DE GRUYTER

Tilo Schabert

THE FIGURE OF MODERNITY

ON THE IRREGULARITY OF AN EPOCH

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The Figure of Modernity

On the Irregularity of an Epoch

Translated from the German
by Javier Ibáñez-Noé

With a Foreword by James Greenaway

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Dedicated to my relatives in Chicago:
The Iberle Family

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Foreword[1]

It is unlikely that there are many terms more nebulous in their meaning than "modernity." Modernity communicates something of a break with pre-modern thinkers or times, and thus refers to a unique time period with its own set of qualities or processes or phenomena. It can point to a range of particular experiences and attitudes. It is a term that works as a euphemism for secularization, for a resurgent Gnosticism, for an age of ideology with particular emphasis upon progressivism, and so on. Modernity, for all its hazy and under-formulated threads of meaning, involves, nonetheless, a web of assumptions about humanity and its relation to the world. As such, it is uncritically accepted in some quarters, while it is opposed vociferously in others. It is a net good for some, while for others it is an evil that embraces every heresy. Some consider modernity to be our moment, our apogee; some insist that ours is a post-modern moment; while others again hold that post-modernity is merely a repackaging and continuation of modernist ideas crystallized in the Enlightenment. "There are," as Tilo Schabert points out in the present volume, "many different interpretations of modernity. They are all supposed to hold up a mirror to modernity." It is likely that Eric Voegelin, Leo Strauss, Hannah Arendt, Stanley Rosen, Hans Blumenberg, Karl Löwith, Romano Guardini, Carl Schmitt, and Christopher Lasch are among the interpreters that Schabert has in mind, and while none of these contemporary voices are mentioned directly, *The Figure of Modernity* moves within the orbit of their conversation. The conversation they began is the effort to elucidate modernity, to provide a "figure" for it, a key by which to understand it. Indeed, Schabert's *The Figure of Modernity* represents a significant contribution to the conversation they have begun, not least because he charts the development of modernity in a way that helps to frame that very conversation.

The present volume can certainly be read as a scholarly study of modern civilization by one of Europe's most distinguished political philosophers. Yet, because a concern for the human condition has been a signal concern of Schabert's throughout his career, *The Figure of Modernity* cannot be read as simply another exposition of Enlightenment ideals, or of modern European civilization and its discontents. (Nor should it be considered a lament for what the moderns have lost through willful blindness.) Schabert is a philosopher engaged in an ongoing anamnetic recovery of truths about human existence; truths that ought never to be forgotten. For all of their dignity and their misery, for all of their proneness to error and their narcissism, and for all of their love of wisdom and their cognitive

1 EDITORIAL NOTE: This foreword was written for the English edition of the book.

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capacity to realize their *capax omnium*, human beings are worthy of the attempt to recover—and keep recovering—the truths of their existence. For Schabert, the first truth to be recovered is that human beings are not lost. They are not solitary, floating in a vacuum, left to themselves. They bear in their persons, in their societies, and in their history, a relation to the cosmos that holds them. *The Figure of Modernity* emerges from a life-time of research and serious engagement with various aspects of the modern world, but what is perhaps unique to Schabert's "figure" is a pervasive tenderness for the human subjects whose bodily predicament and political constitution are always in question.

Unsurprisingly, *The Figure of Modernity* is a book about more than modernity, aiming to elucidate a uniquely modern episode of a perennial human tale. The reader will find representative thinkers and texts from throughout the four hundred years of modernity—arranged in thematic order—but also representatives from pre-modern times to provide a broader, deeper perspective. Through their own words, Schabert allows the various attitudes and sentiments of modernity to communicate themselves. The "life-worlds" of modern societies, and civilizational characteristics of modernity are treated methodically and with the tools of well-honed scholarship, yet the treatment is driven by an abiding concern for its subjects and their place in the cosmos. In doing so, *The Figure of Modernity* brings together many of the themes of Schabert's career. It fits particularly well with his *The Second Birth: On the Political Beginnings of Human Existence*. In that work, Schabert presents *Gestalten* of human existence, the various frames of being human. The *Gestalten* by which we exist—bodiliness, the political, number, consciousness, grace, thought, divinity, power, justice, love, etc.—chart the contours of human continuity with the encompassing cosmos. Nor is this mere mysticism. In various publications since the 1970s, Schabert has been elucidating the intimacy of the cosmos through various "figures of the cosmos" that are genuinely concrete realities of daily life: architecture and city-planning, the political wisdom of statesmen, the life of nations, aesthetics and poetics. *The Figure of Modernity* apprehends the modern situation with a philosophic eye that also sees the cosmological significance of the moment. Thus, it is a study, not just of the hallmarks of modernity, but of what constitutes the "loneliness" of the modern human being. His or her modernity may well be characterized by estrangement, but it is so only because there is that which one can estrange oneself from. The "cosmos of the world" abides, and Schabert's erudition is on hand to remind the modern human being that existence is already nested within that cosmos. Like Plato's prisoner who returns to the cave in the *Republic*, *The Figure of Modernity* re-presents the paradigmatic existential challenge of *periagoge*, the turning around of the soul, that can only take place in the context of an encompassing cosmos.

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On one level, the present volume works as a study with historiographical elements, chronologically tracing the "intellectual development and social consolidation" of modernity as a civilizational project that begins in a "mental attitude." On another level, Schabert expects his reader to shift gears into philosophy in order to grasp this mental attitude. The mental attitude that characterizes modernity is one that has prescinded from its relations with the surrounding cosmic reality for the sake of a pure human autonomy, a prescinding or forgetfulness that the ancients knew as *hybris*. Indeed, Schabert lets the ancients speak for the "cosmos of the world" within which we exist and of which we are part, in order to clarify why the *conditio humana* is a condition of existential limitations, the transgression of which is a presumption akin to self-divinization that amounts to arrogance.

The Figure of Modernity takes the reader on a journey through modernity that includes an account of various modern perspectives toward the ancients and their cosmological bearing. Schabert discusses how, initially, it was adaptation of ancient wisdom to new historical situations that constituted the first "modern" attitude toward the past. However, this eventually succumbed to a qualitatively different attitude marked by arrogance. To be "modern" was precisely not to be attached to the ancients, and not to be enchanted by the cosmological wisdom of their works. In fact, what we have most generally come to call "modernity" is more clearly associated with a jettisoning of the ancients for the sake of an ever new beginning, our beginning. The modern attitude, extrapolated to a civilizational project, is one that wills to possess a nature whose secrets are there to be discovered and mastered. In the transition from the experience of existence within a "cosmos of the world" to the confrontation with an objective "world of nature," the relation of prudence and humility that human beings bear toward the cosmos that holds them is inevitably replaced by something like an intoxication that absolute domination of nature promises. This is the characteristic mental attitude that animates modernity, and is what Schabert's teacher, Eric Voegelin, has called "imaginative oblivion." In extending the horizons of Voegelin's work, Schabert reminds his readers at critical points that our humanity is at stake when, in the absence of a "cosmos of the world" we claim a godlike power over the "world of nature." Human beings, we know, are often the first victims of limitless domination, and for every ascent to divine stature, there is a grinding dehumanization that is merciless and remorseless.

The project of modernity – its obsession with novelty and originality, its *libido dominandi*, its essential homelessness, its irascible stance toward pre-moderns – was neither universally accepted by its European contemporaries, nor integrated into the lives of all Europeans (and by later extension, Western peoples). Indeed, modernity has met with much skepticism and resistance in its 400 years.

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Nonetheless, to the extent that modernity has been successful, there have followed continuous crises – personal, social, and political – which "are intrinsic to its existence." Modernity is dedicated, on the one hand, to totemic progress; but on the other hand, its mental attitude is a predilection for independence from what came before. To paraphrase Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the modern is a revolutionary who wills only to innovate, not to renovate. The modern person and modern society – through the various realms of the human life-worlds: religion, economics, literature, architecture, and so on – distinguish themselves by novelty, by untrammelled freedom, by "divine genius," and most conspicuously by an ideological conviction that modernity inevitably leads to progress. If there is a "Law of Progress" that justifies the uprooting of the modern present from the regressive past, then it is violence that becomes the authentic manifestation of modernity in its purest form, a dreary exercise in forgetfulness. The mindset of violence – not necessarily expressive in physical action – stands always ready to tear down all the old filth, as Marx famously put it, wherever it may be found in order to open new vistas and unleash previously unimagined possibilities.

The loss of the cosmos is not immediately experienced as a loss, because there is a tangible gain on offer: knowledge of the "world of nature." Schabert reveals the spirit of recklessness – not in wonderment and the desire to know – but in the giddiness of modernity's pursuit of knowledge. "These meaningful relations in the cosmos of the world," Schabert writes, "were lost in the world of nature. In the nature philosophy of the moderns, experiences of the world were simplified down to mere perceptions of physical facts. … [T]here were data, but there was no meaning." To seek the meaning of life in the fast-moving train of knowledge amounts to an exercise in futility. In eclipsing the cosmological dimension of existence, the modern loses his or her bearing, and must seek refuge from futility in endless data: busyness, distraction, entertainment, drugs, pornography, rage, and the refusal to think in the noetic sense. As Voegelin wryly noted, "The price of progress is the death of the spirit."

This is not without controversy. Let us briefly allude to one or two typical themes raised in other figures of modernity so that we better appreciate Schabert's contribution. Hans Blumenberg, for example, presents a figure of modernity with an entirely positive ground for a renewal of the meaning of life, especially in relation to the preceding late medieval period. The rise of nominalism and of certain fideist and voluntarist aspects of Scotism impressed upon the intellectual world of the time an image of the remoteness and impenetrability of the transcendent-divine ground of the cosmos. In such a paradigm, nothing is certain and everything is insecure because the world depends upon the assertiveness of an inscrutable God. That paradigm is a figure of a world that is unfit

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for human beings. Blumenberg sees in modernity a deliberate discontinuity with the past. The past that had to be sloughed off was experientially closer to a chaos than a cosmos. The "disappearance of order" in the late Middle Ages, for Blumenberg, is answered only by the modern project that locates meaning and beauty and order in an intramundane setting. Modernity is the restoration of order.

Similarly, Romano Guardini, in *The End of the Modern World*, points out how modernity is founded upon a fundamental disconnection with the past. However, for him this disconnection tends instead toward chaos, and emphatically not order, because human beings have severed themselves from the history of their own humanity, which is also a history of their presence before God as the ground of their existence. Modernity, always in pursuit of what is new (*modo*, modern), is a turbulent state of mind, a restlessness that comes close to an infatuation with itself. Guardini sees in Enlightenment rationalism the figure of modernity made manifest. There is something like a self-abasement where moderns diminish the sphere of their existence from the cosmos to an intramundane materialism: being is reduced to matter, and matter's passivity is ever susceptible to manipulation by reason. The moderns proceed to order their societies according to materialist criteria. Thus, power over nature becomes the model for modern political society where power has become the most salient characteristic of social discourse and praxis.

Thus, Guardini and Blumenberg present contrasting figures of modernity. If Guardini is suspicious of power as a technological means to despiritualize human life, Blumenberg clearly moves in the opposite direction. That is, the role of modern science in excavating knowledge of the natural world is to secure footholds of order by which human beings can live according to their self-assertion. Knowledge and control of nature is the reliable means for the survival of human life. However, there is a prior question that Blumenberg and Guardini address only obliquely, but which Schabert raises here:

> The development of these instruments, however, – the natural sciences, in other words – is merely a symptom, though certainly the most visible one, of the rise and expansion of the modern worldview. ... The worldview of modernity cannot be explained through the natural sciences; it is rather the natural sciences that demand to be explained by the worldview of modernity.

So, Guardini impugns the Renaissance thinkers for their plundering of the ancients as they went in search of tools "with which to cut [themselves] away from Revelation and ecclesiastical authority," but if the problem had become Revelation and authority, the question remains why had these only now become problematic? *The Figure of Modernity* sets itself the task of explaining the "world-

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view of modernity" so that it can shed light upon Guardini's and Blumenberg's figures, and the figures of others in what we have above referred to as a conversation.

