how the world in which they live is constituted. What is, as it were, added by the use of the concept "cosmos" is that *all* these stories are to be embedded in a *single* structure that has the property of coherence. They all have finally to fit together beautifully. Once one has the idea that the world constitutes a cosmos, it seems a small further step to think that its beautiful order will be accessible to us in some way: we will be able to see that order or reason our way to some kind of noetic apprehension of it.

Even if many people now might be inclined retrospectively to focus on the importance of construing the physical, biological, and astronomical world as a (unitary) cosmos, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that there is an analogue to this conception in thinking about morality. We can imagine our *moral* lives as constituting something like a cosmos. Just as, correctly understood, the parts of the material universe cohere nicely, so we might also suppose that our own moral views, correctly understood, were fundamentally unitary, coherent, and accessible to us through reflection, or at any rate that our central beliefs could be put in order—with some minor revisions that we can come to see are necessary—by straightforward means (including simple empirical observation of consequences and reflection). I emphasise that there are (*at least*) two distinct strands in this. The first is that we can become at least minimally self-transparent to ourselves morally; we can come to know what our moral beliefs are. The second is that these beliefs, or at least an important central core of these beliefs, will turn out to be, or, perhaps with some slight revision, can viably be made to be coherent with each other. If the world of human morality is to form a cosmos, however, one might think it is not enough that all our beliefs about values, principles of action, duties, and so forth can be made coherent and rationally transparent and intelligible to us. The world we encounter must make sense to us and be intelligible as one in which it is possible to *live* in a way conformable to at least our minimal ethical expectations, aspirations, and demands. The world must, as Williams puts it, be at least minimally "adjusted to [human] ethical aspirations," that is, "at some level of the world's constitution there is something to be discovered that makes ultimate sense of our concerns."[11] To speak of "the world's constitution" here also implies that what makes ultimate sense of our concerns has some property of being natural or metaphysically necessary; it is not an accidental or contingent trait or one merely imposed on an inherently indifferent or recalcitrant world. The compatibility of world and morality is out there to be discovered, not

something we (or anyone) invent or construct. One might think of this as a third strand in a view of the world as a moral cosmos in the fullest possible sense. The particular way in which the world makes moral sense may be highly complex and the object of sharply diverging speculation, but at some level there must, if the world is a moral cosmos, be a connection between the way the world fundamentally is and our own deepest human interests, particularly our ethical interests.

Since the idea of a "moral cosmos" comprises these three elements, the rejection of any one of the three would indicate that this conception was not fully present. Thus if one thinks that self-knowledge is seriously limited so that in some important sense one cannot know what one's own deepest moral beliefs are, this would be toxic for any conception of the world as a moral cosmos. Or if one thought that one's moral beliefs could not be organised into a single more or less stable, consistent system, perhaps because some of them were just irremediably contradictory or were too fluid and kept changing under scrutiny, this, too, would rule out any view of the world as a moral cosmos. Finally, if the external world exhibits no particular morally relevant order at all, if that order is merely local or very fragmentary, or if it is clear that "nature" will seriously or even actively thwart us in our attempt to lead a morally good life, the world we live in is not a cosmos.

There is a traditional conception according to which philosophy is structured around the pursuit of "wisdom" of a certain kind. What "wisdom" is that? Williams describes the main line of traditional philosophy not as a kind of principled and realistic attempt to come to terms with our world as it is but as a form of addiction to the production and propagation of fantasies of a certain kind.[12] Philosophy, and especially moral philosophy, has exhibited an almost pathologically compulsive need to give humans good news about their situation in the world. "Good news" in Greek, of course is "εὐαγγέλιον," so one might say that Williams's project in life was to stop moral philosophy

from continuing to be quite as evangelical as it had been in the past. What, though, is the content of the "gospel" philosophy has preached? In a word, it is that our world constitutes a "moral cosmos."

For Williams, the acquisition of this conception that our world is a moral cosmos is a major turning point in intellectual history. There is, he says, a deep "ditch" between archaic forms of thought such as those of Pindar, Sophocles, and Thucydides, which distinctly lack the conception of the world as a moral cosmos, and "philosophical theories" such as those of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, and Hegel, all of whom in one way or another are committed to this conception. Of course, the "gospel" a philosopher preaches can be, as it were, "thicker," more detailed and substantial, and more pleasant for us, or less so. Hegel constitutes one of the extreme poles. On his view, we can come to see that the whole universe, including the world of politics and history, is rational and systematically ordered in such a way as to be amenable to our real interests and aspirations, and thus is potentially a "home" for us. Kant has perhaps the thinnest and most minimalist version of the gospel: We cannot *know* that the external world of nature would even in principle show itself to be malleable to our ethical aspirations, and this is to some extent chastening. On the other hand, however, we can know first that nature has a systematic and rational structure and second that our ethical life is fully coherent, fully intelligible to us, and under our control. We can't *know* what the actual outcome of our action in the world will be, but, Kant holds, that is morally not relevant because we can know clearly what our duty is and this is morally sufficient. Furthermore, we can have not "knowledge" but a rationally grounded *hope* that all will turn out for the best if only we do our duty.[13]

One must resist the tendency to think of there being a smooth historical progression from "tragedy" to "philosophy." This is not correct because, for one thing, although one of the major tragedians, Aeschylus, does seems to have a very robust sense of the universe as a moral cosmos, in this he seems very different from Sophocles (and also Thucydides). There is, however, a more important reason to re-

ject this way of seeing things. Sophoclean tragedy is about kings and heroic figures—Ajax, Heracles, Creon, Oedipus —but it is also in a deep sense "realistic": it is about people (eventually) facing up to the dire situations in which they actually find themselves without flinching and making difficult choices. (Old) comedy, on the other hand, deals with ordinary folk, but it is also an inherently exaggerated and fantastical genre. Archetypically a comedy begins with a disturbed, disordered, and painful situation, for instance a state of war, which is highly unsatisfactory for the protagonist, who is not in any way heroic. In many of the plays of Aristophanes the "war" in question is a real one and they were first presented during the Great War between Athens and Sparta. The comic protagonist has a "bright idea" that is imaginative but utterly absurd: end the war by making an *individual* separate peace with the Spartans (*Acharians*), breed a huge dung-beetle and fly him up to heaven to get peace from Zeus (*Peace*), have the women go on a sex-strike until the men make peace (*Lysistrata*), or build a new city of peace in the sky and support it by charging the gods a toll to fly around in heaven (*Birds*). Each comedy ends, notoriously, with a vivid "resolution," a return of order, or a happy ending often characterised in relatively crude and down-to-earth terms as peace, lots of eating and drinking, music, dancing, and lots of sex. (Old) comedy thus in one way also tells us a kind of "good news" that is absent from Sophoclean tragedy—despite appearances we *can* get back to a life with lots of creature comforts—but only through inventing and activating a bizarre, ludic, and utterly unrealistic mechanism (e.g., founding a "city-in-the-clouds"). Philosophy is not the "natural" successor of tragedy but, if anything, of comedy. It is a kind of comedy without the humour. The "resolution" or "happy ending" philosophy envisages is perhaps less Rabelaisian than that of Old Comedy: rationally moderated εὐδαιμονία, psychological ἀταραξία, or metaphysical *Versöhnung* instead of eating, drinking, marriage, feasting, and orgies, but the means are equally delusional and fanciful. Comedy tells us that Trugaios can get out of the painful reality of the Peloponnesian War by mounting his giant dung-beetle; philosophy makes

the parallel claim that you can attain harmony, success, and happiness in the world by believing in Reason or God or Duty or *Geist* or the Ideas. What replaces the jokes is po-faced ratiocination sprinkled with occasional sanctimonious effusions. The two most egregious examples of this are Seneca (whom Nietzsche unforgettably calls the "Toreador der Tugend")[14] and Kant ("Duty! you sublime grand name, you who have nothing attractive about you which would flatter, but who require subjugation. . . . what is your worthy origin, where does one find the root of your noble decent?"),[15] but they stand *instar omnium*.

Where does this leave the wisdom of Oedipus? This first approach to his wisdom appears to have led nowhere, except to see that whatever the wisdom of Oedipus is, it is not like the evangelical annunciation of the existence of a moral cosmos that is the content of most forms of philosophy. Pindar does not in fact give us any nugget of distilled Oedipean wisdom of any kind that can be formulated in a single pithy saying. Pindar cannot, of course, express by direct assertion in a pithy saying the fact that he lacks the concept of a moral cosmos or that he rejects the idea that human life constitutes a cosmos, if the concept of a moral cosmos is really a *later* human acquisition.

A second possibility, then, is that Oedipus's wisdom consists in the mastery of a practical skill that cannot be easily summed up in a single saying or a body of doctrine, like the skill of a good diplomat, a good old-style carpenter, or a good military leader. Pindar repeatedly refers to his own skill as a poet as his σοφία,[16] which equally requires the discerning composition of a work that is appropriate to the occasion for which it is commissioned.

Thinking about σοφία in this way immediately mobilises a second expectation: If one asks what notable cognitive skill did Oedipus have, one likely answer will be that he was good at guessing riddles. As Williams notes, the ancient scholiast takes this reference to "the wisdom of Oedipus" in exactly this sense, when he remarks on this passage:[17] προτρέπεται τὸν Ἀρκεσίλαον ὁ Πινδάρος συνορᾶν αὐτοῦ τὸ αἴνιγμα. τὸ γὰρ Οἰδιπόδα σοφίαν τοῦτο βούλεται, ὅτι κἀκεῖνος τὸ τῆς Σφίγγος αἴνιγμα ἔλυσεν. ["Pindar is trying to get Arkesilaos to see the

relevance of his riddle. The phrase 'wisdom of Oedipus' refers to the fact that he, too, was able to solve a riddle, that of the Sphinx."] So the scholiast takes the whole image of the oak that is chopped down and then used in the fire or as a part of a building as a "riddle." In the version of the story with which most of us are familiar, there is both a problem and a riddle. The riddle is the question the Sphinx asks; the problem is that she kills people if they can't answer her riddle. These are connected, but they are not the same thing. It is one thing to exercise the relatively detached cognitive capacity that allows one to find the answer to a riddle; this is like doing a crossword puzzle, or solving an anagram, or proving a proposition in elementary logic. It is another to solve a pressing practical problem that requires one to respond to the exigencies of some current situation. Just as these two things are combined in the Sphinx's questioning, so they are also combined in Oedipus's response. He solved the riddle of the Sphinx by applying it to the present situation and himself, and discovered that by solving the riddle he had also resolved the problem, because the Sphinx killed herself when her riddle didn't terminally stump him. In addition, as has often been pointed out, Oedipus was *himself* the solution to the riddle: He was the thing that walks on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening (namely a human being). So the progression would be:

(a) You, Arkesilaos, have the problem of governing this unruly city.
(b) You come from a family renowned for their good counsel, so learn to solve my riddle, as Oedipus solved the riddle of the Sphinx.
(c) Like Oedipus, you can yourself be the solution to your problem; just realise that Damophilus is like that oak log I have just described; the log is displaced but still useful. Recall Damophilus and use him well.

The parallel is not exact because solving Pindar's riddle is not at the same time solving the problem of stasis in Kyrene, and there seem to

be two parties to Pindar's riddle—Arkesilaos and Damophilus—rather than one. Still there is sufficient similarity to support the comparison and the image.

Williams does not completely reject the view put forward by the scholiast, but he also argues that there is another, a third, possible way of reading this passage that makes it, in his words, "more interesting."[18] The third possibility is that what is called "the wisdom of Oedipus" is not a detachable skill that Oedipus exercises, such as guessing riddles, but rather that *we* can acquire wisdom of some kind by observing under the right circumstances the way in which *he* acts. So think of the phrase "learn the wisdom *of* Oedipus" as meaning "learn wisdom *from* thinking about the actions and fate of Oedipus." Of course, I can learn wisdom even from studying a case of someone who does not himself instantiate wisdom. I can, for instance, to some extent learn wisdom by observing the mistake of exercising or failure to exercise wisdom, just as I can learn something about the importance of avoiding indecisiveness in war by studying the actions and fate of Nikias in Sicily or, for that matter, just as I can learn the importance of informed knowledge and moderation in aggression by studying the folly of the Athenian decision to send a military expedition to Sicily in the first place.

Note that Williams's reading need not imply that Oedipus is not in his own way wise, merely that in *this* context the point is not whether or not *he* is wise but whether or not Arkesilaos can make a "wise modern use" of thinking about Oedipus's life and fate. Pindar then gives Arkesilaos an indication of *how* he should learn from Oedipus. This indication is not in the form of a discursive explanation of Oedipus's fate or the explicit drawing of a moral from it but in the form of an image. You can learn from Oedipus if you think of him and his life as figured in the fate of the oak tree. Let me for the purposes of analysis distinguish two aspects of Oedipus-as-oak-tree. First of all, the oak tree is described as absolutely separated from anything that could be called the "natural" conditions of flourishing. It has been cut down with violence, its natural beauty has been defiled, its fruit

has withered, it has been taken away from its natural place and thus left that place desolate.[19]

Aristotle, who is one of the most thoroughgoing and explicit theorists of the moral cosmos, tended to think of human moral life as analogous to biological phenomena. Humans and their environment are "naturally" suited to each other. A good human being is one who functions well in that environment, and thereby does well and fares well (εὖ πράττειν means *both* of these things in Greek). One does well and fares well if one is fully realising one's nature and thus flourishing.[20] Part of that nature, if one is a human being, may consist in having the right kind of life, ideally in a polis, and having the right beliefs, among them beliefs about how humans should act. An oak tree is good if it fares well, that is, flourishes, but, given its nature, it need not have the right beliefs of any kind. It flourishes if it grows tall and broad and produces, in the right season, lots of green leaves and acorns. Its "nature" is to produce further oak trees, not to burn in a fire. From the point of view of the oak tree, then, the situation in which it has had its branches lopped off, has no "fruit" (acorns), and is either burning in a fire or supporting a roof is about as far removed from one in which the world shows itself to be a cosmos as one could possibly imagine. Its deepest interest and aspiration, an interest in its own flourishing, has been shown to be a matter of utter indifference to the most powerful forces that structure its world.

You might say that although the oak is not *itself* flourishing, its consumption in the fire is causing the life of the householder in whose fireplace it burns to flourish. The failure of the oak to produce acorns and reproduce itself is part of the ability of the householder to live in warmth, cook his food, and so forth. Well, what if the householder is Oedipus? He doesn't look to be exactly flourishing either. Look, then, philosophers will say, not at him but at the polis. Perhaps his catastrophic life is necessary that the polis may flourish. One could continue in this way, appealing at each stage to "the bigger picture." In fact, philosophers are likely to say, one *must* in principle be able to continue in this way until one gets a final picture. Kant, oddly enough,

was the one of the four philosophers whom Williams cites who experienced the greatest theoretical discomfort with this procedure. He knew that the idea of a final picture, and thus of a cosmos, didn't make sense, and so we could never *know* that the world was compatible with the demands of morality. The fact that we could never *know* this, however, terrified him, and so he reintroduced the harmony between the world and our moral sense not as an object of knowledge but as a mere postulated object of faith and hope.[21] Kant, could not, of course, even conceive of the possibility that our moral sentiments *themselves* might not form a single coherent system. To the main line of the philosophers the archaic thinkers might be imagined to reply: we don't know the final big picture, don't even know if it exists, and to the extent to which we can speculate about it, it seems very different from your conception. It is not notably characterised by coherence and moral order but by conflict, ignorance, and accident. When Plato proposes that this world of shame, confusion, sterility, and so forth *must* end in some bigger more harmonious whole that in some sense we can picture or describe in *logoi*, Pindar might respond by saying: Why "must"? Yours is a poetic phantasy, like various of mine, but less plausible.

The second aspect of the comparison refers not so much to the external circumstances but to the judgements we make, respectively, about the oak tree and Oedipus. The oak log and Oedipus are clearly being cited here as positive *exempla*. They are to be admired and emulated. Pindar presents that judgement pointedly when he "writes":

> καὶ φθινόκαρπος ἐοῖσα διδοῖ ψᾶφον περ' αὐτᾶς

Williams translates this as:

> "Although its fruit has failed, yet it <the oak tree> can give an account of itself."

Williams was a more than competent scholar of Greek so this translation is not wrong, but it is to be noted that "give an account of" has become for us the standard translation of a philosophical phrase re-

peatedly used by the Platonic Socrates: λόγον διδόναι, which means to give a discursive account of oneself that justifies what one thinks or does by reference to good reasons. When Williams writes that the oak tree (and Oedipus) give an account of themselves, however, this is meant not in the sense in which Socrates asks people to give an account of themselves but in the sense in which we speak of a boxer giving a good account of himself in the ring. We might also say he "showed his mettle" or "showed what he was made of." This does not mean that the boxer can explain or justify anything or that he has won the match. In place of a λόγος Pindar here speaks of a ψῆφος: διδοῖ ψᾶφον περ΄ αὐτᾶς. (In the following I shall use the Attic form of Pindar's Doric ψᾶφος, because it will be more familiar to most contemporary readers of Greek.)

A ψῆφος is a small stone, and then by extension it came to mean a vote since such stones were also used as counters of various kinds, for instance, in board games, and then in various kinds of decision procedures. The fundamental fact about a decision taken by casting a vote, however, is that under normal circumstances to give a vote is *not* to give an account in the platonic sense. In voting for candidate X I need not give any account of why I am doing that. I don't have to have reasons; a vote is usually opaque, a black box. Part of the reason democratic politics is so obscure is that a vote does not carry its own reason on its sleeve, and in fact it is valid even if the voter has *no* reason and has cast it at random or for utterly indiscernible, perverse, or irrelevant reasons.

Philologists,[22] however, tell us that διδόναι ψῆφον does not mean, as one might expect if one is coming to the text with assumptions derived from the structure of English, "give a judgement," that is, vote for (or against) something—that, apparently, would be φέρειν ψῆφον—but rather it means "submit to a vote" or "put a case to a vote." That is, the oak, when it holds up the roof (or even when it burns in the fire), allows and invites people to judge it and see what kind of thing it is. The boxer who goes into the ring allows one to judge his mettle, see what kind of account of himself he can give.

The implication of this line is not just that the oak tree puts forward its case and submits to judgement but that the judgement made will be positive. The log is presented here in the poem, after all, as a kind of model to be emulated. So the notional "judges" will vote that this is a "good" log because it burns well in the fire or supports a ceiling well (despite the fact that it has no leaves or precisely because of this). The log is judged to be doing well/faring well (εὖ πράττειν again, *vide supra*). Who, however, is imagined to be doing the judging and from what point of view? In a world that is not a moral cosmos there may be no absolutely definitive, authoritative answer to these questions. Some humans see it this way; others that way; the Olympians gods see it this other way; various chthonic agents, Furies, demons, and so forth have their own different views; perhaps Fate herself has a view, but that is just one more view among many. *Nevertheless even if it ends up in the fire* the log *has* done well and passes the judgement with high marks, even if that is merely based on an accidental conjunction of points of view that do not always coincide or a contingent preponderance of ballots cast for different reasons. That is not nothing.

This is not to say that the oak might not *fail* to receive a good judgement, just as the boxer can *fail* to give a good account of himself in the ring. This sense of "failure" is distinct from technical failure in the "competitive" sense. The boxer may show his mettle but lose the match, but he may also win the match and still have put up a poor showing. Perhaps his opponent was even worse than he was, or perhaps he wins on a technicality. Similarly, Pindar canvasses two possible outcomes for the oak log: the fire or serve as a roof support. Both of these can be seen (by humans) as useful functions. What about the possibility, however, that the oak branch is stripped off but then dropped accidently and simply allowed to rot in the place where it falls, or what if the oak branch when it is stripped from a seemingly healthy tree shows itself to be internally rotten? The oak then does not obviously give a very good account of itself. Part of the reason Pindar mentions only the two (potentially constructive) outcomes,

the fire or the roof beam, is perhaps that the *epinikion* is inherently a poem of *praise* and so always focused on positive achievement, even though Pindar is aware that such achievement is exceptional, easily destroyed, and dependent on factors outside anyone's control.[23] Pindar is not an evangelist and his form of praise, with its great emphasis on a φυά (good natural endowment) and καιρός ([skill in choosing] the nonrecurring opportune moment to act), is not equivalent to, or dependent on, philosophical "good news."

In a famous essay Williams analysed the career of the painter Paul Gauguin as an instance of what he called "moral luck."[24] Gauguin abandoned his wife and child to a life of poverty in order to pursue a life of painting in the South Seas. By the normal standards of accepted morality he is to be condemned for doing this. However, he had the moral luck that he turned out to be exceptionally talented at painting and that he lived long enough to realise that talent in a series of highly impressive works. The fact that he did turn out to have great talent and did produce a body of marvellous work affects, Williams claims, the judgement—even the moral judgement—we will make on him. Pindar's example of the oak log is much more radical than this. After all, Gauguin *wanted* to paint, and he turned out to achieve extraordinary things. The oak log "wanted," if one can use that expression—and since the whole passage depends on what later rhetorical theory would call "personification" there is no reason not to use that expression—to stay on the mountain and produce acorns. Similarly, the oak tree is a kind of model not just when it does something extraordinary, like holding up a palace roof, but even when it does something completely commonplace, like burning in the fire, something any old bundle of twigs or even a bit of rubbish can do.

Oedipus's case, too, is even more complex than Gauguin's.[25] Gauguin got what he wanted: he lived the life of a painter, and in that sense his life was a success by his own standards. There is no obvious sense in which Oedipus's life was a "success" from his own point of view, and it is hard to see that he has "flourished" in any sense recognisable by himself or other humans: he did solve the riddle of the

Sphinx, and that is a singular achievement, but he ends up like the oak tree as a shameful sight, enmeshed in a web of violence bereft of descendants.[26] Nevertheless he can put himself forward like the oak tree in the hope, presumably, that others will vote that he was a sad plaything of fate and has made the best he could of the situation in which he found himself, that of acting under truly weird circumstances over which he had no control. One might say, though, what does "giving the best account of himself" mean if not that *we*, the notional "judges" who are to cast our ballots wither for him or against him, judge him by certain standards, criteria, perhaps rules? These will be standards we use. So giving the vote to him is not just random but follows rules or principles. If this is the case, then it might be possible theoretically to specify those rules. Of course that is correct, but then one would have merely the set of rules a certain person or group of people use. Other human individuals or other groups might use other rules. There might be different groups of gods (Olympians and chthonic deities) who were in conflict with each other and whose moral views differed. Even within a single group, for instance, the Olympian gods, some particular gods might enforce on humans different rules from those that other gods would wish to enforce—think of Euripides' *Hippolytus*—and even if the Olympians all agreed with each other, their evaluations might differ from or conflict with ours—think of the treatment of Heracles in Sophocles' *Trachiniai* and Euripides' *Hercules Furens*—and even if *all* the diverse kinds of gods and *all* men agreed on some set of rules for distributing votes about who is to be admired, there is no reason to assume *the world* is set up so as to be amenable to these rules, *whatever "amenable" might mean*. After all, it is not as if anyone in this period thought that the world as a whole was "created" by any one of the gods; rather we repeatedly find suggestions that there are forms of "necessity" active in the world to which both gods and men are subject, and "necessity," powerful as it is, is not usually moralised.

Damophilus is in a situation similar to that of the oak tree (or to Oedipus). He, too, has been ripped out of the natural context for his

human flourishing and is making the best of it. Arkesilaos is not a stripped branch with no fruit (φθινόκαρπος); he has been successful in retaining his throne in "fruitful" Libya (καρποφόρος Λιβύα, line 6) despite civil unrest and an attempted coup, and he has plucked the fruit (καρπός) of a Pythian victory. Even he, though, even if he "deserves" it, cannot count on his continuing success and good fortune. No one can because our world is not a moral cosmos. Human forms of valuation have neither consistency, coherence, nor any particular purchase on reality.

I have always found it striking and important that although Pindar wrote a large number of victory odes and was obviously keen on athletics and fascinated by athletic success, he is also wise enough *never*, as far as I know, to compare human life to a race. In an Olympic or Pythian race there was a clear "point of view," a clear set of judges and clear rules: those who started before the starting order was given were whipped and disqualified; the first one over the goal got a wreath; the others slunk home in shame (*Ol*. VIII.65–70). This might be crude—there was a distinction in some events between those for men and for boys, but still *all* boys raced together without further handicaps—and brutal, but it was regulated. Human life is distinctly *not* like that.[27] It is not that life is completely chaotic, that we can find no order whatever in any part of it, or even that we cannot give ourselves good rules of thumb, such as μηδὲν ἄγαν, which will hold in a number of different circumstances, although not with Kantian universality. We can construct small islands of rules and "good order" such as that which holds in Phokulides' "polis on the rocky outcrop"—such a polis then is a small cosmos—but that is a *local* order (i.e., it does not hold, nor had anything analogous held in Nineveh), it won't last forever—where are those little *poleis* today—it won't always survive external assault or internal *stasis*. Furthermore, it is constructed and maintained (for as long as it is maintained) by dint of great human exertion; it not "found."[28]

Pindar in fact seems rather to suggest that we cannot even expect to be able always to create local order by our own unaided efforts.