For example, *The Figure of Modernity* clarifies what is already valuable in Blumenberg's figure by enhancing an understanding of the modern predicament of cosmological estrangement. All the more clearly do we see Blumenberg indicating such alienation in the dominant intellectual climate of late medieval Christendom as a driving factor toward modernity; we see alienation as operative in his explanation of the modern attitude toward science and transcendence. Yet, *The Figure of Modernity* highlights the importance of finding one's place in the cosmos. In contrast, science for Blumenberg is modernity's method to forget the cosmos by humanizing a world that had been inhospitable. As a result, science is less a method than a principle: it takes over the role of Christianity by embodying a new mythos of human autonomy by which human beings can be at home without a cosmos. Blumenberg presents modern human beings as those beings whose problem of estrangement is countered only by reliable knowledge and technology, and it is science alone that presents us with an understanding of the world of nature that is reliable, constant, and dependable. Science eclipses the need for transcendent meaning because, in controlling nature, it is science alone that properly ministers to the existential needs for meaning in human life, rather than any theological notions.

Yet it is precisely this modern glorification of science that, for Guardini has exacerbated the problem of estrangement. What is most needed, now more than ever for Guardini, as for Schabert, is a recovered sense of transcendence to counterbalance modernity's immanentizing emphases. In still other figures of modernity, the eclipse of transcendence becomes a spiritualization of immanence. On the one hand, both Carl Schmitt and Karl Löwith present modernity as a "secularization" of Christianity, whereas on the other hand, Guardini, Marquard, and Pius X see in modernity the rise of new Gnostic heresies.

Schabert enters this field of contesting figures of modernity with some nuance. The modern human person can certainly point to the undoubted success of science and technology from the Enlightenment onward. The alleviation of unnecessary suffering and the achievement of dignified living by countless millions are directly due to the scientific method. Human domination of the de-cosmicized realm of nature has yielded previously unimaginable concrete advances in fields such as medicine, communication, construction, transportation, etc. Modernity is a success at the level of knowledge and *technē*; but it is also partially a failure if we approach it at the level of meaning (as we must, because human beings really do make sense of existence through experiences of transcendent meaning and cosmological dimensions). Schabert is far too pragmatic,

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too receptive to the truth wherever it comes from, too caring of humankind to debauch into an anti-modern dogmatism. Any such dogmatism, of course, would be every bit as reckless as the modern will to torpedo the wisdom of the ancients. *The Figure of Modernity* is a withering critique where it needs to be, but also makes room for the genuine insights of modernity. "Every critic of the experiment of modernity knows that the experiment cannot be simply terminated." What Schabert suggests is a correction. While the moderns live with a technological prowess at their fingertips, the danger remains that they have harnessed unimaginable power without a larger horizon of meaning to guide them.

The balance between cosmos and the humankind that inhabit it was disturbed by human hubris. That is why a balance cannot be restored primarily through changes in the realm of the technological means that modern humanity designed with the goal of asserting its hubris, necessary though these changes may be. Rather, the correction of the experiment "modernity" must start with humankind's rethinking its place in the cosmos.

Human autonomy, science and technology, and assertiveness do not generate meaning. Pragmatic gains in the control of natural processes and artistic brilliance devastatingly tempt us to substitute them for existential meaning. In the end, the scientist, the artist, the technician know that they must grow old and die. If their lot in life was to widen horizons for the progress of modern humankind, their lot was also to suffer in the midst of the cosmos. *The Figure of Modernity* explicitly lays out the cosmological conditions of the dignity and the misery of human life. The world of nature has no answers to the pathos of existence. Sickness, loss, suffering, and death are no more than data from the perspective of science, or problems to be fixed where possible. Only the perspective that opens to the cosmos of the world can be consoled. Domination of nature is no replacement for existential meaning.

The Figure of Modernity then ought to be read as a two-fold reminder: 1. that there is more to being human than being modern; and, 2. that a recovery of the cosmos, as the horizon within which all human beings exist, amounts to a recovery of a fully human stature.

With this in mind, the final chapter on political things picks up the burden of recovery. It is a chapter that works as a rejoinder to the modern tendency to throw away norms, traditions and limitations for the sake of novelty, innovation and genius. For Schabert, the presence of constitutional government within modernity is nothing less than "astonishing." It seems to stand athwart the modern proclivity for irregularity and its impatience with limits and moderation, yet at the same time it seems to fit with a civilizational drive toward progress. The paradoxical status of the constitutional regime seems to meet and transcend the

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modern experiment we have been conducting for approximately 400 years, but there is a solid reason for this, according to Schabert:

> In the construction of the constitutional regime, modernity created a *Gestalt* that is entirely its own and which nonetheless has always been in existence: the *Gestalt* of human beings who, for the sake of the good signified in each body, freely limit, in their bodies, the demand that emanates from these bodies.

In *The Second Birth*, Schabert discusses the "space" between human bodies as a political space. It has to be political (and eloquent) because the body is always in need, whether that need manifests as company or shelter, food or security, etc. The first birth is the emergence into the world of a complete human body, but this intrinsically gives rise the second birth, the political birth that would minister to the good of bodies. Or, as Schabert puts it here, there was always a limit, an absolute limit: the human body. In spite of modernity's rootlessness and apparent incoherence, it cannot remove the moral and cosmological limit of the human body that is always present, and present absolutely.

The constitutional regime serves this limit. It is constructed with the limit in mind. The good in the center of the construction is liberty. Liberty is the political interpretation of the limit – the absolute limit grounded in our bodily existence – that unites all human beings in response to the teachings of their bodies.

The modernist thinker typically frames the *Gestalten* of bodiliness and the political constitution in terms of sovereignty. For example, a popular liberal motif is that we are sovereigns of our own selves, but not of others. Yet, "The very need for governments reveals all there is to know about human nature." Schabert locates a constitutional mechanics of checks and balances, of separation of powers, and a regime of liberty and law within the cosmological depth of existence itself, and in doing so, he is able to effect a reconciliation of modernity and the *Gestalten* of human life in the cosmos. Schabert's recovery of the deeper significance of the role played by politics makes sense of his claim in *The Second Birth* that if human beings "understand politics as the most important activity, and if they act accordingly, human beings make themselves in fact worthy of themselves."

In this sense, constitutional government embodies boundaries that the project of modernity confronts. Constitutional government ensures that the modern experiment in limitlessness and absolute domination of nature is walled in. In another sense, this chapter allows Schabert to take his place in another conversation about the role of political philosophy in general. *The Figure of Modernity* demonstrates that the political conversation was always closely related to the conversation about modernity. Leo Strauss, in claiming that political philosophy

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completes philosophy itself, raises the question of the role of philosophy in the city and the need to live out the ancient goal of moderation. For Strauss, it would seem that political philosophy is the figure of philosophy itself, and there is much in Schabert's writings, here and elsewhere, that resonates with Strauss. Stanley Rosen's more combative approach to the role of philosophy in the city would charge the philosopher never to cease teaching, to aim constantly at the noetic clarification of the *logoi* that are operative within ordinary discourse. The philosopher's role, for Rosen – and arguably consonant with Strauss's turn to political philosophy – is to take ordinary life in all its forms and life-worlds, and to uncover in them the extraordinariness that cannot ever finally be said. Rosen's repudiation of modernity is an avowed denial of the effort to bring the ordinary under the methodological control of the mathematizing sciences. The conceit of modernity, for Rosen, is not only the will to do such a thing, but even in the recognition that moderns have lost touch with simplicity and purity and the good life, the modern is inclined to go in search of them through theory and science. The grip of modernity, for Rosen, is solid and stupefying, and the need for the uncompromising philosopher to take modernity to task has never been keener. Though Rosen's tone is more pugilistic than Schabert's, the common effort is directed toward the recovery of a luminosity (as David Walsh calls it) by which we exist.

There are diagnostic and therapeutic aspects to the present volume that place it in the company of authors like Strauss and Rosen, among others. Where Strauss's and Rosen's figures turn toward political philosophy and the ordinary for their bearings, Schabert's figure finds its language to explain modernity in relation to the intimate and imprescriptible presence of the cosmos. This is the luminosity that is mediated by *Gestalten* such as the body, politics, beauty, truth, goodness, etc. The *Gestalten* of political existence bear that luminosity, and it is fitting that *The Figure of Modernity* finishes with a consideration of the deeper significance of the political.

Overall, one might say that *The Figure of Modernity* elucidates modernity in the retelling of an old tale about human existence, and does so in conversation with other retellings of the tale. Human beings – as persons and as societies – have history because they alone know that they exist, that they must die, and that their abode is the cosmos. The cosmos is less a place than a bond with the mysterious, extraordinary, luminous, divine ground that holds them; it is less a space than a radiant order of *eros* by which they can find meaning in their lives. The old tale is about how humans either become worthy of the home that holds them or forgetful of the home that awaits their return. If it can be a tale of pride, arrogance, and indifference, then it can also be a tale of humility, repentance, and *eros*; and of how the pendulum in every soul swings

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between them. It is by swings such as these that history is constituted. It is only because human beings exist historically, in the presence of the cosmos, that we have a cosmos to retreat from, and, with our backs turned and our heads down, to live as though modernity were the consummation of history. *The Figure of Modernity* is not simply Schabert's contribution to an ongoing academic conversation, but also a gift offered to the exhausted and demoralized modern human being who has begun to wonder again.

James Greenaway

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Prolegomenon[1]

Nemesis and Athena

I am writing this prolegomenon while I am living like a hermit. A pandemic is raging across the world. Under governmental order my movements are severely restricted. I should absolutely avoid to get close to anyone except my wife. Countries are shut down. Travels have ceased. Economies are damaged. The practice of citizenship is extinguished almost entirely. We have to fear for our lives. This is the news that streams in from all sides, incessantly.

Certainly, we need not despair. Our world will endure. Differently, however. Lessons will be drawn. Such as the one a friend in France has drawn and shared with me. He held high positions in the government of his country, is a well-read person and a keen observer of political and civilizational developments. "This catastrophe", he observed, "represents an excellent lesson in humility for arrogant humankind that believes itself able to master the material and existential problems of the world with the instruments of technology alone. Contrary to what the new thaumaturges wish us to believe, that artificial intelligence, the benefits of which they boast with much clamor, is hardly of any help to us against a malignant virus. This brutal reminder of our individual and collective fragility will perhaps induce our societies to correct their chaotic trajectories and find again the path of wisdom."

My friend's observation carries in fact two lessons. The first is: Humankind has been possessed by an unfounded arrogance. And the second is: The ways of humans ought to be corrected and be wise ones again. The ethical insights expressed by these lessons are old – and have been largely forgotten. In "ancient" times they were, to everyone's knowledge, personified by divinities. If we turn to the pantheon of Greek gods, for instance, we see there *Nemesis*, the goddess who punishes hubris, and *Athena*, the goddess of wisdom. Both of course were held to be forces in human life, and therefore feared, as in the case of Nemesis, or invoked, as in the case of Athena.

Through the figure of Nemesis people in "ancient" times would have known, *before* any advancement unto pride, the lesson: Do not commit hubris! The knowledge did not necessarily constitute a guarantee against flares of arrogance, of course. But the powerful presence of the goddess in the prevailing mental cul-

1 EDITORIAL NOTE: This Prolegomenon was written by the author in English for the present English edition of the book.

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ture signified a distinct ethical warning. Be aware of the punishment pride entails!

Injunctions, to be accepted, need to be embedded in an intelligible moral whole. There were many deities in the Greek pantheon, and among them goddesses and gods, of course, who embodied the precepts that engender, if followed, a good life. Of these precepts wisdom undoubtedly is decisive. It was personified by no less a figure than Athena, the favorite daughter of the king of the Olympian gods, Zeus. Through the figure of Athena people in "ancient" times knew a life determined by the virtues of civilization, peace, civic courage, justice. Again, the presence of Athena in the prevailing mental culture did not necessarily prevent moral carelessness, reckless behavior, injudicious decisions and actions. But the very high position the goddess held in the pantheon and the many tales of her deeds signified for everyone the great promising power that is inherent to wisdom. Win your life, in undertaking it wisely!

The Modern Discourse

Knowledge matters. Knowledge personified is persuasive, besides. The "ancients" had an advantage over contemporary humankind, the "moderns", in having represented by their pantheon the ethic that humans ought to respect. Ethical rules may slip into the back of one‘s mind, Nemesis, once visualized, does not. Is Athena present, in the shape of statues, sculptures, relievos, she renders wisdom real in one‘s perception, and there, in one‘s mind, the tales of her wise and just deeds are freshened. What is required in terms of individual and social ethics is thus made generally intelligible.

Yes, the "ancients" had here an advantage over the "moderns". But the advantage derives from a mental, and not a concrete difference. Pride is a common notion, as is wisdom. Is the distinction that we have drawn between "ancients" and "moderns" therefore artificial? Yes, if we think of the commonality of ethical notions such as pride and wisdom. No, however, if we consider the particular mentality that we associate with the term "modern". In formulating his lesson my French friend had in mind a humankind sturdily on the path of modernity. "Moderns" overtaken by arrogance. "Moderns" that had strayed from the paths of wisdom. "Moderns" for whom humility is a foreign word. May we, for a justness of our considerations, nevertheless ask: Is the appeal to our sense of disinterest not called for? Is, indeed, human existence not essentially fragile?

It is not. This is the response, if, for an echo to our question, a modern mentality is assumed. To a representative of this mentality the lessons we are talking

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about hardly make sense. He (or she) knows his (or her) discourse[2]. It is an ideologically closed discourse. Of much sophistication, we might say. Are you questioning the premises of the modern *Weltanschauung?* You doubt my belief in man's lordly status in the world and you say this is pride? You query my enthusiasm about the tremendous progress humans have made in conquering nature and employing it, together with all the fantastic devices they are fabricating, for the purpose of attaining an ever more pleasurable life, and you say this is an anthropocentric folly? Well, be calm. There is no reason to worry about our modern *Weltanschauung.* That it is criticized is part of it. There are many different interpretations of modernity. They are all supposed to hold up a mirror to modernity. I do not refute what you say. For with your criticism you practice, I am greatly pleased to be able to note, a profoundly modern attitude. Whatever there is, let us be clear, is a subject of debate. All is negotiated. Nothing, for us, is solid. All melts in the modern mind. Isn't that infinitely interesting?[3]

Our objections escape our modern friend. The discourse within which she moves is perfectly self-contained. It makes her deaf, we could also say, to anything that would require an acquaintance with another kind of discourse. If there were, to be ascertained in the past, such a kind or, rather, such other kinds of discourse, then they are perceived, if they are perceived, as antique material that is of interest only to cultural antiquarians. They might live on by gracious acts of remembrance. Or they are just ignored. How could I speak of Nemesis, of Athena? Somehow seriously, indeed? What manner of discoursing have *you* chosen? Our modern friend could ask, probably quite puzzled.

Well, our friend is guessing right. We vary from the discourse that she is observing. In a probably unsuspected way, however, we should explain at once. We certainly do not refrain from pursuing our considerations on our chosen topic –

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2 To avoid the awkward "he (or she)" we shall assume for our representative the female gender and shall henceforth use the pronouns "she" and "her".

3 Friedrich von Schlegel, German philosopher, literary critic, and writer of the Romantic period (on his life and work see the entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/schlegel/), developed in his text *Ueber das Studium der griechischen Poesie* (1795–96) a penetrating interpretation of the modern mentality. The principle of all modern poetry (the poetry written at his time), he stated, was a "supremacy of the 'Interesting'". Its purpose was to incite, to captivate, and this by all means. As there always appeared something to be more interesting than that which presently was interesting, the modern poet was engaged in a pursuit of an infinite reality, an endless perfection. Unable to reach his goal, he was increasingly seized by an unfulfilled nostalgia, by a yearning for the infinite, and, ultimately, by despair. For the German text see: Friedrich Schlegel, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. 5, Vienna: Jakob Mayer und Compagnie, 1823, pp. 7–218. See furthermore my "Note on Modernity" which includes a section on Schlegel's text, in: *Political Theory*, Vol.7, No.1, Feb. 1979, pp. 123–137.

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modernity – in line with the stated narrative of modernity. We have to know how the modern mind works and what it is that it produces, intellectually, culturally, socially. We redo the modern discourse. It will appear here unflawed. Naturally, a major part of our work will therefore be an inquiry into the birth, the sources, and the growth of the modern idea. They ought to be exposed. It is in this state, then, that the modern idea, viewed in all its purity, fully displays its curious character. *While it is meant to be actualized, it is destined never to be actualized*. The modern idea molds by itself into a fiction.

We cannot but vary from the modern discourse. The reality of the fiction it is concerned with, is one thing. To appraise this phenomenon, is another. Such a project requires a language of comparison. Discourses other than the modern one have to be used in order to ascertain the latter‘s particular character. We shall rely therefore on such discourses for comparative purposes. It will be possible to contrast the narrative of modernity with narrative elements that not only are quite different from it, but actually entirely outside it. Thus, a critical language can be built up that is immune to the modern discourse. Our modern interlocutor will be puzzled. Why can my modern mind not just absorb what I am told?

The Crucial Notion: Limits

Yours is a special perception, we might reply. It filters and it frames. Be not surprised. You see things in your way. You have your notions in your mind. You judge by your measures. Oh, our modern friend will probably retort, what is wrong with that? Do have I not the right to hold the views that I claim to be mine? Of course, we shall say, you can entertain your views. This is not the problem. The difficulty lies elsewhere. Would you really be prepared or, rather, be able, we should now be compelled to ask, to enter into a *dialogue* with us? To understand us, as we understand you? Might you become aware of your curious position: You think your modern discourse is, as to the life and destiny of humankind, the exclusive one, while this is certainly not the case? You think you represent the latest in epistemology and can therefore sublimely postulate that all knowledge is discursive and suppose that the revelation of reality called truth occurs through processes of universal communication? While, as a matter of fact, reality epistemically is diluted?

As we shall see toward the end of the book, with the last chapter, people who are modern minded can indeed, as to the curious mental position they are accustomed to, waver and assume assessments of the human actuality outside the modern view. The pressure of reality that comes from the power structure of

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human life proves to be too strong. If the pure maintenance of your existence is at stake, the modern fiction appears to be of no help. You delve into your genuine knowledge of human nature, the empiricism of it, and anthropological lessons reappear that render you wise midmost your modern temperament. The result, surprising but logical, is the judicious system of constitutional government.

"Limits" is the crucial notion of this system. It is a decidedly non-modern notion. Let us consult our modern friend, not that we are mistaken. What will she say about limits? About the suggestions the notion implies? Knowing her, we should hardly be astounded by what she adamantly states: Limits? You speak of limits? To us, the people of modernity? You do not seem to have grasped our view. Let me pronounce it plainly: We can do whatever we can think of; we bring about whatever we undertake to bring about; we carry out whatever we are excited about carrying out. Nothing is farther from us than a limit to the expansion of our power to attain what we want to attain, to take possession of what we want to possess, to enjoy what we feel like enjoying. Everything is at our disposal, nothing is immune to our power. And if anyone speaks of limit or limits, we refuse to listen or reject it. Limits do not belong in our civilization, the modern civilization.[4]

In response, we shall remind our friend of the unsteadiness of all the modern pursuit, strikingly reflected today by so many interpreters of the contemporary human world. Our first chapter documents their views – and their paramodern conclusions. Will she demur? Or show herself inclined to examine our material? Even consider perhaps our diachronic diagnosis put forward later in the book? Concerning the historical reality of modernity, as it appears to have split apart, into a history "I", the projected one (the "fiction"), and into a history "II", the one that has actually come to pass and is by far different from history I ? Or will she remain stubborn and tell us that we haven't understood what modernity is: the pledge to a perpetual promise?

Whatever kind of response she might give, we likely have perplexed her again. Our "Discourse on Method" (Chapter 3) will disturb our friend. We talk her language, and we talk about her and her views in another language. This language poses, as she cannot help but realize, limits to her discourse and its contents. She sees that we understand her – in that other language. Limitations of all her views, her mentality, her projects emerge. We do not press upon her by explaining the perfect use that our language allows for speaking her language and for *defining* it. That discursive limits have become apparent, this is the essen-

4 Later in the book we hall quote our friend again. See p. 161.

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tial event. The prevailing modern culture around us is a *limited* phenomenon. The more we understand modernity, the more we understand this limitation.

The Actuality of Imagination, the Actuality of Things

Humans know one mode of mental activity by which they can indeed fly away from all impediments towards a world where there are no limits to them at all, nowhere and never. It originates in one of the faculties of their mind: their imagination. This faculty, let us recall, is within the human mind steadily a rival to the faculty of reason. Reason often leads to results of its use that frustrate. Wishes are seen to be beyond fulfillment, practices are discovered not to be desirable, trains of thoughts end up in a deadlock. With imagination, such disappointments and defeats never happen. What you imagine, is present in your mind. Wholly, lastingly, invariably. You are master of the work of your imagination. It is yours, for enjoying it, living with it, beholding in it your genius.

As we shall see in the course of this study, there is in the modern mind a great presence of imagination. We shall hear the people of modernity praise what they imagine, those visions that they fantasize. They take them as proofs of the promises that modernity heralds. Their imagination fills them with enthusiasm. An enthusiasm that we can perfectly understand. A world without limits is imagined.

I am writing this text in my study. It is a rectangular room with four walls, a flat floor and a flat ceiling. There is a door in one wall and in the wall towards the balcony outside there are openings for a large window and a glass door. The room has a three-dimensional shape, with its length, height and width. I could of course imagine a room of another configuration. Perhaps an oval or a circular one? Or a room with a curved ceiling? But I did not build the house of which my study is a part. The house has its structure and most of that structure would have to be altered if I should say: I wish to have a circular instead of a rectangular room for my study. I can freely play with my architectural imaginations, but hardly with the concreteness of architecture and its constraints. I could not use my study if there were no door in one of its walls whereby to enter and leave it.

Architecture – and be it concerned only with the arrangement of rooms in a house – translates images of spatial arrangements and structures (a house, a street, a cluster of buildings) into a spatial actuality of those arrangements and structures. This actuality, however, sharply controls the imagination from which these images originate. If you want to have a room of your own, it has to be an enclosed space. Whatever the structure of it is, this structure has to

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allow for an entrance. But is it just a control? I would need artificial light all the time if my study had no openings. But there are openings through which sunlight can penetrate the room and my eyes can meet the flowers and trees in the garden. Those openings are highly beneficial, they relate me to my existentially true habitat, nature. They contribute thereby to the health of soul and mind. The rules of architecture do not only exert a constraint, they are also wise.

Why? Why, to put the question squarely, is architecture an instance of wisdom? The illustration given by the example of my study may have prepared the response. Architecture, we might observe, keeps humans from letting their imagination run its own course. As builders, architects, city planners, they simply cannot opt out entirely from respecting the primary *Gestalt* of things. A lot is pre-given here: the fundamental elements of architecture such as circle, square, lines, angles, joints, cavities, measured space, emplacement, dimensions, and proportions. Everyone is free to imagine a house but then it is possible to imagine it only according to the paradigm "house" that is already "there" within the possibilities offered by the fundamental elements of architecture.[5] The primary *Gestalt* of things in this world allows humans, invites them indeed, to engage themselves in imaginative creativity. But this creativity precisely is not absolute.