Just after the passage Williams cites from the Fourth Pythian, Pindar has his chorus sing

> ῥᾴδιον μὲν γὰρ πόλιν σεῖσαι καὶ ἀφαυροτέροις·
> ἀλλ᾽ ἐπὶ χώρας αὖτις ἔσσαι δυσπαλὲς δὴ γίνεται, ἐξαπίνας
> εἰ μὴ θεὸς ἀγεμόνεσσι κυβερνητὴρ γένηται [ll. 272–74]
>
> [It is easy even for feeble people to shake and throw down the city
> But very difficult to set it back up on its feet again
> Unless suddenly a god acts as the steersmen for the leaders]

Note that this does *not* say that a god will always come to the aid of those trying to put the city back into order, or even that *if* the leaders are good and skillful some god will come to their aid. Rather, I suggest, than asserting that the world is a moral cosmos, this seems rather to indicate how much distance separates Pindar from any such idea.

To what "modern use," then, can we put any of these archaic ideas? I don't like the term "use" in this context because it suggests that one can detach individual concepts or conceptions from their original context and apply them atomistically to pre-given problems. It suggests that there is a detachable "wisdom" to be found in them that can be extracted. It might be that one can learn something from thinking about the life and works of these archaic figures, Pindar, Sophocles, and Thucydides in the first instance, without it being the case that *what* one learns can be "used" in any direct way. This is in one way like, but in another unlike, the situation of Arkesilaos. Arkesilaos, on Williams's reading, can "learn" something from Oedipus although that is not a formulatable piece of "wisdom," and perhaps the same is true of us when we read Pindar or Sophocles. However, Arkesilaos is presented by Pindar with a clearly structured issue and a favoured policy or course of action: Learn from Oedipus and recall Damophilus from exile. Our situation may be different in that we do not know exactly what our "issues" are.

Williams certainly thought, as his friend and sometime teacher Isaiah Berlin did, that the idea of a moral cosmos was by no means dead in the modern world. One might describe it as having gone into hiding. It is perhaps a thought which for its proper formulation depends on a particular metaphysical language that is out of fashion in the modern world. Nevertheless, the idea of our world as constituting a moral cosmos continued to exercise a considerable influence from its invisible lair. No Kantian and few mainstream liberals could envisage that our moral intuitions and our values might not form a beautiful whole but that on the contrary they irremediably conflict with each other.[29]

I first read Pindar's Fourth Pythian in 1968, when as a student in Freiburg/Br. in Germany I took an Oberseminar on the poem in the Classics Faculty. This, of course, was a momentous year. In January the Têt Offensive took place, which made it clear that the United States would eventually lose its colonial war in Indochina. Then Europe was convulsed by the upsurge of anarcho-syndicalist activism, which goes by the name "May 68" and which at the time seemed to be the beginning of something significant but in retrospect marked the beginning of the end of an era. Finally in August the forces of the Warsaw Pact invaded the ČSSR, demonstrating that the Soviet system of the time was incapable of internal reform. This turned out in retrospect, I think, to be a particularly propitious time to be reading Pindar. We are familiar with what are now called "win-win" situations, but 1968 was a kind of "lose-lose" situation in Western Europe and the United States. Whatever your view about the world or about rationality, it was hard to see the situation as one in which rational structures were successfully reproducing themselves, or the world was showing itself amenable to our ethical life, or things were moving in a positive constructive direction. Whatever the world was, it certainly did not resemble a rational cosmos. Having reason on your side was not much of an advantage, if in fact you could discern where reason lay.

No one can force philosophers to hold particular views, and this is especially true with regard to ethics. If a philosopher, at any rate a sophisticated philosopher, denies the existence of the external world, one can be moderately sure that such a philosopher will have much to tell one about what he or she *exactly* means by "deny," "existence," "external," and "world," and probably a lot to tell one about a variety of other matters. Still it is possible to follow Dr. Johnson and "refute" this thesis by kicking a stone. This will not end the argument if the philosopher in question is at all worth his or her salt, but, especially in a public forum, Dr. Johnson's is unlikely to be entirely without effect, even if one feels inclined to denigrate this effect by calling it "merely rhetorical."

What about the issue under discussion here, the existence of a moral cosmos? Williams holds the general view that ethics is characterised by a weaker degree of "objectivity" than science.[30] In the absence of any strong notion of objectivity in matters of ethical theory, one can easily imagine moral philosophers adopting the "dig-in-your-heels, hunker-down, and grit-your-teeth" approach in their desperate attempt to hold onto the idea that our basic moral beliefs are transparently accessible to us and consistent with each other. After all, it is not difficult to attain at least a strong semblance of coherence in one's views if one is willing simply to discard large swathes of one's beliefs, and this is all the easier the looser the fit between "moral beliefs" and the world. Most philosophers of a certain age will have memories of the Primitive-Utilitarians who used to infest odd corners of neglected departments. They would attempt to vindicate the ultimate coherence of ethics by simple dogged persistence, by holding fast to their preferred version of utilitarianism and refusing to budge from it, despite the gruesome and counterintuitive consequences of their view. You simply couldn't talk these people out of their view because, when all else failed, they simply stopped listening or accepted any unpalatable consequence of their view that one pointed out. "Yes, we should redistribute body parts *ad libitum* if it will maximize utility," they would say. One had the sense that at some

level they must have known the disrepute into which they brought themselves by brazenly accepting these consequences, but they apparently learned to tolerate this psychic pain this must have caused, while retaining an impassive countenance. Nowadays it is likely to be Kantians who adopt this teeth-grinding attitude: "You must *never* lie, just because you must never; if you don't admit that you are not being rational." This method will allow one to continue to affirm the existence of a coherent moral cosmos, if one wishes and one can tolerate the price one must pay. Instead of conducting endless and compulsive discussions of the possibility of a pure amoralist, perhaps it might make more sense for us to think about this phenomenon and what it tells us about moral life (apart from the fact that some of its theorists are pathological cases). That reasoning in fact utterly fails here is not completely insignificant.

It is a mistake to expect the world to make moral or human sense. That it does not is something one must simply accept. One might be tempted here to assert this as the contents of a new kind of wisdom, a wisdom of modesty, self-restraint, and acceptance. This is certainly not Pindar's way for two reasons. First, his career as a poet is dominated by the praise not of lowly men who know their own limits but of aristocrats who glory in their self-assertion, grandeur, and external success, in the λαμπρὸν φέγγος[31] that plays around them (even if just for a moment) when they win the race. Second, the wisdom of acceptance is not real solution, and its value can easily be overestimated:

> Τί ἔλπεαι σοφίαν ἔμμεν, ἂν ὀλίγον τοι
> ἀνὴρ ὑπέρ ἀνδρὸς ἴσχει;
> οὐ γὰρ ἔσθ' ὅπως τὰ θεῶν
> βουλεύματ' ἐρευνάσει βροτέᾳ φρένι·
>
> [What do you expect wisdom to be, in which
> One man surpasses another only by a little?
> For there is no way for the mortal mind
> to find out what the gods plan] [Fr. 61 (33) *Paeanes*]

So grim is our situation that not even having wisdom will do us much good. The term I have rendered as "expect" (ἔλπεαι) is etymologically closely associated with the word that eventually establishes itself as the term for "hope" (ἔλπις). The "good news" philosophy preaches is a message of deceptive "hope" to which Pindar, Sophocles, and Thucydides did not fall victim.[32]

12

Who Was the First Philosopher?

One might think that this question has no answer because it is badly formulated. It might, that is to say, be thought to make two incorrect assumptions. First, it seems to assume that "philosophy" is an individual or even solitary activity like swimming the Tiber or bringing down a particular kind of bird with a boomerang. Provided we can agree on rough and ready "definitions" of the entities and activities in question—*homo sapiens*, not one of our near simian relatives; "swimming," not "floating" or "being borne along by the current"; "boomerang," not "stick" (and this is a *big* "if")—we could in principle answer these questions, although, for contingent epistemic reasons we are unlikely actually to know who this was in either case. On the other hand, it would make no sense even in principle to ask "Who was the very first chess player?" because playing chess requires two people. As Hegel pointed out, it is a mistake to think of the history of philosophy as a series of activities performed by a succession of *individual* men or as the result of such an activity; it is inherently a collective social enterprise.[1] The model for philosophy is not Thales noting that the waters of the Nile rise at the same time every year and wondering why that might be the case—that is perhaps (one of) the origin(s) of science. The paradigm for philosophy is the encounter between Socrates and Euthyphro, who is on the way to indict his father for the murder of a slave. This encounter

becomes an instance of philosophising when Socrates asks Euthyphro what's up, and, more important, when Euthyphro enters into extended conversation with Socrates and tries to respond to his questions. Extended monological speeches à la Protagoras or Gorgias may or may not be edifying, but whatever else they might be they are definitely not philosophy, which consists of a *joint* attempt to thrash out some agreed-on conclusion in discussion, whether that attempt is successful or fails. In any case, as in chess, it takes (at least) two to philosophise. Friedrich Schlegel gets the emphasis wrong in praising the importance of "Symphilosophie" only to the extent to which his use of this term suggests that the social dimension is a mere desideratum, as if there could be such a thing—albeit a slightly deficient thing—as philosophy that was not a collective activity.[2]

Nietzsche was not so keen on the idea of philosophy as a social enterprise, preferring a more traditionalist and heroic conception,[3] but he can be seen as raising a second kind of objection to the initial question. He criticises all forms of analysis of any continuing human practise that refer it to a purported unique "origin."[4] He is especially scathing about attributing the origin of enduring institutions to individual "founders": Christianity "founded" by Jesus, democracy "founded" by Cleisthenes, philosophy "founded" by Thales, Pythagoras, or Socrates. It is deeply misguided to look for a single origin for anything that has had extended historical significance. The "genealogical" mode of arguing, in which purportedly unitary "origins" are shown in reality to be contingent conjunctions of diverse and varied antecedents, is now a commonplace. It is a development of a strand in Nietzsche's thought one might call "positivist." Nietzsche himself, after all, emphasised that "genealogy" as he practised it was a "grey" science with affinities to the driest kind of archival research.[5] This conception of what he was trying to do is somewhat at odds with his actual practise. If "genealogy" really is a form of quasi-archival history rather than, for instance, a philosophical fairy tale something like "state of nature" narratives one finds in some philosophical works, or the description of historical process using something like a series of

Weberian ideal types, then it should be possible to ask and answer the questions: Who *exactly* are "the masters" and "the slaves" in the narrative? When precisely did the "slave uprising" take place? Notoriously there is no answer to these questions, and Nietzsche treats this as no objection to his account. Perhaps it is the constant shift between levels of analysis—from discussions of "masters" where it is left open whether they are Arab, Japanese, or Germanic aristocrats[6] to the concrete details of early Roman history—which constitutes part of the point of the exercise. However, in addition to these two modes, the archival and the ideal typical, the early Nietzsche recognised another possibility that only very gradually came to be sidelined in his thinking and perhaps never completely lost its grip on his imagination. Richard Wagner had wanted to replace conceptual *and* historical thinking with what he called "mythic" thought.[7] As a dramatist Wagner was particularly keen on removing the historical element in theatre. Shakespeare's historical plays, Wagner thought, were the worst kind of literature; drama must deal not with real, and thus contingent, historical figures and their vicissitudes, like Henry V, but with "mythic" figures like Oedipus, Siegfried, or King Lear. It was one of the glories of Attic tragedy, in stark contrast to comedy, that it did not in general deal with real history or present onstage real historical characters. *The Persians* (about the Persian Wars, which were part of contemporary memory at the time the play was written) was apparently to be considered an exception,[8] and even *The Persians* mentions no individual Greek by name. "Myth" formulated not what had happened to occur but inherent structures of meaningfulness. Henri V happened to win at Agincourt, but what happened to Tristan and Isolde, to Siegmund and Sieglinde, or to Siegfried and Wotan was not simply an accident: there is a kind of necessity about the way in which primordial eros breaks down any existing social relationships and about the way in which the primordial aggression that characterises the relation between son and father can express itself in violence. In Wagner's view what he called "the state" was a coercive structure that controlled and repressed these basic human

urges and the form the coercion took was to make us unaware of our own real nature. The state could continue to exist only to the extent to which it was capable of continuing successfully to keep us in ignorance about this "mythical" level of human existence. His own work, he thought, derived its power from his ability to tap these primitive human urges that were present in everyone and bring them to the awareness of the members of his audience. To this extent his operas were all by their very nature politically revolutionary.