However, the protagonists of modernity apparently think so. Throughout this book we hear the message: Humans are about to make the world and all its parts into what they wish them to be. And this is the evidence that prompts us to evoke and describe the inevitable conflicts that emerge between the assumption of a divine-like status of humankind and the earthly nature of humans, between attempts to let one's demiurgic fantasy play with language and the structures of language pre-existing in the apparatus of the human mind, between the inexhaustible demands of the self-centered Ego and the indispensable concert of views and actions without which no human society could exist. We cannot refrain from pointing out and dealing with the consequences of those conflicts that bear on individuals and societies alike. "Chaos" and "violence" shall be the appropriate descriptive terms to be applied for our analyses.

A reign of human imagination, we shall see, does not liberate, but dehumanizes. Or, to put it positively, human nature rebels against the demands of a reckless imagination. If things are not allowed to be what they are, life, in the end,

5 On the paradigms of architecture cf. further my article "The Cosmology of the Architecture of Cities" in: *Diogenes*, No. 156, Winter 1991, pp. 1–31 (French version in: *Diogène*, No. 156, Oct.-Dec. 1991, pp. 3–31; Spanish version in: *Diógenes* (Mexico City), No. 156, Oct.-Dec. 1991, pp. 3–34; Arabic version in: *Messbah El Fikr* (Cairo), No. 156, May 1994, pp. 1–30); and my book: *Die Architektur der Welt. Eine kosmologische Lektüre architektonischer Formen*, Munich: Fink, 1997.

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becomes vacuous, dispiriting, infuriating. Outlets are longed for, however excessively. Human nature appears to be resilient. A full experience of modernity, this is the supreme lesson, counters modernity.

The Great Competition

The people of modernity believe in God. In their own way, though, we have to add at once. They would never speak of the Divine in the way of negative theology, for instance. In their minds, God certainly is not, as negative theology teaches, so utterly removed from human understanding that humans are totally unable to spell out anything about the Divine, and could therefore say only, in speaking about the Divine, what God is not. They often speak of God, the moderns, as will be seen throughout this book. And they do so with much assurance, in displaying in their writings quite precise ideas about the nature and the properties of the "God" who figures there. It is very much their God, it seems.

The predilection of the moderns for their figurations of the Divine may at first astound. At the top of their world, after all, is man (except for some recent feminist provocations, there is but a masculine imagination at play here), unhesitatingly called "King of the Earth (*roi de la terre*)" by Buffon and Rousseau.[6] In principle, a God – let's say the God of the Bible – has no place there. The spirit of modernity has taken over and leads man into his own kingdom, the *regnum hominis* (Francis Bacon's term),[7] where he will obey but himself.

Why, then, appears "God" so often in the writings of our protagonists? They compete. This is the answer. They wish to have a measure against which they can score the excellence of their thoughts and the supreme status of their knowledge. They need a figuration of Divinity in order to prove that no one, even "God", owns a position with regard to the world other than the one they themselves hold. Under the laws of nature, they claim, "God" and humans are equals. "God", Montesquieu observed, "cannot change the essence of things".[8] The people of modernity are by no means disinclined to discuss things divine, or, in their words, religious matters. Concerning the Great Competition that they conduct, they certainly are not unmusical.

6 See Chapter 6, note 31.
7 See the section *The "Kingdom of Man"* at the beginning of Chapter 6.
8 See Chapter 4, note 65.

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Modernity unto Cosmology

The moderns pluck, in fact, a number of strings of the common cultural sensitivity. All of the actuality of their civilizational project resonates with the cosmos of things from which they desired to take leave. In describing this actuality we continually experience a dichotomy between civilizational desire and civilizational truth: against the attempts of humans to conquer it, nature rebels; a capricious play with language for the purpose of amusement only, has, in order to impress, to be formed into a carefully constructed tale; a silence fills the world that is defined exclusively by geometry and mathematics, and the search of humans for meaning does not cease; the supremacy of the individual is always and everywhere checked, if the existence of a society is the goal.

We speak in this book very often of the "cosmos". Our inquiry into modernity is leading us to do so, from chapter to chapter. The more we comprehend modernity, the more we realize that it pioneers the formulation of a cosmology. Athena's counterpoise, perhaps?

Baierbrunn (County of Munich) April 20th, 2020

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Chapter 1

The Floundering God

Now, son, the tasting of the tree was not
itself the cause of such a banishment,
but only the transgression of the bound.
Dante, *The Divine Comedy, Paradiso*, Canto XXVI
Wealth has no limit set clearly down.

Solon, Fragment 13

Beginning in the 17th century, the European civilization undertook an experiment that was unique in the history of humanity: the world originally given to humankind was to be replaced by a different world, in which humankind would contemplate the image it itself created of its own godlike omnipotence. No other civilization had ever conceived and drawn up such a project. On the contrary, all prior civilizations had consistently understood themselves in the framework of a primary order encompassing all things and all events, within which humankind, too, had from the beginning moved and found the meaning of its existence. Be it that the ancient Egyptian spoke of *maat,* or the ancient Chinese of the *Tao*, the Indian Upanishads of *Brahman,* or Islam of *Haqîqat Mohammadîya,* through all these different symbols the same experience was expressed: Human beings exist within an encompassing reality possessing an order to which they belong and which they themselves carry out to the extent that this order is the paradigm for their actions.[1] For this reason, when an arrogantly self-confident Ancient Greek would propose to foist upon the *kosmos* a world-image of his own making, he made himself guilty of the worst of all sins: *hubris*.

It is true that human intervention in the inner workings of nature was a concept familiar to the ancient Indians, the Chinese, the Greeks, and the Arabs in the form of alchemistic practices. Alchemy was supposed to complement, accelerate, and perfect the work of nature; it was never conceived, however, as a means of competition that would make it possible for humankind to bring about in a much faster and generally better way that which nature itself achieves

1 Cf. Henri Frankfort, *Kingship and the Gods: A Study of Ancient Near Eastern religion as the Integration of Society and Nature*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1948; Marcel Granet: *La pensée chinoise*, nouv. éd., Paris: Albin Michel, 1968; Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. I: *Israel and Revelation*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press 1956; Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique*, Paris: Gallimard 1964.

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in the course of time.[2] Only European humankind let itself, in the 16th and 17th centuries, into a competition with the Cosmos, when it found itself no longer satisfied with the scientific and technological knowledge it had inherited from Aristotle, Ptolemy, Eratosthenes, and Euclid.[3]

But scientific curiosity can only partially explain the onset of this competition. Neither among the Greeks nor among the Arabs was the cosmological worldview ever shattered by advances in geometry, astronomy, geography, or medicine. And from the Romans to the Renaissance, the development of the natural sciences in Europe had consisted chiefly in the reception of the knowledge transmitted by the Arabs. So, how did it happen that precisely in 16th- and 17th-century Europe investigations were introduced and experiments were designed on the basis of which, within a short time, the impression was to arise that humankind could make use of nature, which up to that point had been revered as omnipotent, as an arbitrarily manipulatable tool?

The turning point at which the epoch known as "modernity" took its inception, and from which the technocratic world was to arise, was due to a fundamental change in the outlook of European humanity on its surrounding world. In earlier times, when the *ordo christianus* had not yet been dissolved, Petrarca, to give one example, could deem it more important to investigate his soul rather than the things of the world. There is a famous letter in which he describes his ascent of Mont Ventoux (Provence) in 1336. He relates in it how his excitement over the landscape that offered itself to his eyes gave way to consternation: "While I was admiring such things, at times thinking about earthly things and at times, following the example of my body, raising my mind to loftier things, it occurred to me to look into the *Book of Confessions* of St. Augustine, … which I shall always keep on hand … I opened it and … my eyes happened to light where it was written: 'And they go to admire the summits of mountains and the vast billows of the sea and the broadest rivers and the expanses of the ocean and the revolutions of the stars and they overlook themselves.' (*Confessions*, X; 8, 15). I confess that I was astonished, … and I closed the book enraged with myself because I was even then admiring earthly things after having been long taught by pagan philosophers that I ought to consider nothing wonderful except the human mind, compared to whose greatness nothing is great. Then indeed having seen enough of the mountain I turned my inner eyes within,

2 Cf. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible. The Origins and Structures of Alchemy*, New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1971, pp. 8, 169 ff.
3 Cf. Charles Joseph Singer, *From Magic to Science. Essays on the Scientific Twilight*, New York: Dover Publications, 1958, pp. 4–10, 25–36, 50–53.

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and from that moment there was no one who heard me speak until we arrived back at the foot of the mountain."[4]

Three hundred years later European human beings had begun to "overlook themselves." They abandoned that outlook on reality that had motivated Petrarca to engage in contemplative meditation and reflection on the wisdom of the Ancients. Now Francis Bacon thought the moment had come to turn our admiring gaze away from the past, away from Plato's legendary *Atlantis*,[5] towards a more promising future, that *Nova Atlantis* which he pictured for himself in the eponymous book brought to the public in 1638. In his account of the constitution of "Solomon's House" – the organizational center of the *Nova Atlantis* – Bacon put in the mouth of this house's "Venerable Father" (an imaginary descendant of the biblical Solomon) a characteristic maxim calling humankind to vastly greater things than the hitherto practiced attunement to the cosmos of all things: "The End of our Foundation," Bacon writes, "is the knowledge of Causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible."[6] According to Christian eschatology, the "kingdom of God" would be realized at the end of times. In marked contrast, Bacon exhorted his contemporaries to establish a "kingdom of man" (*regnum hominis)* here and now.[7] And he was heard. The model of a Christian humankind, who perceives itself as on a pilgrimage on earth, as a frail creature under God, had disappeared from Europe's public consciousness. The model of the *homo viator* (itinerant humankind) was replaced with the model of the *homo faber* (working or producing humankind), who creates for itself out of nature a world subject to human control.

It is from the anthropocentric dynamic of this new anthropology, which asserted itself in 17th-century Europe, that the experiment of "modernity" – the hitherto repudiated competition of humankind with the cosmos – would arise. Within the European-Western civilization, human beings began adopting an outlook on their environment that fueled the collective belief that, whatever an overbearing modern humankind did not like about reality, could be at will changed, discarded, or artificially replaced. A number of thinkers in the past three hundred years, from Descartes to Hegel and Sartre, have, in line with all this, iden-

4 Francesco Petrarca, *Rerum familiarium libri I-VIII*, translated by Aldo S. Bernardo, Albany, New York: SUNY Press, pp. 177–178.

5 Cf. *Timaeus* 24 E–25 D.

6 Francis Bacon, *New Atlantis*, in: *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. by James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denan Heath, vol. III, London: Longman 1859, p. 156.

7 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum – Aphorismi de interpretatione naturae et regno hominis (LXVIII)* in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. I, London: Longman 1858, p. 179.

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tified the final goal of the ongoing experiment with the transformation of reality according to the standard of a God-like humankind. From the very beginning, however, the anthropological ideas that underlie both this experiment and its attendant social transformations were subjected to criticism and sometimes even to condemnation. Pascal had shared in his youth the new faith in progress, i.e., in the steady improvement in the human condition; later on, however, he rejected this faith in his *Pensées* and came to regard it as just one more excuse for the panhistorical egocentrism of a modern humankind setting itself up as *maître de tout*. In the 18th century, Jean-Jacques Rousseau endeavored like no other among his contemporaries to reshape nature, which had become untethered from humankind, into a mirror image of man. He was aghast, however, when he realized the consequences that would follow from mankind's experiment to make itself the proprietor and master of nature. He writes: "Our souls were corrupted to the extent that our sciences and our arts advanced towards perfection." "Do away with our wretched progress, do away with our errors and our vices, do away with the work of man and everything is good."[8] It is true that, in the 19th Century, Engels and Marx proclaimed in the *Communist Manifesto* that the whole past was meaningless in view of the imminent last act in the process of human emancipation. And yet, in a moment of creeping nostalgia, they could not forgive the bourgeoisie for having, while assuming its "supremely revolutionary role," also "mercilessly torn to shreds … the motley feudal ties." The bourgeoisie, they continued in the same vein, has dissolved "personal worth into exchange value and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unscrupulous freedom – Free Trade."[9]

In the period stretching from the 17th Century to our own days, such critical reservations about the experiment of "modernity" would be drowned out in a widespread euphoria about what Condorcet had called the "boundless perfectability of the human race"[10] – and this in spite of the 20th Century, the century of catastrophes! Within the technological-scientific milieu, however, which had previously produced some of the architects of the faith in progress, there would now appear prophets of an industrial apocalypse. In the 18th Century, Ber-

8 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur Les Sciences et Les Arts*, First Part, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. III, Paris: Gallimard 1964, p. 9; Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile ou de l'éducation*, Book IV, Paris: Éditions Garnier 1964, p. 342.