Early in his life Nietzsche was close to Wagner's views about myth, though, of course, he held them in a highly metaphysical and radically de-politicised form: In *The Birth of Tragedy* he strove to overcome conceptual and historical forms of thinking and replace them with mythology. *The Birth of Tragedy*, a work that even in its very literary form, for instance its lack of footnotes, rejects the existing standards of scholarship, is organised not as a proper history or an analytic account of tragedy but as a mythic narrative of the doings of "Apollo," "Dionysus," and "Socrates" (who in this account is transformed from a real denizen of the deme of Alopeke to a mythic figure, just as, presumably the historical Iranian king Ḫšayāršā becomes the "mythic" "Xerxes" in *The Persians*). "Apollo," "Dionysus," and "Socrates" are intended to be neither real historical individuals like Henry V[9] nor mere names for what are actually abstract conceptual structures, such as "the drive to encompass more and more material" (*Stofftrieb*) and "the drive to impose unity" (*Formtrieb*), which Schiller took to be the basic constituents of human nature.[10] A "mythic" treatment is a narrative in which a figure with some distinctive individual characteristics (such as Heracles) is involved in an encounter with *other* such figures (such as Admetus, Alcestis, and Death). "Lear" is to some extent "defined," if one wishes to think about it in this way, by his own characteristics and by the nexus of his encounters with others (his daughters); it is this nexus that has a kind of necessity. Myth exhibits recurrent narrative patterns, but the individual story need not be strictly invariant; one of the most striking features

of ancient myths is precisely that they have no single canonical form but are flexible and can be reconfigured in a variety of different ways, each one of which is expressive of an aspect of human nature or a kind of human necessity. Each author could write *his own* Oedipus within certain limits that are antecedently indeterminate. So although a proper history would not pinpoint a single origin of the human practise we call "philosophy," there is no reason one could not give a mythic account that sums up in a concentrated form some of the salient characteristics of the practise.

In this spirit I would like to suggest that the "origin" of philosophy might be taken to lie in the encounter between the aboriginal philosophical couple: Oedipus and the Sphinx. Neither one, then, is *the* originator of philosophy because philosophy is inherently an interaction of a certain kind between two animate entities who can speak with each other and act with or on each other. I say "animate entity" rather than "human being" because the Sphinx is not a human being but on most accounts half woman and half lioness (often with wings). The interaction between Oedipus and the Sphinx is an odd mixture of the utterly frivolous and the deadly serious, of the accidental and the essential. What could be more contingent than a meeting on a road? Yet the meeting seems to generate from itself its own internal necessity. The Sphinx asks a question that is also a riddle, that is, she proposes a kind of game, but also kills anyone who loses the game by failing to solve the riddle.[11] Generally we think of a "game" as something one can chose to play or not, but the Sphinx leaves one no choice. It is assumed that she is endowed with enough strength and willingness to use violence so that there can be no question of "overcoming" her in a simple fight. She subjects herself to a limitation on the use of that strength; she could simply kill travellers, no questions asked, but she does not do that. Rather she transforms what might otherwise be a straightforward physical struggle, which we have reason to believe she would always win, into a contest of wits and commits herself not to use her overwhelming force if bested.

When Oedipus does come up with the right answer, she not only spares him but kills herself. She makes the question (and the answer) a matter of life or death for Oedipus, and then for herself. Was her own death in the envisaged circumstances a part of the "rules of the game" as initially specified (by her) from the start, or did she simply improvise and *make up* the final logical conclusion of the game, her self-destruction, when she found herself bested? Why did she start the game in the first place? Did she actually know the answer to the riddle before Oedipus told it to her or merely recognise that what he said could count (or "must count"?) as an answer, when he said it? Did she make up a question she thought had no answer in order to be able to kill travellers under the specious appearance of giving them a "fair" chance? When Oedipus shows that he knows the answer, or at any rate gives an answer she cannot dismiss, the conclusion she draws, killing herself, does have a weird archaic consistency, even if it was not originally envisaged as even a possibility. By doing so, she founds philosophy. Was there any other possible outcome? Could she simply have let Oedipus go and retired from the question-asking business? Or taken Oedipus to live with her to the mountains and perhaps father a race of preternaturally intelligent sphinxes? Probably not. The riddle was: "What walks on four feet in the morning, two feet at noon, and three feet in the evening?" and the answer was "man"—as baby, adult, and old-man-with-a-stick (not "sphinx"), and Oedipus not only gave the correct answer but also *instantiated* it. The correct answer is, then, just a true description or proper analysis of what he himself is. If Oedipus had failed to give the right answer, he would also not himself have instantiated it because he would have died before reaching the stage at which he would need to use a stick.

The encounter between Oedipus and the Sphinx might be thought to count as the origin of philosophy in part because in it two things seem inextricably intertwined: the solution of a riddle and an existential issue of life-or-death importance. The Sphinx has *imposed* the existential dimension on the encounter, to be sure, so perhaps it is only really a philosophical encounter in the full sense if we think of

her not as an individual person but as kind of force of nature or metaphysical principle. It is philosophy only if the solution of the riddle is also a matter of life-and-death that is necessarily imposed on us by the nature of the world we live in, not the result of a random encounter with an individual. Philosophy that reduces itself to mere riddle solving loses its traditional importance, and, eventually, its raison d'être.

Is it perhaps relevant that the Sphinx herself seems to us not to exhibit a "natural unity" but to be a biological "creole," a bifurcated being[12] only presenting herself as a unity? How does she seem to herself? Does she think of herself as a natural unity? Does it matter what she thinks? After all, we humans, in the person of Oedipus, won. Is her creole nature part of the explanation for her murderous hostility to the people of Thebes and for her habit of asking off-beat questions? Her question suggests that although *we* may see ourselves as natural unity, it is possible to see us as just as deeply creole as she is: we are, after all (correctly), described (by her) as *three* in one. Oedipus must in some sense not merely know what sort of creature he is but also how a creature like him would look to a Sphinx. Who is to say what is to count as "natural unity," what as a mere appearance, and what as narcissism? Philosophy exists in the state of emotional tension and cognitive motion between the moment when Oedipus can be seen coming up the road from Corinth—or rather the moment when the first nameless traveller appears, since Oedipus was not the first to have an erotically tinged meeting with the Golden-Strangler-Girl-of-Thebes—and the final sad but "logical" denouement. When the answer is formulated and revealed, the encounter (and philosophy) is over. This is perhaps why Nietzsche calls Oedipus "the last philosopher," condemned to speak only with himself.[13] How can he ask questions without a partner? Recollection lacks the essential frisson of the real thing because if you can recollect, you have survived, and part of the point of the encounter is that that is not yet assured. Oedipus is not only the last philosopher but also "the last man."[14] As Nietzsche's Zarathustra says about the dead tightrope walker,[15] the Sphinx perished in the course of discharging a self-chosen, and in her

case indeed self-invented, profession that turned out to be dangerous, and there is nothing contemptible in that. Did Oedipus realise that his profession of "knowing" could be equally dangerous? Would he have been so keen to discover the cause of the plague in Thebes, and his own origins, if he had not met the Sphinx?

13

A World without Why

I have what I have always held to be a mildly discreditable day job, that of teaching philosophy at a university. I take it to be discreditable because about 85 percent of my time and energy is devoted to training aspiring young members of the commercial, administrative, or governmental elite in the glib manipulation of words, theories, and arguments. I thereby help turn out the pliable, efficient, self-satisfied cadres that our economic and political system uses to produce the ideological carapace that protects it against criticism and change. I take my job to be only mildly discreditable partly because I don't think finally that this realm of words is in most cases much more than an epiphenomenon secreted by power relations that would otherwise express themselves with even greater and more dramatic directness. Partly, too, because 10 percent of the job is an open area within which it is possible that some of these young people might become minimally reflective about the world they live in and their place in it; in the best of cases they might come to be able and willing to work for some minimal mitigation of the cruder excesses of the pervading system of oppression under which we live. The remaining 5 percent of my job, by the way, what I would call the actual "philosophical" part, is almost invisible from the outside, totally unclassifiable in any schema known to me, and quantitatively in any case so insignificant that it can more or less be ignored.

So the experience I have of my everyday work environment is of a conformist, claustrophobic, and repressive verbal universe, a penitential domain of reason-mongering in which hyperactivity in detail—the endlessly repeated shouts of "why," the rebuttals, calls for "evidence," qualifications, and quibbles—stands in stark contrast to the immobility and self-referentiality of the structure as a whole. I suffer from recurrent bouts of nausea in the face of this densely woven tissue of "arguments," most of which are nothing but blinds for something else altogether, generally something unsavoury; and I feel an urgent need to exit from it altogether. Unsurprisingly, Plato had a name for people like me when I am in this mood: μισόλογος, a hater of reasoning. I comfort myself for being on the wrong side of Plato by thinking that I am also, at any rate, never unaware of the potentially questionable nature of this desire. One might be inherently suspicious of what is clearly the luxury complaint of someone who occupies what is in effect a very privileged position in a rich society; those suffering from debilitating diseases, struggling to get access to clean water, or trying desperately to avoid the systematic attentions of a repressive state apparatus or the more or less random violence of armed gangs in regions where public order has broken down might well be thought to have more pressing concerns. To that extent perhaps my reaction does not throw a morally flattering light on me. That does not, however, exhaust the objective disquiet my impulse causes me.

The problem with "N'importe où hors de ce monde" ("Anywhere outside this world") is not merely that such a place is hard to find. A world utterly without "why" can have one or the other of two very different aspects. It can seem a deeply contemplative, even if not necessarily thoroughly pleasant, place, as in the poem by the seventeenth-century Silesian mystic Angelus Silesius:

Die Ros' is ohn' Warum; sie blühet weil sie blühet.
Sie acht' nicht ihrer selbst, fragt nicht ob man sie siehet.

[The rose is without why; she blossoms because she blossoms.
She pays no attention to herself, does not ask if anyone sees her.]

The rose may have a thorn and her self-less insouciance will perhaps be barely distinguishable from cold indifference; still, this vision of reality as freed completely from the subordination of any of its parts to purpose or functionality might have some aesthetic appeal. The other, potentially diabolical, aspect of this construction is the one that presented itself to Primo Levi when he realised that in Auschwitz there was no "why" ("Hier gibt es kein 'Warum'" ["Here there is no 'why'"]). Levi's experience, of course, was not really of a place in which there was no "why" *at all*. The SS officers with whom he came into contact had a variety of reasons for what they did and what they allowed to happen. Some of these reasons, to be sure, were unreflective and conflicting, some perhaps fantastic and delusional, many were deeply malicious, but that is a different thing. It was not in fact that an extermination camp had no "why" whatever but that those in control of Levi's fate were in no way required or inclined to give *him* any reasons for anything that occurred. A world in which reason was utterly inaccessible to the individual might at best be an approximation of one possible form a "world without why" could take.

Our networks of institutionally anchored universal ratiocination are hard to escape. How in fact could one get out, assuming one wanted to? Offhand, I can think of three possible ways. First, one could be clever enough to turn the why-game against itself from within. This has been the dream of any number of philosophers including, most notably, Hegel and Heidegger. This way out does not recommend itself to me because I am not clever enough to trod this path successfully but also because even if successful, who would notice? The second possibility is action. One deed is worth any number of words. A deed can cut through—I always think of this with the French word *trancher*—the spider's web of bogus rationalisations and create not merely new words but new facts. Unfortunately, this second course of action requires very significant amounts of courage as well as practical skills of various kinds, neither of which I possess. The courage in question, by the way, is not merely personal fearlessness in the face of threats to oneself but also the moral courage to face the

possibility that one's actions, which, if they are going to be effective at all, will certainly be almost completely out of one's own control as far as their actual consequences are concerned, may turn out to inflict great suffering on the *wrong* people (even assuming one were to know for certain who these are).

The third possibility is the invitation, in particular one to observe, look at, or consider something. One kind of thing one can be invited to consider is a juxtaposition: masses of anonymous people storming the Winter Palace and two stone lions standing up on their pedestals, or the prime minister oleaginously addressing the House of Commons and a pile of bodies in a ditch in Iraq. By putting two (or more) separate "things" next to each other and inviting people to look at them together, one is not necessarily asking or trying to answer the question "why." A poem may cause someone to ask a question or to initiate a line of reflection, or even to develop some hypothesis or theory, but then a clap of thunder or a sudden pain in the chest may do the same; that does not make either the pain or the poem a theory or a "line of argument." A word in a good poem is not a concept. Since neither a picture nor a poem is an argument, neither is a suitable object for counterargument. "La terre est bleue comme une orange" ["The earth is blue like an orange"] is not best understood as "asserting a proposition." Neither is

Der Nordost wehet,
Der liebste unter den Winden
Mir, weil er feurigen Geist
Und gute Fahrt verheisset den Schiffern.

[The northwest wind blows,
the dearest of the winds
to be because he promises
fiery spirits and good passage to sailors.]

Nor finally even:

Ver erat, et morbo Romae languebat inerti
Orbilius.

[It was spring and in Rome Orbilius was suffering
from a debilitating sickness.]

You can't refute an invitation (although you can refuse it, closing your mind and heart to it): it makes no claim. At the end of all the talk, the poem, if it is good enough, is still standing there, waiting. An invitation has neither the direct constructive or coercive power of action nor the indirect coercive power of ratiocination—Habermas's "eigentümlich zwangloser Zwang des besseren Argumentes" ("peculiarly uncoercive coercion of the better argument"). If one is lucky enough to live in a society in which a sphere of "free" artistic activity is permitted to exist, no one is forced to look at one's picture, listen to one's poem, or read one's novel. Still the work of art need not be without effect on those who accept its invitation.

Simple juxtaposition of external objects, persons, or events not usually seen together has a number of variants that are perhaps no less interesting and "compelling" (to use the peculiar expression that seems natural here). Rather than allowing the sewing machine to encounter an umbrella on the dissecting table, one can invite the reader to pay attention to something usually overlooked or taken for granted, which seems to have a unity that upon inspection dissolves. The world can occasionally turn itself inside out or upside down. No one who lived even in complete personal security through the period of the Vietnam War could thereafter ever hear the sound of a helicopter in exactly the same way again.

Invitation

Shall we go to the sand-pits?
Yes, let's go to the sand-pits.

Will the air be fresh and clear
    over the sand-pits?
Depending on the season, the time
    of day, and the weather
the air will be cool, sultry, or mild
    over the sand-pits.

Shall we whistle and get a drink
    at the sand-pits?
Whistling and drinking are *de rigueur*
    at the sand-pits.

Will there be a crowd
    at the sand-pits?
There is almost invariably a crowd
    at the sand-pits.

Shall we take our whips
    to the sand-pits?
In what tree have you parked
    your brain, imbecile?
Without whips what would be the point
    of the sand-pits?

Arthur Schopenhauer, "Über die Universitäts-Philosophie" (1850)
Paul Celan, "Der Meridian" (1960)
Plato, *Phaedo* 89d (fourth century BC)
Charles Baudelaire, *Le spleen de Paris* (1869)
Angelus Silesius (Johannes Scheffler), *Der Cherubinische Wandersmann* (1657)
Primo Levi, *If This Is a Man* (1947)
Jacques Derrida, "Les fins de l'homme" (1967)
G.W.F. Hegel, *System der Wissenschaft, Erster Teil, Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*: *Vorrede* (1807)
Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (1957)
Bertold Brecht, "Fragen eines lesenden Arbeiters" (1935)
Paul Eluard, *L'amour la poésie* (1929)
Friedrich Hölderlin, "Andenken" (1806)
Arthur Rimbaud, "Ver erat" (1869)
Isidore Ducasse, Comte de Lautréamont, *Les chants de Maldoror* (1869)
T. W. Adorno, "Parataxis" (1964)
Georg Büchner, "Lenz" (1835)

Notes

Preface

1. Marx, following Feuerbach, correctly maintains that this is the correct order: first social needs, then language and cognition. See *Die Deutsche Ideologie MEW* (Berlin, 1983), 3:13–77.

2. For criticism of this assumption, see David Graeber, *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* (Chicago, 2004).

3. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (New York, 1920); see also his *The Quest for Certainty* (London, 1929).

4. See, for instance, the appeal to "autonomy" that is exaggerated almost to the point of senselessness in R. P. Wolff's *In Defence of Anarchism* (New York, 1970).

5. This is not exactly right because there were the Stoics who seem to have planted the seed for the modern obsession. See Michael Frede, *A Free Will* (Berkeley, 2011). Still they were *one* philosophical school and their views did not represent an almost universally shared cultural obsession.

6. See Aeschylus, *Persai* 402ff; Herodotus I.62, 95; Plutarch, *Vita Titi Flaminii*, etc. Further references in Kurt Raaflaub, "Zum Freiheitsbegriff der Griechen," in E. Welskopf, *Soziale Typenbegriffe im alten Griechenland* (Berlin, 1981), vol. 4; also Raaflaub, *Die Entdeckung der Freiheit* (Munich, 1985).

7. Ch. Wirszubski, *Libertas as a Political Ideal at Rome during the Late Republic and Early Principate* (Cambridge, 1968). See also Malcolm Schofield, "Liberty, Equality, and Authority: Theory and Practice in the Later Roman Republic" (forthcoming).

8. And another school, the Cynics, adopted an ideal of practical "self-sufficiency," which eventually seems to have developed into a more metaphysically laden notion.

9. That the Greeks used "autonomy" to designate only a limited, essentially negative, and social property, see Martin Ostwald, *Autonomia: Its Genesis and Early History* (Chico, CA, 1982).

10. Sophocles, *Antigone* ll. 450ff.

11. E. E. Evans-Pritchard notoriously used the local poison-oracle in making everyday decisions when he was working among the Azande and claimed

that in retrospect he thought this was as reasonable a way to conduct such affairs as any other would have been. See his *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937).

12. I merely point out that I am really using the same "philosophical *must*" to which I drew attention earlier in this chapter. I am, after all, essentially saying that there "must" be a place for trust, respect, etc., in human life. I invite the reader to reflect on this.

13. Jan Philipp Reemtsma, *Vertrauen und Gewalt* (Hamburg edition, 2012); Martin Hartmann, *Die Praxis des Vertrauens* (Berlin, 2011).

14. Immanuel Kant, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* in *Werke* (Darmstadt, 1963), 4:36.

15. M. Foucault, *Le gouvernement de soi et des autres* (Paris, 2008) and "Qu'est-ce que les lumières," in *Dits et écrits* (Paris, 1994), 571–78.

1: Goals, Origins, Disciplines

I am particularly grateful to Richard Raatzsch and to the other members of the Cambridger Philosophisches Forschungskolloquium for comments on an early version of this text. A very much abbreviated version was presented at the conference "Changing the Humanities/The Humanities Changing" at the Cambridge Centre for Research in the Arts, Humanities, and Literature in July 2009.

1. Wilhelm Windelband, "Geschichte und Naturwissenschaft," *Präludien* (Tübingen, 1919), 1:136–61.

2. Klaus Köhnke, *Entstehung und Aufstieg des Neukantianismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1993).

3. I use the Monro/Allen Oxford Classical Text (OCT), translation by R. Lattimore (Chicago, 1951), sometimes slightly modified.

4. One of the many fascinating aspects of this passage is that it contains what may be one of the first references to writing in Western literature. One of Glaukos's ancestors, Bellerophontes, is exiled from home and takes refuge with King Proitos. As the consequence of an intrigue, Proitos decides he needs to kill Bellerophontes, but he doesn't dare. We are not explicitly told why he doesn't dare, but one might surmise it is because in the Homeric world it was considered wrong to kill someone to whom you had once offered refuge. Proitos sends Bellerophontes off to a neighbouring king, carrying with him a folded tablet on which are inscribed, incised, drawn, or painted (γράψας, 6.169) some signs or marks that will bring him death (σήματα λυγρά . . . θυμοσθόρα πολλά, 6.168–69) when the neighbouring king sees them. I have often wondered whether the very unclarity about what is painted or scratched on those tablets might not be part of the point. We don't know whether they are the words "KILL BEARER IMMEDIATELY" (ΚΤΕΙΝΕΙΘΕΡΟΝΤΑΑΥΘΙ) or rather something more indirect and suggestive, such as pictures of a stick-man with a spear in his back or a

skull and crossbones. If this is a case of writing and writing is still a novel, unfamiliar, and slightly puzzling phenomenon, sending someone off with a written warrant for his own death might be a very good way of generating a form of self-deception that would allow one to believe one has distanced oneself from what eventually happens. Not just "I didn't know the gun was loaded" but "How was I to know that that tiny tube could *really* kill at a distance?" The written or painted image is a kind of obscure black box: how could I know it would work?

5. See also Raymond Geuss, "Thucydides, Nietzsche, and Williams," in R. Geuss, *Outside Ethics* (Princeton, 2005), 219–34.

6. George Kennedy, *A New History of Classical Rhetoric* (Princeton, 1994).

7. Diogenes Laertius 8.8.

8. *Protagoras* 318a–b.

9. See Plato's *Gorgias*.

10. *Protagoras* 339–47.

11. *Protagoras* 320–28.

12. See the position attributed to "a philosopher" in Longinus's *De sublimitate*, ch. 44 (OCT, ed. Russell).

13. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie*, *Werke*, vol. 18, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), 202–9.

14. Arnold Schönberg, *Stil und Gedanke* (Frankfurt am Main, 1976), 33–34.

15. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A852/B880–A856/B884. The history of reason gets four pages out of 850 or so. See also Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik*, "Vorrede."

16. Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, 50–57, 119–22 (Ak.).

17. Most clearly in Schopenhauer; see his essay "Über die Universitäts-Philosophie," in *Parerga et Paralipomena* in *Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt am Main, 1985), 4:173–242.

18. This is only one half of the story for Hegel. He also thinks that philosophy is in some sense a form of "absolute" spirit. The relation between philosophy as a historical formation and as a systematic, absolute enterprise is at the heart of his complex views.

19. G.W.F. Hegel, *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems des Philosophie*, *Werke*, vol. 2, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt am Main, 1970), 20–25.

20. Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie* in *Marx-Engels-Werke* (*MEW*) (Berlin, 1968), 1:378–80.

21. See T. W. Adorno et al., eds., *Der Positivismusstreit in der deutschen Soziologie* (Berlin, 1969).

22. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral* in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. G. Colli and M. Montinari (Berlin, 1967), 5:245–413; see also "Genealogy as Critique," in Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 153–61.

23. Saint Paul, after all, in a slightly bizarre passage (Romans) seems to claim that the point of the Jewish Law was to increase consciousness of sin; one can hold that Christianity generates the sense of sin to which its message of redemption from sin is purportedly the only adequate response.

24. I mention only one of the presentable philosophical reasons for the demise of this Hegelian tradition. This should not be taken to imply a denial of political, economic, and social causes, which were in fact probably more important.

25. *Phaedo* (OCT) 96a–99d.

26. See W. Burkert, "Platon oder Pythagoras," *Hermes* 88 (1960): 159–77.

27. *Tusculan Disputations* (OCT) 5.4.10–11.

28. See Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 5:245–413; also "Nietzsche and Genealogy" in R. Geuss, *Morality, Culture, and History* (Cambridge, 1999), 1–28.

29. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 5:254.

30. This gives one the ancient triadic division of philosophy into physics, ethics, and dialectics (or logic). See, for instance, Diogenes Laertius 7.39 and Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* (OCT) 5.24.68–72.

31. Vitruvius, *De architectura* 1.1.8, 10.12.2.

32. The *OED* gives a first isolated instance in 1702, then a series from the mid-nineteenth century.

33. Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris, 1966), 398.

2: *Vix intellegitur*

1. *Orator ad M. Brutum* 9.30–31.

2. See "Second Letter to Ammaeus," in *Dionysius of Halicarnassus: The Three Literary Letters*, ed. William Rhys Roberts (Cambridge, 1901), 136. See also the useful general discussion of obscurity in Greek in the Roberts edition of Dionysius's *On Literary Composition* (New York, 1910), appendix A, pp. 335–41.

3. *Philosophische Untersuchungen* § 71.

4. Cited in Cicero, *De divinatione* II.56.116, who points out the inherent implausibility of the Greek god Apollo addressing a king of Epirus in a Latin hexameter.

5. That means, of course, the exact Latin words Ennius ascribes to the god. I am not at all interested in the historical accuracy of the stories told about Pyrrhus, who seems to have been the kind of charismatic figure who attracted to his person all manner of mythic accretions.

6. The importance of seeing certain kinds of apparently very general statements as in fact particular responses to specific questions was emphasised by R. G. Collingwood. See his *An Essay on Metaphysics* (Oxford, 1940).

7. Plato's *Charmides* mentions a third (164–65), but this has been more or less ignored in subsequent discussion.

8. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie* in *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Colli and Montinari, 1:40–41.

9. Plutarch, *Life of Pyrrhus* 397.

10. The classic study of ambiguity, of course, is still William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (London, 1930).