9 Karl Marx, *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, in *Die Frühschriften*, Siegfried Landshut (ed.), Stuttgart: Kröner 1968, pp. 527 f.

10 Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, Paris: Éditions Sociales 1966, p. 221.

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nard le Bovier de Fontenelle had earned his fame in the spirit of the control of nature with panegyrics to Copernican Astronomy and Newtonian mechanics. In contrast, an alarm-sounding ecological study of the 1970s, *The Limits of Growth*, attained the status of a bestseller.[11] Set in motion by industrialists and finished in that veritable haven of technological spirit, the *Massachusetts Institute of Technology,* this outburst of techno-apocalytic futurology evidently spoke to the *Zeitgeist*. The reviewer for the German weekly, *Die Zeit*, presented it under the heading: "Thus the World Ends."[12]

The debate about the experiment of "modernity" has intensified not only due to the talk of a threat of an end of the world caused by humanity itself; critics have also turned their attention to the fundamental problems that a correction of the experiment faces. The British psychiatrist, R. D. Laing, for instance, drew attention to the contradiction between our ages' alleged rationality and its actual irrationality: "Should the human race survive, future men will, I suspect, look back on our enlightened epoch as a veritable age of Darkness."[13] He also advanced an explanation for the fact that modern humanity has been lured away from the path of rational behavior: "Our time has been distinguished, more than by anything else, by a drive to control the external world."[14] The French ethnologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss, also took up this theme in his critique of the age and elaborated in particular on the consequences that he discerned:

> We must at long last take stock of the fact that the absolutist-humanistic position, which holds sway among us since the Renaissance, has had extremely catastrophic consequences. A few centuries of humanism have led to the great wars, to exterminations, concentration camps, and the destruction of all sorts of living beings; we have allowed nature to become impoverished. It is precisely its exaggerated humanistic attitude that threatens humanity, in particular when it believes that it can do whatever it wants with regard to anything.[15]

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11 Donella H. Meadows, Dennis L. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and William W. Behrens III, *The Limits to Growth*, New York: Signet Book, 1972. – Cf. also Donella H. Meadows *et al.*, *Limits to Growth: the 30-year update*, White River Junction, Vt.: Chelsea Green Publ. Co., 2004. For a discussion of this book and its contemporary relevance cf. Christian Parenti, "The Limits to Growth: A Book That Launched A Movement," in *The Nation*, 24.–31. Dez. 2012 (see https://www.thenation.com/article/limitsgrowth-book-launched-movement/, retrieved Jan. 5, 2018); Jørgen Stig Nørgård *et al.*, "The History of the Limits to Growth," in *Solutions*, vol. 1, Issue 2, March 2010, pp. 59–63 (see https://www.thesolutionsjournal.com/article/the-history-ofthe-limits-to-growth/, retrieved Jan. 5, 2018).

12 Thomas v. Randow, in *Die Zeit*, Nr. 11, 21.3.1972.

13 Ronald D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, New York: Pantheon 1967, p. 129. Cf. p. 142, more lapidarily: "We are in an age of darkness."

14 Ibid. p. 140.

15 *Spiegel* Conversation with Claude Lévi-Strauss, in *Der Spiegel*, No. 53, 1971, p. 94.

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Lévi-Strauss' claims followed on from the classical, premodern, insight that humankind dwells *inside*, not *beyond*, the cosmos. "A rightly understood humanism," he says, "would have to, paradoxically, urge today's humanity to moderate its humanism and to learn from the great religions of the Far East – Buddhism, for example – that human beings are ultimately one kind of living being among others, that they can survive only under the condition that they respect these other living beings."[16]

Modern humanity has become entangled in a paradox. The Italian writer, Nicola Chiaromonte, put it most clearly:

> The prevailing myth of our time is the idea that the exploitation of all available natural and technological resources and their use for the satisfaction of men's material needs must lead to the general good and the creation of the best of all possible worlds.
>
> Yet it should be obvious that the automatism of the present world does mortal man the greatest possible harm. It increases his physical power while increasing his capacity for aimless action, that is to say, his stupidity.[17]

Just like Lévi-Strauss, Chiaromonte maintains that, because of its arrogance, modern humanity itself stands in the way of solving the paradox:

> Not a single human problem can be clarified, solved, or even properly formulated if the individual stubbornly … continues to consider himself the center of the universe.[18]

In the spring of 1973, the American news magazine, *Time*, published a series of articles under the suggestive title, "Second Thoughts About Man." Reading these articles, one perceives that the debate on the experiment of "modernity" had by that time expanded from the writings and the interviews of single scholars to the sphere of public discourse. The articles and what they express sound quite remarkable from the perspective of the year 2020. Many of the things that by 2020 have become part of what the educated general public thinks and feels can be related to, and explained by, the "turn" that these articles predict.

According to the essay that opens the series, "there is an impending sense of change in the world of ideas." Humanity's confidence in its power to control the

16 Ibid. Mircea Eliade offers a similar argument in: *The Forge and the Crucible*, p. 12.
17 Nicola Chiaromonte, *Das Paradox der Geschichte. Zur Krise des modernen Bewusstseins*, Vienna: Europaverlag 1973, pp. 171 f. (English: *The Paradox of History: Stendhal, Tolstoy, Pasternak, and Others*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985, p. 146). On Chiaromonte's life and works see Cesare Panizza, *Nicola Chiaromonte: una biografia*, Rome: Donzelli, 2017; in this book Chiaromonte is presented as a conversation partner of, among others, Ignazio Silone, Hannah Arendt, Mary McCarthy, Albert Camus, and André Malraux.
18 Ibid. p. 173. (English: 147).

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world has sunk to the lowest point; technology is regarded as a dangerous ally; progress is mistrusted. The unitary cosmos of the middle ages has broken down in the wake of the "aggressive humanism of the Renaissance" and the "mechanical visions of the scientific revolution." Western civilization has lived for more than three hundred years in a universe marked by a Cartesian split. Presently, however, this dualism is fought by many people, whose doubts are triggered by the ecological crisis and the lunar vision of a fragile "spaceship earth." At the basis of the now revived cosmological sense is the humble acknowledgment that man and his universe are more complex than has been thought until recently.[19]

Should we state, then, that the experiment of "modernity" was not the success that it was touted to be? Whoever asks this question (and the question was posed in the articles mentioned), is questioning the two postulates on which modern anthropology is built: (a) that human beings exist "out of themselves," and (b) that the control of nature belongs to humanity.

The first postulate – basically the modern doctrine of human aseity – is regarded not only as the cause of the dissolution of meaning-structures such as the communities of tribe, guild, congregation, and city, with which pre-modern people were so interwoven that each person could understand himself or herself as a representative of a greater social unity; this postulate is also seen as the origin of the socio-psychological phenomenon that for modern people existence no longer has meaning. To be sure, human beings became modern the moment that they understood themselves as "individuals" who, as such, made themselves the sole meaning of their existence. "Individuals," in this sense, would usually promise themselves that, in so doing, they would attain that absolute "self-determination" which they considered to be the supreme fulfillment of their existence. Such "individuals" were led to this point by following the paths of "modern" thought. At this point, however, individual humankind stood disoriented, because, though filled with the freedom of self-determination, it had to ask itself *to what* they should now determine themselves. And at this point, freedom became a burden: the burden of having to be an "individual" without really being able to do so. How could indeed such an "individual" find a meaning for existence that was solely his or her own meaning? Thus, the self-determination of the "individual" promoted by the thinkers of modernity had yielded, seen from a socio-psychological perspective, questionable results. It led in general to the loss of the experience of existential meaning. What remained was the perverted form of this experience, a posturing obsessed with "being oneself" at

19 *Time Magazine*, April 2, 1973, p. 42.

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any price. Modern humankind, according to the diagnosis given by the novelist, Saul Bellow, is afflicted with a "fever of originality" that causes it to suffer so intensely that it must finally yearn to be no longer itself.

> I think we may summarize my meaning in terms like these: that many have surged forward in modern history, after long epochs of namelessness and bitter obscurity, to claim and to enjoy (as people enjoy things now) a name, a dignity of person, a life such as belonged in the past only to gentry, nobility, the royalty or the gods of myth. And that this surge has, like all such great movements, brought misery and despair, that its successes are not clearly seen, but that the pain of heart it makes many people feel is incalculable, that most forms of personal existence seem to be discredited, and that there is a peculiar longing for non-being.[20]

Two consequences of the modern attempt to control and appropriate nature tend to be particularly emphasized in the debate on the experiment of "modernity": the desacralization of work and the ecologically irresponsible interaction of humankind with its natural environment. In the cosmological worldview, a worker is understood as performing not merely a utilitarian activity of sweat and effort but also as collaborating in *metakosmesis*, the periodical renewal of things in the cosmos. The religion scholar, Mircea Eliade, explained this in his study, *The Forge and the Crucible*, through the example of land tillage: "the tilled field is something more than a patch of earth, it is also the body of the Earth-Mother: the spade is a phallus while still remaining an agricultural tool; ploughing is at once a 'mechanical' labour (carried out with man-made tools) and a sexual union prescribed for the hierogamous fertilization of the Earth-Mother."[21] When it started to compete with the cosmos, however, modern humanity lost the sense for this correspondence of labor and sacral participation in the cosmic process. Nature, regarded now purely from the perspective of human self-glorification, began to be regarded only as a raw material from which humankind thoughtlessly took what it could use and which it unrelentingly manipulated and molded so to make it pliant to its desires. The consequence was that human work became a contest with nature which prodded humankind into yet more work, that is, into greater successes in the control of nature. A single act of work thus became meaningless for modern humanity, and yet modern humanity would find no meaning in the overall process of work either. For, even though work had become the dominant factor in human existence, nothing in the world revealed to humankind what its contest with nature was ultimately meant to achieve.

20 Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet*, New York: Viking Press, 1971, pp. 209, 214.
21 Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, p. 144; cf. p. 172 ff.

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Every critic of the experiment of modernity knows that the experiment cannot be simply terminated. Indeed, such an undertaking would be fantastic. The technocratic world of the present cannot be transformed back into the courtly world of the Baroque, and hardly anyone would want to let go of the creature comforts made possible under the conditions of the modern industrial and scientific society. The debate is about, not a termination, but rather a correction of the experiment "modernity." The advantages of modern technologies are not subject to doubt, even if we must acknowledge that modern humanity has floundered in its attempt to act like a god in this world. The balance between cosmos and the humankind that inhabit it was disturbed by human hubris. That is why a balance cannot be restored primarily through changes in the realm of the technological means that modern humanity designed with the goal of asserting its hubris, necessary though these changes may be. Rather, the correction of the experiment "modernity" must start with humankind's rethinking its place in the cosmos. As the American sociologist, Daniel Bell, wrote in 1978 in the journal *Partisan Review:*

> We are groping for a new vocabulary whose keyword seems to be limits: a limit to growth, a limit to the spoliation of the environment, a limit to arms, a limit to the tampering with biological nature. Yet if we seek to establish a set of limits in the economy and technology, will we also set a limit to the exploration of those cultural experiences which go beyond moral norms and embrace the demonic in the delusion that all experience is 'creative'? Can we set a limit to hubris?[22]

How can modern humanity regain a "cosmological consciousness"? Claude Lévi-Strauss touted in this context the structuralist method introduced by him into anthropological research:

> Structuralism offers the social sciences an epistemological model incomparably more powerful than those they previously had at their disposal. It reveals, behind phenomena, a unity and coherence that could not be brought out by a simple description of the facts, 'laid out flat,' so to speak, and presented in random order to the enquiring mind. By changing the level of observation and looking beyond the empirical facts of the relations between them, it reveals and confirms that these relations are simpler and more intelligible than the things they interconnect, and whose ultimate nature may remain unfathomable, without

22 Daniel Bell, "Modernism and Capitalism", in: *Partisan Review*, vol. 45, New York, 1978 (http://theoria.art-zoo.com/from-modernism-and-capitalism-daniel-bell/, retrieved Jan. 10, 2018).