11. Compare Aeneas's "Italiam non sponte sequor" (*Aeneid* IV.361).

12. T. W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Berlin, 1970), 182–93.

13. Only later (*Aeneid* VI.847–53) does Aeneas find out definitively from his father in the underworld that nothing like this is intended.

14. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 1:35.

15. Lucretius, *De rerum natura* I.1–2.

16. Similar thoughts are found in David Hume's *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (originally 1777).

17. *De E Delphico* 385B.

18. This idea of divine revelation as being progressive and presented with a primarily paedagogical intention becomes important in certain Enlightenment views, e.g., in G. E. Lessing's *Die Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts* (1777; Ditzingen, 1967).

19. Plato, *Socratis Apologia* 20–24.

20. *Agamemnon* 174–77.

21. Actually in Delphi there seems at some periods to have been a fourth agent, a college of priests who wrote down what the priestess, the Pythia, said and passed the written text to the oracle-seeker. Putting in a further layer of intermediaries, of course, makes it that much easier to protect the god from accusations of ignorance or bias: Apollo spoke the truth, but the priestess misheard it or mispronounced it, or the priest who wrote down what the Pythia said misinterpreted what she said, or falsified it in his own interest, or had been bribed, etc. The passage in *Aeneid* (Book III) is a departure from this standard case because Vergil goes out of his way to emphasise that the Trojans heard *the very voice* of the god, not of any intermediary. Presumably this, too, is part of Vergil's attempt to present the oracle as maximally authoritative and not subject to falsification or distortion through a chain of intermediaries.

22. Clearest perhaps in Hölderlin's poem "*Wie wenn am Feiertage*" (written in late 1799 or early 1800) in *Hölderlin: Sämtliche Gedichte*, ed. Jochen Schmidt (Frankfurt/M., 2005), 239–41. For Rimbaud, see his letter to P. Demeny of May 15, 1871, in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1972), 249–54.

23. Despite my general reservations about the concept of "evil," it is useful here. See my *Politics and the Imagination* (Princeton, 2009), 182–84.

24. G.W.F. Hegel, *Rechtsphilosophie* in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel (Frankfurt/M., 1971), vol. 7, "Vorrede," pp. 26–27. See also Theodor Adorno, "Skoteinos," in his *Aspekte der Hegelschen Philosophie* (Frankfurt/M., 1963), "Parataxis," in *Noten zur Literatur III* (Frankfurt/M., 1965), and *Minima Moralia*, §§ 5, 44, 50.

25. Paul Celan, *Der Meridian: Tübinger Ausgabe* (Frankfurt/M., 1999), 85.

26. Ibid., 7, 84.

27. "[E]mphatisch <kann> kein Kunstwerk gelingen" ["No work of art can be a success in an emphatic sense of the term 'success' "]. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 87.

3: Marxism and the Ethos of the Twentieth Century

In all my thinking about the subject matter of this chapter I have been deeply influenced by discussions with the members of the Cambridger Forschungskolloquium, especially Richard Raatzsch. I am also very grateful to the members of the audience at UCD for their resistance to some of the glibber parts of the original version of this chapter.

1. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London, 1981), esp. 103–13, 238–45.

2. See P. Bourdieu, *La distinction* (Paris, 1979).

3. See Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe*, 12:350.

4. One of the central parts of Foucault's analysis of the difference between ancient and Christian forms of ethics is that the former are not necessarily proposed as having relevance to everyone: slaves are not even candidates for leading a good life. See Michel Foucault, *L'histoire de la sexualité: L'usage des plaisirs* (Paris, 1984).

5. Much of what we now call "ancient religion"—a usage that already to some extent represents an anachronistic, retrospective construction, which forces a variety of phenomena into a fixed format derived from later monotheistic patterns of thought—did not even aspire to be all-encompassing or tell any kind of truth about the whole world or all of human life. For an almost random selection of relevant works, see Jan Assman, *Moses the Egyptian* (Cambridge, MA, 1998); Clifford Ando, *The Matter of the Gods* (Berkeley, 2008); Polyumnia Athanassiadi and Michael Frede, eds., *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999); and Moses Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA, 1992).

6. The meaning of "universalist" might not, of course, be limited to the two components cited, by way of example, in the text. It hardly requires stating, I hope, that discussion of "universalism" in this context does not imply any special privileging of Kantian or Habermasian perspectives.

7. Hegel's way of putting this point is usually that religion is a matter of "Vorstellung" ("representation") rather than "Begriff" ("concept"), which is the realm of philosophy. Thus, he writes, "In den Religionen haben die Völker allerdings niedergelegt, wie sie sich das Wesen der Welt, die Substanz der Natur und des Geistes vorstellten, und wie das Verhältnis des Menschen zu demselben" (Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 1:82 [*Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Religion I*]. The contrast here is that philosophy does not "represent," for instance,

the "essence of the world" but "grasps it in a concept" ["In der Philosophie wird das Wesen der Welt nicht vorgestellt, sondern begriffen"]. Even when religion presents "deep, sublime, speculative thoughts," which are not mere images, it presents them as objects of external devotion ("Andacht") rather than as argumentatively structured processes that we grasp "from the inside" by enacting. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 18:83–92.

8. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 18:84.

9. Christian theologians have long discussed this issue, and many of these discussions are highly enlightening, even when finally unsatisfactory. The three most important discussions since the eighteenth century seem to me to have been those of Lessing, Hegel, and Kierkegaard. Analogues to some of the problems that arise here have reemerged in Alain Badiou's *L'ethique: Essai sur la conscience du Mal* (Paris, 1998) and *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris, 1997). How can what Badiou calls an "event" (which like the French Revolution occurred at a particular time and place) have the appropriate kind of universality? Isn't "fidelity" to such an event like commitment to the content of a historically specific form of religious revelation? I can merely state here that for various reasons having to do with the detailed structure of his views I do not think this is as serious a difficulty for Badiou as the parallel problem is for advocates of revealed religion. There is a second possible strand of argument here, associated with Nietzsche rather than with Hegel, which emphasises not inherent limitation of the human image-making capacity but the claim that Christianity is committed to specific substantive delusions that it also has a tendency, in the long run, to undermine. Nietzsche was of the opinion that this process of self-destruction was essentially complete by the end of the nineteenth century. For this view, see Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 5:247–412.

10. The most conceptually interesting and enlightening modern discussion of "sects" is that of Max Weber. See esp. *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* (Tübingen, 1972), 721–26. I should mention, however, that my usage of "sect" deviates slightly from his. I take the term as a quasi-empirical description of a state of affairs in which one group is in fact "cut off" (*seco/sectum*) from a catholic community or from other groups. For Weber, an elitist rejection of free and open access to the religious community is constitutive for being a "sect." Thus he writes, "[Eine 'Sekte' ist eine Gemeinschaft]. . . . welche ihrem *Sinn und Wesen* nach notwendig auf Universalität verzichten . . . muß . . . weil sie ein aristokratisches Gebilde: ein Verein der religiös voll *Qualifizierten* und nur ihrer sein will" (721).

11. See "Epilogue: 1953, 1968, 1995: Three Perspectives," in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism*, ed. Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Leiden, 2008), 419–21.

12. Professor Joseph Raz has proposed a "perfectionist" liberalism that is not obviously subject to this particular line of criticism. See his *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford, 1986).

13. Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, 1969), 131–54.

14. *MEW Erg.* 1.522, 536, 540, etc.

15. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Berlin, 1953), 387.

16. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (New York, 1967), 177–82.

17. On Marx's theory of needs, see Agnes Heller, *The Theory of Need in Marx* (London, 1976), and Ian Fraser, *Hegel and Marx*: *The Concept of Need* (Edinburgh, 1998); see also Lawrence Hamilton, *The Political Philosophy of Needs* (Cambridge, 2003).

18. *MEW Erg.* 1.544, 546.

19. Note the almost compulsive use of "Gegenstand" and "gegenständlich" in the relevant passage (*MEW Erg.* 1.539–42). The model here is human relation to "objects."

20. *MEW Erg.* 1.539–42.

21. The classic expression of this Humboldtian strand is *Die Deutsche Ideologie MEW*, vol. 3, see esp. pp. 32–34, 74–75, 206, and note that Marx was aware of the dangers of "one-sided" or fixated development (see *MEW* 3:238–39).

22. *MEW Erg.* 1.542.

23. Alasdair MacIntyre, "The *Theses on Feuerbach*: A Road Not Taken," in *Artifacts, Representations, and Social Practice*, ed. Carol Gould and Robert Cohen (Dordrecht, 1994), 277–90.

24. This is the thesis of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt/M., 1969), esp. pp. 9–49. See also Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, § 100, pp. 206–8.

25. See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, 1963), §§ 45–53, pp. 231–67.

26. Obviously the view presented here is incompatible with another often used metaphor, that of life as a "journey" from determinate place A to determinate place B, a metaphor that found its most exquisite development in Dante's *Comedy*. The *Comedy* would repay close study in this context, but here I mention only two aspects that seem to me of importance. First, the lives of all those whom Dante encounters are seen as in some way summed up in some single image: Paolo and Francesca buffeted by the unending wind of desire, the sodomites running an eternal race over a desert, Ulysses in his flame. Can every human life really be summed up without remainder in such a single image? Is *nothing* lost by this? Second, it is not, it seems to me, a merely aesthetic fact that the "failures" in *Inferno* are so much more interesting than the saints in *Paradiso*.

27. Contra MacIntyre. See *After Virtue*, esp. chapter 15, pp. 190–209.

28. A further serious problem for any contemporary rehabilitation of Aristotle is the complete absence in his work of any real sense of history as something that matters. He has, to be sure, some trivial remarks about how human inventions have accumulated, some comments about the comparative history of "con-

stitutions," and the odd observation to the effect that human desires develop over time, but none of this amounts to nearly enough to accommodate the modern keen "historischer Sinn" that developed in the nineteenth century, an awareness that the past was, to put it very crudely, "qualitatively" different from the present. His outline history of previous Greek philosophy in book 1 of *Metaphysics* is in itself a sufficient testimonial to his irremediably "presentist" attitude. It has also always seemed paradoxical to me that Christians could try to find a foundation for their beliefs in an Aristotelian framework. After all, it is central to Christianity not merely that a divine revelation took place at some particular time, thus fundamentally changing the moral universe in which people lived, but also that at some specific point in the past God was incarnated. This is most plausibly interpreted as meaning that the very quality of human time changes.

29. John Dewey and Leon Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours* (New York, 1969), 48. To be sure, if one looks at the context within which Trotsky writes this, one will perhaps have doubts about his understanding of "dialectics." He writes: "From the Marxist point of view the end is justified if it leads to increasing the power of humanity over nature and to the abolition of the power of one person over another. . . . That is permissible, which *really* leads to the liberation of humanity. Since this end can be achieved only through revolution, the liberating morality of the proletariat of necessity is endowed with a revolutionary character. . . . It deduces a rule of conduct from the laws of the development of society, thus primarily from the class struggle, this law of all laws." "Deduction of a rule of conduct" from any *one* "law of all laws" seems contrary to the spirit of dialectic.

30. Dewey and Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours*.

31. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes* in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vol. 3; also Marx, *MEW Erg.* 1, pp. 568–88.

4: Must Criticism Be Constructive?

1. If one wished to multiply distinctions, one could actually distinguish three items here: (a) analysis, (b) judgement, and (c) specifically *negative* evaluative judgement. For the sake of simplicity I shall refrain from pursuing this here.

2. Max Weber, "Der Sinn der 'Wertfreiheit' der soziologischen und ökonomischen Wissenschaften," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Wissenschaftslehre* (Tübingen, 1973), 489–540.

3. *Leviathan* chapter XV.

4. See Stefan Wolle, *Der Traum der Revolte: Die DDR 1968* (Berlin: Links, 2008), 194ff. This real incident was given a literary treatment in Christoph Hein's *Der Tangospieler* (Frankfurt/M., 1989).

5. What I am saying, then, is that there are at least *three* distinct things that must be distinguished here: (1) what I ("in foro interno") support and what I

criticize; (2) the public act of support (or criticism) I *think* I am performing ("in foro externo"); and (3) the public act of criticism (or support) I *in fact* succeed in performing. Proponents of the theory of speech acts generally tend to conflate (2) and (3) presumably on the grounds that one cannot "unintentionally" perform a speech act. First of all, I am not at all sure whether it is right that one cannot *in general* perform a speech act or something very much like a speech act unintentionally. Can't I insult you without intending to do so, or indeed intending anything at all by my action? In fact isn't it a particularly bruising kind of insult if I fail to have any intentions towards you at all, acting as if you were simply not there? Note here that there is a difference between (a) knowing full well you are there and will be insulted and yet acting as if you were not there and (b) *really* having no concern one way or another for your presence. The second is no less insulting (in some contexts) that the former. Second, even if I cannot for technical reasons be said to perform a speech act, I can certainly intend to perform a speech act, and even believe while doing it that I am performing it and yet fail to do so, as in the case of Roessler. Roessler was not acting "unintentionally"; he simply was actually doing what was, in a very important sense, the very reverse of what he intended to do, criticising the SED rather than supporting it.

6. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialektik* (Frankfurt/M., 1966), 25–27, 200ff., 352–64.

7. For a recent discussion, see David Graeber, *Debt* (New York, 2011).

8. In thinking about all these examples, which are perhaps not ideally suited to illustrate my point, one should abstract from the fact that most humans naturally have fingers and opposable thumbs that can also (in emergencies) be used to transfer food to the mouth.

9. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, §§ 14-8 (Tübingen, 1963), 63–89.

10. Ibid., §§ 46–53, 235–67.

11. See Karl Marx, *Deutsche Ideologie: Feuerbach* (*MEW* I.3), 13–77.

12. Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama* (Ditzingen, 1994), 132–219. I merely note that one implication of this would seem to be that no performance can be *fully* successful. In our repressive society works will not be able to performed and apprehended fully; on the other hand, if we were to live in a society fully freed of "state" repression, the work would not have the immediate impact and relevance it now has. If we *were* freed of repression, would we still be gripped? This might suggest that great art is *inherently* a transitional phenomenon or, as Adorno thought, that the very idea of *complete* success for a work of art was incoherent.

13. See Andrew Ford, *The Origins of Criticism* (Princeton, 2002).

14. See Homer, *Hymnorum* III.166–73.

15. It is, of course, slightly ironic, at any rate for someone who adopts the perspective proposed in this essay, that *What Is to Be Done?* is the title of a *novel* (N. G. Tschernyschevsky, *Was tun?* [Berlin, 1986]).

5: The Loss of Meaning on the Left

This is a slightly revised version of remarks made at the conference "Sinnstiftung und Sinnverlust an der Schwelle zum 20. Jahrhundert," which took place in Copenhagen in February 2008. I am very grateful to Dr. Karin Wolgast and Dr. Ulrich Knappe for the kind invitation to speak at this conference and for a number of helpful suggestions that enabled me to improve my original draft. I am also very grateful to Richard Raatzsch for a number of extremely illuminating discussions of the topics treated here.

1. Emile Durkheim, *Le suicide* (Paris, 1897).

2. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Colli and Montinari, 13:49 (11[99]).

3. Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria* (Oxford, 1972).

4. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Ein Brief* in *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Ellen Ritter (Frankfurt/M., 1984), 31:45–55.

5. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* III.343–510, ed. Anderson (Leipzig, 1996). One might think of this story as one of the last expressions of what Nietzsche called "the tragic world view" (see *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, 1:11–156), which was obliterated by what we know as "philosophy."

6. Note, too, a further anti-Socratic element of the story: Narcissus *knows* he is being fooled by his own image ("iste ego sum! nec me mea fallit imago" [III.463]), but his insight into this truth is utterly without effect.

7. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* III.454–55.

8. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, vol. 13 [*Vorlesungen über Ästhetik I*], p. 51.

9. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* III.407–14.

10. "Der Knabe . . . bewundert die Kreise." Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 13:51. In a slightly earlier passage on the same page humans are said to wish to "enjoy" (*genießen*) in things the external reality of themselves ("in der Gestalt der Dinge nur die äußere Realität seiner selbst zu genießen").

11. It should be clear that I am not engaging in strict historical exegesis of Hegel's text but am using this passage as an expository device and that my account of it moves over in a way I hope is seamless from more or less direct interpretation of his position to an appropriating *use* of this text to formulate a set of conditions I think reflective people in Western Europe at the beginning of the twenty-first century would find plausible as descriptions of what they would find "meaningful." This does, however, clearly require a certain amount of pressing on Hegel's text, generally in the direction of a more empiricist reading of it than he would have endorsed. I am especially grateful to Richard Raatzsch for putting this point to me with great clarity and force.

12. "Le bonheur est une idée neuve en Europe," in *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Michel Duval (Paris, 1984), 715.

13. G.W.F. Hegel, *Grundlinien zur Philosophie des Rechts*, § 124Z, in *Werke* (Frankfurt/M., 1970), 7:233.

14. Karl Marx, "Zur Kritik der Hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie: Einleitung," *MEW* 1.379.

15. As Wittgenstein memorably put it in a famous passage from the *Tractatus* (6.521): "Die Lösung des Problems des Lebens merkt man am Verschwinden dieses Problems. (Ist nicht dies der Grund, warum Menschen, denen der Sinn des Lebens nach langen Zweifeln klar wurde, warum diese dann nicht sagen konnten, worin dieser Sinn bestand.)." See also Terry Eagleton, *The Meaning of Life* (Oxford, 2007). Since the 1950s philosophers have distinguished two forms of knowledge or "understanding." The first is the discursive or theoretical form of it, which consists in being able to give a prepositional account of the thing in question. I understand the science of mechanics if I can formulate the basic laws of the subject, and explain and use them. This form of knowledge is sometimes simply called "knowing-*that*." The second kind of understanding is one that expresses itself in certain skillful practical ability to act, that is a form of "knowing-*how*." So I can say I know how to swim, meaning that if you put me in the water, I won't sink and will be able to move myself in virtually any direction I want. It is an obvious mistake to confuse this practical ability or skill with the mastery of a set of propositions. I can know the theorems that describe human buoyancy without being able actually to swim, and I can know how to swim without knowing any particular proposition.

16. Adorno, *Negative Dialektik*, 364.

17. Ibid., 364–66.

18. See the subtitles of his two volumes: *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle* (Frankfurt/M., 1963) and *Stichworte: Kritische Modelle 2* (Frankfurt/M., 1969).

19. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, 164–67, 266.

20. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, 87; Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, § 18.

21. "Für den der nicht mitmacht, besteht die Gefahr, daß er sich für besser hält als die anderen. . . . [während er vor diesen nichts voraus hat] als die Einsicht in seine Verstricktheit und das Glück der winzigen Freiheit, die im Erkennen als solchem liegt." Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, § 6, pp. 22–23. ("The person who does not collaborate runs the risk of thinking he is better than other people. . . . whereas he has no advantage over them apart from the insight into the fact that he is implicated [in society and its evils] and the happiness which consists in the tiny freedom that lies in cognition as such.")

22. *Friedrich Nietzsche: Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Colli and Montinari, 5:402–8.

6: Authority: Some Fables

1. A phenomenon discussed at great length (with special reference to philosophy) by Cicero. See, for instance, his *Tusculan Disputations.*

2. Dio Cassius 55.3. See the bilingual Greek/French edition edited and translated by Freyburger and Roddaz (Les Belles Lettres, 1994) or the Greek/English edition by Cary and Forster (Loeb, Harvard, 1914).

3. Gregory Bateson, *Naven* (Cambridge, 1936).

4. See R. Heinze, *Vom Geist des Römertums* (Leipzig, 1938), 1–24.

5. See G. Agamben, *Auzsnahmezustand* (Frankfurt/M., 2004), 88–104.

6. Robert Kaster, *Emotion, Restraint, and Community in Ancient Rome* (Oxford, 2005), chapter 4, pp. 84ff.

7. Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie réligieuse* (Paris, 1960).

8. Aristotle, *Politica* 1259b1.

9. Aristotle on the σπουδαιός in *EN* 1099a–b.

10. Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria*, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1973), V.11.36–41.

11. See also R. Heinze, *Vom Geist des Römertums* (Leipzig, 1938), 1–24.

12. *LSJ*, s.v.

13. For a simple survey, see A. Lintott, *The Constitutions of the Roman Republic* (Oxford, 1999).

14. Montesquieu, *L'esprit des lois* (Paris, 1993).

15. See Andrè Magdelain, *Ius Imperium Auctoritas* (Rome, 1990), 385.

16. See Julian Swann, *Politics and the Parlement of Paris under Louis XV, 1754–74* (Cambridge, 1995). Thanks to my colleague Michael Sonenscher for the reference to this.

17. Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-europeénnes*, vol. 2, S. 149 (Paris, 1969).

18. For some parallel discussion of colonialist foundations, see essay 11 in this volume.

19. Freud is particularly good on the relation between real and imaginary "success" (and "failure") in some of these early Foundation myths. See S. Freud, *Studien-Ausgabe* (Frankfurt/M., 1974), vol. 9.

20. See essay 11 in this volume.

21. End of Book I of *Iliad.*

22. Hesiod, *Theogony.*

23. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Morale*, 5:327–29.

24. Theognis 53–58; Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 5:257–89.

25. Raymond Geuss, *History and Illusion* (Cambridge, 2001).

26. See R. Raatzsch's excellent *Autorität und Autonomie* (Munster, 2007).

27. It is, of course, anything but obvious what counts as a "commercial context." Anthropologists have shown that in most "premodern" societies "commercial transactions" did not take place in the kind of abstract, self-contained sphere

modern economists tend to assume must always have existed. See the recent marvelous *Debt* by Graeber.

28. See essay 2 in this volume.

29. See also R. Geuss, "Wer das Sagen hat," *Mittelweg* 36 (December 2011/January 2012): 1–10.

7: A Note on Lying

1. *Iliad* VIII.312ff.

2. See also Nietzsche on πονηρός, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 5:272.

3. See esp. M. Foucault, *Le courage de la vérité* (Paris, 2009).

4. Compare the experience of Evans-Pritchard with a population in the Sudan who exhibit a very different attitude toward truth-telling (as cited in Graeber, *Debt*, 96–97).

5. *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, ed. with introduction by Peter Baehr (New York, 2000), 563.

6. See Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," in *Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston, 1965).

7. If Arendt had been paying attention to Heidegger in the right way in the 1930s, she could have learned this from him. See Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (Tübingen, 1957; originally lectures in 1935), esp. pp. 112ff.

8: Politics and Architecture

1. See *Von der Grüneburg zum Campus Westend*, brochure by University of Frankfurt (2007) to accompany the permanent exhibition in the I. G.-Farben-Haus. I am also grateful to Professor Axel Honneth of the Philosophisches Institut of the University of Frankfurt for discussion of some of these issues.

2. *EN* 1094a–1095a, 1141b; *Metaphysica* 980a–981b.

3. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, 1:875–90, 5:15–39, 6:88–97, and passim.

4. Max Weber, *Politik als Beruf* (Berlin, 1977).

5. This line of thought has been very fruitfully developed by Zeev Emmerich in recent, as yet unpublished work, and in general I am very indebted to him for discussions of the topics in this chapter.

6. For what is still one of the most interesting discussions of this topic, see Friedrich Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen* in *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Fricke and Göpfert (Munich, 1967), vol. 5.

7. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir* (Paris, 1975).

8. *EN* 1129b–30.

9. John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA, 1971).

10. See *MEW*, 19:18–22; *Ergänzungsband* 1, pp. 534–35.

11. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (Berlin, 1974), 5–19.
12. See ibid., 387–88.
13. See Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 14:266–72.
14. See Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, 3:524–25.
15. Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London, 1970) and *Justice Is Conflict* (London, 1999).

9: The Future of Theological Ethics

1. Hegel, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 18:496–516.
2. For instance, *Euthyphro* 15e.
3. *Symposium* 223d.
4. For instance, Condorcet. In his speech *Der Meridian*, Paul Celan describes Georg Büchner's play *Dantons Tod*, which is set in the period of the Terror during the French Revolution. Celan describes a scene in which various characters, associates of Danton, discuss the nature of art. Such discussions, Celan says, can be continued indefinitely "unless interrupted" (*wenn nichts dazwischenkommt*). However, in this case—and Celan's discussion suggests that this is the archetypical case—something *does* interrupt (*es kommt was dazwischen*) the discussion, the arrest of the participants, who are tried and guillotined. See P. Celan, *Der Meridian und andere Prosa* (Frankfurt/M., 1988).
5. 1 Cor. 1:19.
6. See K. Marx, *Das Kapital*, vol. I.I.1.3 ("*Die Wertform oder der Tauschwert*").
7. J. Dewey and L. Trotsky, *Their Morals and Ours* (New York, 1973).
8. Matt. 5:22.
9. Personal communication with Richard Rorty.
10. Gal. 3:26–29. See also A. Badiou, *Saint Paul: La fondation de l'universalisme* (Paris, 1997).
11. Rom. 12:2; John 1:12.
12. See A. Dihle, *The Theory of the Will in Classical Antiquity* (Berkeley, 1982); M. Frede, *A Free Will* (Berkeley, 2011); Bernard Williams, *Shame and Necessity* (Berkeley, 1993), esp. chapter 2.
13. This discussion follows Frede, *A Free Will*.
14. I merely note that Aristotle also has no concept of "evil," although he does have a concept of bad. This is probably connected to the absence of "will" in his thinking. If one thinks one cannot do without the concept of "evil" one would have to try to reconfigure it without reference to a "will." I have some suggestions in that direction in my "The Future of Evil," in *Essays on Nietzsche's "Genealogy of Morality,"* ed. S. May (Cambridge, 2011).
15. If Feuerbach and Marx are right and religions are forms of imaginary compensation for human suffering and the lack of a clear perspective for dealing

with them realistically, then one would expect religious belief and practice to increase as Western economies increasingly falter, just as the collapse of the political movements for social change in the West in the mid-1970s led to a resurgence of religion.

10: Did Williams Do Ethics?

I am grateful to Damian Freeman, Istvan Hont, Tom Stern, and especially to Robert Pippin for discussions and comments on an earlier version of this chapter.

1. Zmith somewhat spoiled the effect by drinking Diet Coke during the meeting. It turns out that it is very hard to feel intimidated by someone who drinks Diet Coke. One thinks of Cicero's remark about Julius Caesar: "Sometimes I think he is a serious danger to the Republic, but then I observe the way he curls his sparse forelock around his finger and I think, 'Can such a man be a danger?'"

2. Leon Trotsky, John Dewey, et al., *Their Morals and Ours* (New York, 1973).

3. *EN* 1094–95. I am greatly indebted to Istvan Hont for invaluable assistance, particularly for discussion of the material in this paragraph. See Bernard Williams, "In the Beginning Was the Deed," in *In the Beginning Was the Deed: Realism and Moralism in Political Argument*, ed. G. Hawthorn (Princeton, 2005), 18–29.

4. See *Apology*.

5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile; ou De l'éducation*, ed. F. Richard and P. Richard (Paris, 1964), 223. See also Hegel, *Grundlinien zur Rechtsphilosophie*, § 126 Z.

6. Speech at the Convention, December 3, 1792.

7. Sven Lindqvist, *Exterminate all the Brutes!* (Granta 1996), 149.

8. Christine Korsgaard et al., *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge, 1996), 217–18.

9. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, § 18.

10. Some of the material from chapter later appeared in "Wagner and the Transcendence of Politics," in Bernard Williams, *On Opera* (New Haven, 2006), 70–89.

11. John Deathridge, *Wagner: Beyond Good and Evil* (Berkeley, 2008), 52. The use of the term "hollow" with reference to this particular passage is so frequent in the literature as to be almost a cliché. See also Michael Tanner, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Wagner* (London, 2010), 154 ("stunningly grand and hollow"); also Deryck Cooke, *I Saw the World End: A Study of Wagner's "Ring"* (London, 1979): "this 'triumphant' ending is a temporary and hollow one" (238).

12. Warren Darcy, *Wagner's "Das Rheingold"* (Oxford, 1993), 208–14.

13. Richard Wagner, *Mein Leben*, vol. 2 (Munich, 1911).

14. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, § 24.

15. T. W. Adorno, *Versuch über Wagner* (Frankfurt am Main 1974, c. 1952).

16. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, § 18.

17. *Briefwechsel, 1928–1940: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main, 1994), 370.

18. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 163.

19. Ibid.

11: The Wisdom of Oedipus and the Idea of a Moral Cosmos

My thanks to Peter Agush, Lorna Finlayson, Hilary Gaskin, Chris Kassam, Domenic O'Mahony, Richard Raatzsch, Tom Stern, and Paul Woodruff for exceedingly helpful discussions of the topics of this chapter, as well as to the members of the Literature Seminar in the Faculty of Classics at Cambridge for many constructive suggestions.

1. The only other major works of modern philosophy I can think of that end in this way are Hegel's *Phänomenologie des Geistes* and Heidegger's *Einführung in die Metaphysik*. That Williams's book originated as a series of lectures to a Classics Faculty goes some way towards making it less peculiar that the poet cited is Pindar, rather than Schiller or Hölderlin, or some appropriate English-language poet, but this still doesn't really explain why discursive prose gives way at the end to a metrically expressed image. Ending with a bit of poetry might also be expected to be associated with a cognitive and hermeneutic relaxation at the end of a difficult work, but that is clearly not the case here.

2. *Republic* 607b.

3. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 167.

4. I intentionally say that *we* would distinguish between historical and mythical tales because, of course, Pindar himself shows no sign of making any such distinction, and, as Williams points out in a well-known chapter of *Truth and Truthfulness* (Princeton, 2002, 149–72), he really couldn't have made such a distinction because there really was no such thing as "proper" history until the work of Thucydides, a generation after Pindar's death.

5. We are relatively well informed about the history of Cyrene because of book 4 of Herodotus's *Histories.*

6. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie*, § 3 in *Sämlitche Werke*, 1:35.

7. All of the examples in this paragraph are from Diogenes Laertius (lives of Thales, Chilon, Pythagoras).

8. *Anthologia lyra graeca*, ed. Diehl.

9. "There are serious doubts in fact about whether Pythagoras ever existed" means what such statements usually mean with reference to the ancient world. That is, there is a traditional body of lore about a particular person, attributing

to that person some signal achievements. To say that that person did not exist is to say that there was not a single person with that name and those properties who accomplished all those things. Thus "Homer did not exist" does not mean that there was never *any* Greek named Homer who wrote some poems but that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were not the work of a single blind poet of that name who lived in the eighth century BC in Ionia. This, of course, does not mean than *no one* wrote the *Iliad*. See Martin West, *The Making of the Iliad* (Oxford, 2012).

10. Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege* (Frankfurt/M., 1963). Heracleitos has a very strong claim to being a major participant in this story. See his Fragment 30 Diels/Kranz *Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, 6th ed. (Zurich, 1951), 157.

11. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 164.

12. He does this at the beginning of his essay on Sophocles' *Trachiniae* in *The Sense of the Past* (Princeton, 2006), 49ff.

13. On "hope," see Geuss, *Outside Ethics*, 224–25. However, see also Michael Theunissen, *Pindar: Menschenlos und Wende der Zeit* (Beck, 2008), 307–99.

14. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Götzen-Dämmerung*, Streifzüge eines Unzeitgemässen, § 1, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 6:111. Further judgements about Seneca's style: reading him is "like dining on nothing but anchovy sauce" (nineteenth century); he "writes as a Boare does pisse, *scilicet* by jirkes" (seventeenth century), both cited in edition of *de otio* and *de brevitate vitae*, ed. G. D. Williams (Cambridge, 2003), 26.

15. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (at the end of book 1 of part 1). I can assure those who do not read German that the original is even more unctuous and rebarbative than this suggests. Kant is one of the few major philosophers whose style translators generally improve. In the original the full sentence from which this segment is taken runs to over a dozen lines and constitutes a full paragraph.

16. Pindar, *Ol.* 11.8ff., *Ol.* 2.147ff., *P.* 4.248ff., etc.

17. *Scholia vetera in Pindari carmina* (Stuttgart, 1997), ed. Drachmann, vol. 2.

18. Williams, *Shame and Necessity*, 217n64.

19. Obviously the description of the stripped oak log reminds one of *Il.* I.233ff. where Achilles swears on a sceptre made of just such a stripped oak branch that the Greeks will one day come to realise that they need him.

20. If there is as much to be said for the pre-philosophical view as this essay argues, it would not be surprising to find, especially in certain early post-Socratic philosophers, *traces* of a recognition of those aspects of the world to which Sophocles, Pindar, and Thucydides are most sensitive. In Aristotle this takes the form of his recognition of "the fate of Priam" as a perpetual possibility (*EN* 1099b–1101b).

21. Martin Heidegger, *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik* (Frankfurt/M., 1951).

22. Basil L. Gildersleeve, *Pindar: Olympian and Pythian Odes* (Cambridge reprint of edition of 1885), 301; Bruce Braswell, *A Commentary on the Fourth Pythian Ode of Pindar* (Berlin, 1988), 365.

23. Pindar is in fact an archetypical example of one aspect of what Nietzsche called a "master morality" in contrast to a "slave morality." The first is focused on praising *positive* achievement while simply ignoring or passing over in silence failure; the second is centrally concerned to censure vice. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Jenseits von Gut und Böse*, §§ 257–96 in *Sämtliche Werke*, 5:205–40 and *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, Erste Abhandlung, §§ 1–17 in *Sämtliche Werke*, 5:257–89.

24. Bernard Williams, "Moral Luck," in his *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981), 20–40. Roger Crisp has pointed out (private communication) that the "Gaugin" who figures in Williams's essay is really a character who appears in S. Maugham's novel *The Moon and Six-Pence*, not the real painter of that name.

25. We don't know what exact version of the Oedipus story Pindar, who after all was himself a local boy from Thebes, presupposes here. The early history of the story is extremely complex and obscure, and Greeks in general allowed themselves great freedom in mixing motifs, adding or dropping details of the old stories, or for that matter simply making things up. Thus in various older versions of the story, such as that in Homer, Oedipus is not presented as having been driven out of Thebes but continues to rule there, and in many of the extant versions of the story before it was taken over by the Athenian dramatists Oedipus's two sons, Polyneikes and Eteocles, are not the sons of Oedipus's wife/mother but, apparently, of a second wife named Eurygeneia. So one must be careful about projecting back into Pindar details derived from other or *later* treatments of the Oedipus myth, such as that of Sophocles, which Pindar, given that he was about twenty years older than Sophocles, is unlikely to have known. There is only one other place in the extant work in which Pindar speaks of Oedipus, and that is the *Second Olympian*, which merely states that he killed his father and that a Fury caused his own sons to kill each other. The only further possible reference to a story about Oedipus occurs in one of the fragments where there is a reference to a "young woman's riddle <spoken from> savage jaws," which might possibly refer to the Sphinx. See Jebb's introduction to his edition of *OT*.

26. Actually one did survive: Thersandros. See Pindar, *Ol.* II.47.

27. It is also true and important that no one was forced to compete; we do not in the same sense volunteer to be born and live.

28. Even if the order in the world is *now* underwritten by Zeus, if Hesiod is to be believed it is still a fragmentary, local, and constructed order. The order is not in any way natural, necessary, or metaphysically grounded but is *imposed* by Zeus after a war in which he must overturn the old order completely and over-

come the titans by military force. The defeated Titans still rage underground. See Hesiod, *Theogonia* ll. 617–719; Pindar, *First Pythian*, ll. 13–28.

29. Bernard Williams, "Conflicts of Values," in *The Idea of Freedom*, ed. A. Ryan (Oxford, 1979).

30. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA, 1985), chapter 8.

31. See p. 221 [*Eighth Pythian* 97].

32. See also Geuss, "Thucydides, Nietzsche, and Williams," 219–33.

12: Who Was the First Philosopher?

1. Hegel construed philosophy as a form of what he called "absolute spirit," that is, as something that inherently could not be understood as a way in which a social group reflected on itself. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, §§ 552–77, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, 353–95.

2. Friedrich Schlegel, *Athenäumsfragmente*, Fragment 112 in Friedrich Schlegel, *Werke in zwei Bänden* (Berlin, 1980), 1:204.

3. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen* in *Sämtliche Werke*, 1:799–872.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral: Zweite Abhandlung*, §§ 12-3, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 5:313–18.

5. Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral:* "*Vorrede* § 7" in *Sämtliche Werke*, 5:254ff.

6. Ibid., 5:275.

7. Richard Wagner, *Oper und Drama* (Reclam).

8. As everyone who has studied ancient theatre knows, there was also an earlier play, *The Sack of Miletos* by Phrynicus, on a (painful) topic of recent Greek history. Wagner was rather widely read in ancient literature—he apparently sometimes read Aeschylus aloud to his family in the evenings—but I don't know whether he would have been aware of this.

9. The question that this immediately raises is why it would not be possible to turn "Henry V" into the same kind of mythical figure as "Xerxes" or "Socrates," or rather whether that is not just what Shakespeare tried to do.

10. Schiller, *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*.

11. See essay 11 in this volume.

12. Ignoring for the moment the complication that would be introduced by the wings.

13. Nietzsche, *Sämtliche Werke*, 7:460ff.

14. Ibid.

15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra: Zarathustra's Vorrede*, § 6, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 4:S.21ff.

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