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> this provisional or definitive opacity being, as hitherto, an obstacle to their interpretation... [S]tructuralism reintegrates man into nature.[23]

Nicola Chiaromonte, for his part, appealed to our more discerning understanding *après le deluge:*

> After the catastrophes caused by egomaniacal drives to dominate the world and bend it to the tyranny of a single idea, we cannot help seeing how warped the individual is who does not recognize the existence of an order transcending himself and every other thing created; who does not recognize the primary fact that the bond tying him to others, that is, to the community, is more important and much stronger than he is, and that even more important than himself and the community is the bond between him, each single thing, and the whole of things, call it Nature, Cosmos, or what you will.[24]

What is this "bond" between all things, and what is humankind if it is no longer the master of nature? In what sense would the structuralist method, as opposed to a different method, be the right approach to discover the connections obtaining among things? And how exactly is human behavior supposed to accord to a "primary order" of the world which human beings no longer even perceive?

Modern humanity will be insensitive to the "unity behind things" for as long as it persists in a characteristically modern mode of consciousness: modern humans are fascinated by everything that is new, odd, or strange, and they are bored with anything that repeats itself, anything ordinary or long familiar.[25] The experiment of "modernity" may be corrected only if the recovery of a "cosmological consciousness" is no longer impeded by those modes of consciousness that modern humanity has adopted in the course of its competition with the cosmos. Getting to grips with modernity requires not just developing alternatives to that which has so far been regarded as "modern." That would be equivalent to simply extending the series of those intellectual fashions which modern consciousness absorbs so rapidly because they stimulate its hankering after ever "new" things.

How the critique of the experiment "modernity" should, instead of contributing to the proliferation of intellectual fashions, be expanded into a correction of the experiment, is clear. A double investigation is required: (a) a study of the

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23 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, vol. IV: *L'Homme Nu*, Paris: Plon 1971, p. 614. English translation in *Teaching Lévi-Strauss* (ed. Hans H. Penner), Oxford University Press, Atlanta, GA 1998, p. 313.

24 Nicola Chiaromonte, *The Paradox of History,* p. 146.

25 Cf. Adrian Marino, "Modernity and the Evolution of Literary Consciousness," in Diogenes, Spring 1972, No. 77, pp. 110 – 137.

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modes of consciousness typical of "modernity" and (b) an exploration of the experiences that constitute the basis for the formation of a "cosmological consciousness." Without a knowledge of the modes of consciousness of "modernity" it would not be clear what stands in the way of the recovery of a "cosmological consciousness," or what this cosmological consciousness is supposed to replace. And it is equally unclear, conversely how a "cosmological consciousness" builds itself and what its contents might be. There is only one method for overcoming this double uncertainty. We must retrace the path trodden by modern humanity from the moment that it began both to compete with the cosmos and to surround itself with that artificial world which today separates it from its natural environment. We should bring to mind that from which "modernity" detached itself as well as that which it wanted to attain instead. Only then – when we realize not only what we have thus gained but also what we have thereby lost – will it be possible to correct the experiment "modernity."

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Chapter 2

What is Modernity?

> I have been afraid of one thing my whole life, namely to be the only wise person in the world, because this seemed to me to carry the danger that I might become either a god or a fool. (Nam id in omni vita unum maxime formidavi: ne ego solus saperem, quae res plenissima discriminis semper mihi visa est, ne aut deus fierem, aut stultus.)
>
> Giambattista Vico, *De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*

The idea that one is "modern" goes back about 1600 years in European history. In the year 476, the Western Roman Empire came to an end, and its former dominions passed into the hands of the new kingdoms of the Visigoths, the Burgundians, and the Ostrogoths. The ancient Roman culture seemed to have little chance of survival in the new Germanic kingdoms, unless it could be given new life under the new circumstances. It was in the context of just such a project that Flavius Magnus Aurelius Cassiodorus (484–585), a statesman, scholar, and historian in Theodoric the Great's court, introduced the distinction between *antiqui* ("ancients") and *moderni* ("moderns").[1]

Cassiodorus dubbed his own contemporaries the "moderns" on the belief that they had the mission to assimilate the science and the culture of the "ancients" (in other words, the Roman *antiquitas)* under the new circumstances and to thus render it again fruitful for their own present. Cassiodorus' distinction, therefore, was in no way meant to replace the ancient culture by a "new" one in the wake of the fall of Rome and the rising of the new Germanic kingdoms. Quite the contrary: Cassiodorus saw in his contemporaries the "new ancients," so to speak, in the sense that they were called to inherit and renew the ancient culture. Here the concept of "modernity" did not imply a discontin-

1 *Cassiodori Senatoris Variae*, ed. by Theodor Mommsen, in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica, Auctorum Antiquissimorum*, vol. XII, Berlin 1894, Book III, sect. V (p. 81); Book III, sect. LI (pp. 138–139); Book V, sect. V (pp. 146–147). – On Cassiodorus cf. Heinz Löwe, *Von Cassiodor zu Dante*, Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973, the chapter "Cassiodor", pp. 11–32; Keno Backer, "Cassiodorus, Flavius Magnus Aurelius (Cassiodor)", in *Der Neue Pauly Supplemente I* Online – vol. 2: *Geschichte der antiken Texte: Autoren – und Werklexikon*, ed. by Manfred Landfester, Brigitte Egger, online: http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2452–3054_dnpo2_COM_0053 (retrieved 1/8/2018). See also: Elisabeth Gössmann, *Antiqui und Moderni im Mittelalter. Eine geschichtliche Standortbestimmung*, Munich: Schöningh 1974 (with detailed bibliography.); Hans Steffen (ed.), *Aspekte der Modernität*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965.

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uation of the ancient cultural tradition but exactly and emphatically its unbroken continuity.

In his personal activity after retiring from public life in 554 AD., Cassiodorus worked on a civilizational program of his own design. He founded a monastery, the "Vivarium," on his Calabria estate,[2] where he translated Greek texts into Latin, and where he also wrote the *Institutiones divinarum et saecularium litterarum*. This work, which would go on to become the basis for the study of the *artes liberales* in the middle ages, provided not just an overview of ancient literature but also directed the monks to copy texts from antiquity. Everything, both originals and copies, was archived, and in this way the first post-Roman library came into being. This undertaking of Cassiodorus' is one of the reasons for the immensely significant role of the monasteries in the transmission of ancient knowledge to Christian Europe.

But the original understanding of "modernity," which had thus been articulated by Cassiodorus, was not to be retained in the subsequent history of Western culture. While the conceptual distinction between "ancient and modern" has been formally retained up to the present time, its substantive meaning was transformed into the exact opposite of what Cassiodorus had in mind. In contemporary language usage the concepts "ancient" and "modern" are applied to indicate a fundamental difference between "ancient" and "modern." It has become the general custom to say that something "old" or "ancient" has been replaced, surpassed, eclipsed, or even made superfluous by something "modern."

This is why, in order to answer the question, "What is modernity?", we must retrace the historical and cultural development by which the original understanding of modernity was "revolutionized" into the diametrically opposite contemporary interpretation. From the standpoint of Cassiodorus' interpretation, the answer to the question would be straightforward: The Modern is the Old recovered and renewed. But the answer becomes more difficult when the presumption is that the Modern is created, not in imitation, but rather in the rejection and replacement of the Old. The question then becomes: What is modernity when un-

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2 Cf. Leo Teutsch, "Cassiodorus Senator, Gründer der Klosterbibliothek von Vivarium," in *International Journal of Libraries and Information Studies*, vol. 9, No. 3, Jan. 1959, pp. 215–239; Cassiodorus, *Einführung in die geistlichen und weltlichen Wissenschaften*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 2014, esp. the section "Leben und Werk" (pp. 1–7), where the remark is found: "It is no exaggeration to say that Cassiodorus attained a very high rank in the history of Western history with this foundation: Without Cassiodorus' monks in the studies of the Vivarium the ancient (also pagan) literature would have been lost." (pp. 5f.).

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derstood as legitimized, no longer by a model that it renews, but alone by itself as the absolute New?

The "revolution" in the understanding of modernity, which is now our topic, did not happen suddenly. It went through a number of phases encompassing several centuries. It began in the early middle ages and ended in the Enlightenment. A reconstruction of this revolution is made significantly easier by the fact that it took on a dramatic form. From the 12th through the 18th centuries, a debate raged in the European *république des lettres* regarding the problem of modernity. The participants were split between the advocates of the Old, of the *antiquitas,* and the protagonists of the New, i. e., of modernity. It was inevitable that in the course of time, the former would come to be known as the "Ancients" and the latter as the "Moderns." Thus, in the different phases of the controversy that we now proceed to discuss, we encounter two parties – the "ancients" and the "moderns" – debating whether the *antiqui* proper – the writers, poets and philosophers of antiquity – were to be imitated or rather rejected, that is to say, were either to be regarded as models or to be forgotten.

The relation between the Christian-Germanic culture and antiquity was still conceived in the 12th century according to the model of the *translatio studii*. Just as the culture of the Greeks had been appropriated by the Romans, the heritage of the Roman culture was seen as having now passed into the hands of the Franks. At around the same time, the school of Chartres (Bernard of Chartres, John of Salisbury, Thierry of Chartres, William of Conches, Gilbert de la Porrée)[3] had come up with the metaphor for the "ancients" as the "giants" on whose shoulders the "dwarfs" – meaning the "moderns" – stood. This image would be favored in the course of the following centuries, because, while reflecting a high appreciation for the "ancients" on the part of the "moderns," it also made clear that the "dwarfs" standing on the shoulders of the "giants" were able, from their own high perch, to know more than the "ancients" – in other words, that the "dwarfs" were, after all, superior to the "giants."

This feeling of superiority was reinforced in the Renaissance by the additional element of historical speculation. François Rabelais, for example, in his enthusiasm for the new humanistic culture, distanced himself in *Pantagruel*

3 On the "The School of Chartres" see Winthrop Wetherbee, "The School of Chartres," in Jorge J. E. Gracia, Timothy B. Noone (eds.), *A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, Blackwell, Malden (MA) 2007; Peter Ellard, *The Sacred Cosmos: Theological, Philosophical and Scientific Conversations in the Twelfth-Century School of Chartres*, Scranton: University of Scranton Press 2007; Tilman Evers: *Logos und Sophia. Das Königsportal und die Schule von Chartres*, Kiel: Ludwig, 2011.

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(1532) from the giant/dwarf comparison. From the outset he put his own place in cultural history on a higher level than every previous age:

> The times were still dark, redolent of the disaster and calamity of the Goths, who had brought all sound learning to destruction; but, by the goodness of God, light and dignity have been restored to literature during my lifetime… Now all disciplines have been brought back; languages have been restored: Greek – without which it is a disgrace that any man should call himself a scholar – Hebrew, Chaldaean, Latin … The whole world is now full of erudite persons, full of very learned teachers and of the most ample libraries, such indeed that I hold that it was not as easy to study in the days of Plato, Cicero nor Papinian as it is now.[4]

The "moderns" had discovered that time was their ally in their contest with the "ancients." They conceded that antiquity had not yet been surpassed by any of the ages that followed it. On the other hand, however, they now argued, against the ancients, that through the aggregate of the efforts made at different times to measure up to antiquity more wisdom had been accumulated than had existed even in ancient times. The common belief was now that Truth is the "daughter of time" (*veritas filia temporis*). Giordano Bruno could thus claim in *Ash Wednesday Supper (La cena de le ceneri,* 1584*)* that in reality it is the "moderns," not the "ancients," who are "the wiser":

> PRUDENZIO: Be it as it may, I do not wish to part with the view of the ancients, for as the sage says, wisdom is with antiquity.
>
> THEOPHIL: And the sage adds that prudence is to be found in many years. If you attend well to what you say, you will see that from your position there follows the very opposite of what you think. I want to say that we are older, and have greater age than our predecessors, and by this I mean that which enters in certain judgments as in this topic of ours. The judgment of Eudoxus, who lived only shortly after the rebirth of astronomy, if indeed it was not reborn in him, could not be so mature as the judgment of Calippus, living thirty years after the death of Alexander the Great, who adding years to years could add observations to observations. For the same reason, Hipparchus had to know more than Calippus, for he saw the changes [in the motion of the planets] for at least 190 years after the death of Alexander. Menelaus, the Roman geometer, by seeing the changes in motions 460 years after Alexander's death, had reason [to think] that he understood more than Hipparchus. Of those changes more could be seen by the Moslem Saracen 1202 years after that. Almost in our times, Copernicus saw even more of those changes.[5]

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4 François Rabelais, *Pantagruel* (Chap. VIII), *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Translated and edited with an Introduction and Notes by M. A. Screech, Penguin Books: London, 2006. Cf. Louis Le Roy, *De la vicissitude ou variété des choses en l'univers* (1575), Selections with an Intr. by Blanchard W. Bates, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1944, pp. 45–47.

5 Giordano Bruno, *La cena de le ceneri*, Dialogo Primo, in: *Opere di Giordano Bruno e di Tommaso Campanella*, ed. by Augusto Guzzo, Romano Amerio, Milan: Riccardo Ricciardi, 1956,

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Giordano Bruno had carefully chosen his example. In the 16th Century a revolution was taking place not only in astronomy but also in physics, medicine, geography, and architecture. Following a one-thousand-year interval, discoveries and inventions were now continually being made in all these fields. Whoever wanted to demonstrate the superiority of the "moderns" over the "ancients" could now point to the revolutionary impetus in the modern natural sciences and the technology associated with them. It could not be denied that the "ancients" had laid the foundations for the laborious observations, experiments, and calculations on which this impetus was based, but now the "moderns" were prepared to not only claim superiority but also to demonstrate it. Jean Bodin proclaimed in 1566, in his *Methodus ad facilem historiarum cognitionem,* that the "moderns" would solve all the problems that the "ancients" had left unsolved:

> But the ancients are said to be the inventors of the arts and the sciences and to be deserving of our thanks for it. And in truth they achieved a great deal, especially in the area of the influence of heavenly things, and a few other things relating to the calculation of planetary orbits, but not all of them … They also attentively observed what is obscure in nature and accurately explained many of these things; but they left many of them unaccomplished that will remain for our own sages to transmit to posterity. And no one who thoroughly considers these things will harbor any doubts that our discoveries and inventions are far superior to those of our ancestors. For example, nothing is more admirable in the whole of nature than the magnet, the divine use of which was evidently ignored by the ancients. They were confined to the Mediterranean basin, whereas our explorers sail to all parts of the world every year and establish colonies in a New World, as it were… I will say nothing of the method for calculating degrees of longitude or the catapults and the war machines of the ancients, which look like children's toys when compared to ours. I will also say nothing of the innumerable skills, so wonderfully useful for human life, in the processing of metals and of wool. The art of printing alone is as much worth as all the inventions of the ancients put together.[6]

Such expressions of "modern" smugness did not go unchallenged. Montaigne wrote in his *Essais* (1580): "I abhor novelty, no matter what visage it presents,

p. 203f. English translation: *The Ash Wednesday Supper*, First Dialogue, trans. Stanley L. Jaki, online, https://math.dartmouth.edu/~matc/Readers/renaissance.astro/6.1.Supper.html (retrieved 7/29/2019). On the question of the relation between truth and time, cf. Samuel C. Chew, *The Pilgrimage of Life*, New Haven-London: Yale University Press, 1962, and Fritz Saxl, "Veritas Filia Temporis," in *Philosophy and History*, ed. by Raymond Klibansky and Herbert James Paton, New York: Oxford University Press, 1936, pp. 197–222.

6 Jean Bodin, *Temporis ad facilem historiarum cognitionem*, Amsterdam 1650, reprint Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1967, pp. 322f.

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and am right to do so, for I have seen some of its disastrous effects."[7] Unlike the many "modernly"-minded among his contemporaries, Montaigne declared himself a follower of time-honored wisdom and tried-and-tested tradition. He was less worried by the impetus of the natural sciences than by the reform-crazed obsession inspired by them and extending also to the intellectual and social realms, where it presses for wholesale change. It was customary in the natural sciences to test a new invention through experiments before applying it; this method, however, is not practicable in the case of human society. This is why Montaigne thought it appropriate to warn about those who, carried away by enthusiasm for "new" ideas, would overestimate themselves and forget the likely consequences of their conceit:

> To speak frankly, it seems to me that there is a great deal of self-love and arrogance in judging so highly of your opinions that you are obliged to disturb the public peace in order to establish them, thereby introducing those many unavoidable evils and that horrifying moral corruption which, in matters of great importance, civil wars and political upheavals bring in their wake.[8]

As a result of such divergent views on the heritage of antiquity, the conflict between the parties of the "ancients" and the "moderns" in the European *république des lettres* became exacerbated at the close of the 16th century. Those who, like Bruno and Bodin, wanted to break away from the "ancients" were in the majority, and those who, like Montaigne, warned about the rampant reform-madness and wanted to take the edge off it through a revivification of ancient wisdom, were a minority. Both parties were aware of the significance of the battles that would not fail to come. A break with that "wisdom" of the "ancients" which had been for centuries the touchstone for humankind's experiences, reflections, and insights, would make possible an unusual civilizational experiment: it would allow a future humanity to live without a "past," i. e., without societal institutions of historically transmitted authority. It would be up to each generation to replicate at any given time the original break with tradition and to nullify once again everything handed down from previous generations in order to ensure that it might regulate its affairs wholly on its own. In this vein, Francis Bacon demanded that those "enchantments of antiquity and au-

7 Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, I, 23, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1962, p. 118. English translation Michael Andrew Screech, Penguin, London 2003, p. 166.
8 Ibid. p. 167.

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thority and consent" be broken once and for all which "have so bound up men's powers that they have been made impotent (like persons bewitched)."[9] On the other side we find Montaigne's hesitation to put himself in the "tough position" of an innovator, "since anyone who undertakes to chop and change usurps the right to judge and must pride himself on seeing the defect in what he would get rid of and the good in what he would bring in."[10]

The latent conflict between the two factions broke out in the open in the 17th century. A public debate flared up in England and especially in France that was conducted in numerous specially composed treatises, pamphlets, poems, and sermons. The debate culminated in France at the end of the century in that great final controversy which would come to be known as the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*.[11]

At the beginning of the 17th century, Francis Bacon presented once more, in his *Novum Organum* (1620), the most important arguments advanced by those who refused to further recognize the "ancients" as models. In doing so, he dismissed Montaigne's warning not to infer from the unquestionable superiority of the "moderns" over the "ancients" regarding natural investigations a superiority also in "human matters" generally:

> Again, men have been kept back as by a kind of enchantment from progress in the sciences by reverence for antiquity, by the authority of men accounted great in philosophy, and then by general consent … As for antiquity, the opinion touching it which men entertain is quite a negligent one, and scarcely consonant with the word itself. For the old age of the world is to be accounted the true antiquity; and this is the attribute of our own times, not of that earlier age of the world in which the ancients lived; and which, though in respect of us it was the elder, yet in respect of the world it was the younger. And truly … we look for greater knowledge of human things and a riper judgment in the old man than in the young, because of his experience and of the number and variety of the things which he has seen and heard and thought of.[12]

9 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (LXXXIV), *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol I, 1861, p. 291. English translation In Francis Bacon, *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon,* ed. by John M. Robertson, Routledge: London, 1905, p. 281.

10 Montaigne, op. cit. p. 168

11 For what follows cf. Hippolyte Rigault, *Histoire de la querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*, in *Œuvres Complètes de H. Rigault*, vol. I, Paris: Hachette 1859; Hubert Gillot, *La Querelle des anciens et des modernes en France,* Nancy: Crépin, 1914; Hans Baron, *The Querelle of the Ancients and the Moderns as a Problem for Renaissance Scholarship,* in *Renaissance Essays,* ed. by Paul Oskar Kristeller, Philip P. Wiener, New York: Harper & Row, 1968; Hans Robert Jauß, *Literarische Tradition und gegenwärtiges Bewußtsein der Modernität*, in Hans Robert Jauß, *Literaturgeschichte als Provokation,* Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1970, pp. 11–66.

12 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (LXXXIV), S. 190. English translation pp. 281–282.

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In the mid-1600s Blaise Pascal wrote an exceedingly subtle study on the distinction "Ancient/Modern." His *Preface to the Treatise on Vacuum (Préface pour le traité du vide,* 1647) is a veritable manifest of modernity.[13] Although Pascal here defends the thesis that the authority of the "ancients" should not be undermined, he does not in fact contradict himself. He proposes, indeed, a rather elegant solution to the controversy on the authority of the "ancients." While he is opposed, in his own capacity as a "modern," to making antiquity the "sole principle of the sciences,"[14] he also argues that reason must be placed as a second principle alongside the authority of the ancients.

> In matters in which we only seek to know what the authors have written, as in history, geography, jurisprudence, languages, and especially in theology; and in fine in all those which have for their principle either simple facts or divine or human institutions, we must necessarily have recourse to their books, since all that we can know of them is therein contained, hence it is evident that we can have full knowledge of them, and that it is not possible to add any thing thereto.[15]

But things are different in the case of objects that fall in the realm of the senses and discursive thought:

> authority here is useless; it belongs to reason alone to know them… It is thus that geometry, arithmetic, music, physics, medicine, architecture, and all the sciences that are subject to experiment and reasoning, should be augmented in order to become perfect. The ancients found them merely outlined by those who preceded them; and we shall leave them to those who will come after us in a more finished state than we received them.[16]

This division of the sciences makes any controversy concerning the authority of the "ancients" superfluous. While the "ancients" should obviously be followed in matters regarding which they have already said everything there is to be said and where nothing remains to be added, it would be absurd to deny the superiority of the "moderns" in matters in which the "ancients" were mere beginners and the "moderns" are the beneficiaries of knowledge and skills that have been either accumulated or refined in the course of a long period of time. In the

13 Cf. the beginning of this work. Blaise Pascal, *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1954, p. 529. English translation in Blaise Pascal, *Preface to the Treatise on Vacuum*. In *Thoughts, Letters, Minor Works*. New York: P. F. Collier and Son Corporation, 1910, p. 437.
14 Ibid. p. 535. English p. 444.
15 Ibid. p. 530. English p. 438.
16 Ibid. p. 530 f. English p. 439.

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latter case, Pascal calls his contemporaries to moderate their credulity regarding the “ancients.”[17]

Note that Pascal’s solution does not rest merely on a compromise whereby the ancients are granted a certain degree of respect by the “moderns,” on the one hand, and the “moderns” are granted the right to operate independently of the ancients, on the other. The compromise involves also a fundamental inequality between “ancients” and “moderns.” Pascal does not even touch on the question whether a *general* continuous progress in the sciences had taken place in the period between antiquity and his own present. Instead, he classifies the sciences from the outset in a straightforwardly partisan manner: he leaves to the “ancients” the sciences in which, as he says, no further progress is possible, and he claims for the “moderns” the sciences whose very logic rests on progress. A comparison between “ancients” and “moderns” loses here all real relevance, because, from this perspective, the moderns are, in “their” fields, *a priori* superior to the “ancients.” The only relevant comparison is that between the previous and the present (i. e., highest) level in the development of “modern” sciences such as physics, chemistry, and medicine. Pascal’s discussion of the authority of the “ancients” culminates in a sort of sophisticated belief in progress. He wants to save the authority of the “ancients,” as he said at the beginning, but, in the end, he renders this authority superfluous by making quantitative “progress” the sole criterion of the quality of “modern” sciences. And, ultimately, he did not hesitate to lay down this arbitrarily manufactured correspondence of “progress” and “modernity” as a general principle of human history:

> (…) man … is formed only for infinity. He is ignorant at the earliest age of his life; but he is instructed unceasingly in his progress; for he derives advantage, not only from his own experience, but also from that of his predecessors; since he always retains in his memory the knowledge which he himself has once acquired, and since he has that of the ancients ever present in the books which they have bequeathed to him. And as he preserves this knowledge, he can also add to it easily; so that men are at the present day in some sort in the same condition in which those ancient philosophers would have been found, could they have survived till the present time, adding to the knowledge which they possessed that which their studies would have acquired by the aid of so many centuries. Thence it is that by an especial prerogative, not only does each man advance from day to day in the sciences, but all mankind together make continual progress in proportion as the world grows older, since the same thing happens in the succession of men as in the different ages of single individuals. So that the whole succession of men, during the course of many ages, should be considered as a single man who subsists forever and learns continually, whence we see with what injustice we respect antiquity in philosophers; for as old age is that period of life most remote from infancy, who does not see that old age in this

17 Ibid. p. 531 f. English p. 440.

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> universal man (*homme universel*) ought not to be sought in the times nearest his birth, but in those the most remote from it?[18]

At the end of the 17th century, the "moderns" parted ways for good with the "ancients." Not only had the modern propensity for "innovations" grown in the course of that century, but the moderns had also put in motion, and to some extent completed, a general revolution in the arts and the sciences.[19] Thus, for example, Thomas Hobbes and René Descartes had stopped writing all their works in Latin, the traditional philosophical language. They now wrote some of their books in their respective vernacular and thus demonstrated that thenceforward even the abstract reasoning of scholarly minds could be expressed in the "modern" languages, and that, therefore, the language of the "ancients" could be abandoned.

Hobbes, when conceiving his political theory, began by rejecting Aristotle's. He refused to continue developing paradigms of political action from the perspective of prudence (*phronesis*). He wanted instead to be the first to draw up a political theory that would be exact as well as demonstrable in a geometrical manner.[20] Descartes, when contemplating a totally new method of philosophical cognition, began by repudiating all epistemological theories known to him. He determined to discover the laws of thought solely in the self-intuition of the ego.[21] Newton, when establishing his rules for the study of nature, repudiated the hierarchically structured multiplicity of earlier cosmologies. He spoke instead of a "system of the world," for the explanation of which he would allow only mathematics, and he therefore praised the "Cause" of this system on ac-

18 Ibid. pp. 533 f. (English 441–442). What is new in Pascal is the historical dimension in which he inserts his comparison of the whole human race with the *homme universel*. The comparison itself – minus the historical extension – is older. Cf. Pietro Pomponazzi: *De immortalitate animae* (1516), Giovanni Gentile (ed.), Messina-Rome: Principato, 1925, p. 87.

19 Cf. e. g. La Rochefoucauld's maxime 625. *Œuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1957, p. 499 ("Il y a une révolution générale qui change le goût des esprits, aussi bien que les fortunes du monde") and Voltaire, *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* (1751), Paris 1962, p. 6, where Voltaire, in his characterization of his own age, speaks, just like La Rochefoucauld , of a "révolution générale. "

20 Cf. Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth*, in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, William Molesworth (ed.) vol. VI, London: J. Bohn, 1840, p. 200; Thomas Hobbes, *De corpore*. Ep. Ded., in *The English Works*, vol. I, London 1839, pp. IX, 36–37, 45; Thomas Hobbes, *De cive. The English Version*, ed. by Howard Warrender, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983, pp.36 f., 64, 68, 94, 172, 220 f.

21 René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode. Texte et Commentaire*, Etienne Gilson (ed.), Paris: Vrin 1947, pp. 4 f., 15 f., 18, 21.

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count of His being "very well skilled in Mechanicks and Geometry."[22] Thus, the presuppositions at the basis of the general discussion on the heritage of antiquity had considerably changed towards the end of the 17th century. Firstly, the "moderns" now possessed a settled theory of the supposedly constant progress of humanity towards ever higher stages of a self-perfecting scientific-technological civilization. Pascal expressed this doctrine in the memorable symbol of the *homme universel*, which reinforced the idea that the passing itself of time constituted a decrease in infantilism and hence an increase in maturity. Secondly, the "moderns" had in fact already laid the foundations for a "modern" civilization through the scientific revolution they had engineered. A polemic with the wisdom of the ancients had become superfluous to the same degree that the *nuova scienzia* of the moderns had achieved supremacy.

Thus, Europe was already at the threshold of modernity when, for the last time, the dispute over the heritage of antiquity was reignited in France with the *querelle des anciens et des modernes*. The occasion for the dispute was the question regarding the extent to which "the age of Louis XIV" could be regarded as the equal of the classical age of antiquity (the age of Augustus, for example). According to the traditional theory of the fine arts, the reason why the works created by Corneille, La Fontaine, Molière and Racine in literature, and Nicolas Poussin and Jules Hardouin-Mansard in architecture, were masterworks was that these artists had followed the model of the art of the "ancients" and had "imitated" them. This explanation became the more questionable the more the culture of the French *âge classique* flourished and began to be itself imitated throughout Europe. Many contemporaries were no longer quite sure that this culture was supposed to be merely the work of imitators. Up to this point in time, however, only a handful of people had publicly dared to stray from the official theory of art in order to emphasize the own merits and accomplishments of contemporary poets, painters, and architects. The great wrangle broke out on the 27th of January 1687, at a session of the *Académie Française* in which Charles Perrault (1628–1703), a writer and collector of fairy tales, read out a poem on Le *siècle de Louis le Grand*. In the first verse he declared that the present age was the equal of classical antiquity:

> La belle Antiquité fut toujours venerable;
> Mais je ne crus jamais qu'elle fut adorable.

22 *Four Letters from Sir Isaac Newton to Doctor Bentley containing some Arguments in Proof of a Deity*, First Letter. *Isaac Newton's Papers and Letters on Natural Philosophy and Related Documents*, Bernard I. Cohen, Robert E. Schofield (eds.), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958, pp. 286 f.

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Je voy les Anciens sans plier les genoux,
Ils sont grands, il est vray, mais hommes comme nous;
Et l'on peut comparer sans craindre d'estre injuste,
Le Siècle de Louis au beau Siècle d'Auguste.[23]

Beautiful antiquity was always venerable,
But I never believed it was adorable.
I see the Ancients without bending a knee
They are great, yes, but men just as are we;
And without fear of injustice one can compare
the age of Louis with the beautiful age of Augustus.

With this public violation of the tabu of antiquity's respectability, Perrault had ignited the *querelle*. The French literary world split into two parties engaged in an impassionate feud with one another. On the one hand were the followers of antiquity, the so-called "*anciens*," who included Nicolas Boileau, Jean de la Bruyère and Jean de la Fontaine; on the other were the advocates of the New, the so-called *modernes*, people such as Perrault, Charles de Saint Evremond, and Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle. The *querelle*, which was fought out in lampoons, discussions, and satirical poems, lasted until the opening decades of the 18th century, and came to a formal end with the *Lettre à la Académie* (1714), which François Fénelon wrote in an attempt at mediation. In it, Fénelon gave expression to his wish that the "moderns" might outstrip the "ancients," while at the same time acknowledging that such a thing had not yet come to pass and that, therefore, a total neglect of the "ancients" on the part of the "moderns" was not justified.[24]

To the present day, no dispute comparable to the *querelle* has again taken place in the history of European culture. From Cassiodorus to the time of the *querelle*, the respective "present age" of each epoch had always been compared to "antiquity." This was the case even when the relevant "moderns" were increasingly less satisfied with merely appropriating *antiquitas* and when, from the Renaissance on, they finally proceeded to create a modern civilization on the basis of new ideas. This scientific (and therefore social) revolution was carried out *in opposition to* the "ancients" and with the intention of replacing the

23 Charles Perrault, *Parallèle des anciens et des modernes en ce qui regarde les arts et les sciences*, Paris 1688 – 97, p. 165; English translation of the poem in Larry F. Norman, *The Shock of the Ancient*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2011, p. 80). On the "Querelle" cf. Petra Latschenberger, *Versailles als Gipfel der bildenden Künste? Charles Perrault, Parallèle des Anciens et des Modernes*, PhD thesis, University of Vienna 2013.
24 Cf. *Lettre à l'Académie* (Chap. X: "Sur les Anciens et sur les Modernes"), Ed. crit. par Ernesta Caldarini, Geneva: Librairie Droz, 1970, pp. 122 – 134.

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tradition of antiquity with the scienza *nuova* of the "moderns." The decisive act of this revolution took place in the transition from the 17th to the 18th century, in that age which Paul Hazard called *La crise de la conscience européenne.*[25] The innovations of the "moderns" asserted themselves in the most important areas of human thought. Europe started living in the "modern" age. The *querelle* was the last of its kind, because, after it, the question whether *antiquitas* had been successfully suppressed by "modernity" was no longer a living question.

At this point, namely in the 18th century, the *philosophes* of Enlightenment started to disseminate a new anthropology as well as new theories of knowledge, society, and history. The Christian doctrine that human beings are God's creatures was abandoned; Étienne Bonnot de Condillac proclaimed, instead, that human beings generate themselves and exist from themselves.[26] Morbid egoism was reinterpreted as natural self-interest, and, instead of the Christian concepts of *beatitude* and *charité,* the secular ideas of *bonheur* and *bienveilllance* moved to the forefront. The myths of cosmological world-experience were sacrificed in favor of a *géometrisation de l'univers* (Yves Belaval) and were derided by enlightened minds as being no more than embellished old wives' tales.[27] The Christian interpretation of the world as God's work was replaced by a conception of the world as a lifeless and arbitrarily manipulatable machine. According to classical and Christian tradition, human society should be an image of the divine order of the cosmos; now it was conceived as an artifact whose "truth" is to be determined through its implementation. To be sure, Jacques Benigne Bossuet and Giambattista Vico would present the process of history once more from the perspective of divine *providentia*, but their voices were drowned out by Fontenelle and Voltaire, who now interpreted history from the standpoint of their belief in progress and with the goal of discerning an *histoire de l'histoire* immanent to the world itself.[28]

25 Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne: 1680 – 1715*, Paris: Boivin & Cie, 1934 (reprint: Paris: Fayard, 1961).

26 For what follows, cf. Tilo Schabert, *Natur und Revolution. Untersuchungen zum politischen Denken im Frankreich des 18. Jahrhunderts*, Munich: List, 1969.

27 Cf. Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959.

28 Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle, *Digression sur les Anciens et les Modernes*, in *Œuvres Complètes*, Georg Bernhard Depping (ed.), vol. II, 2nd Part, Paris: Belin, 1818, Reprint Genf: Slatkine, 1968, pp. 356 f. English translation: *A Digression on the Ancients and the Moderns*, in Scott Elledge and Donald Schier (eds.), *The Continental Model. Selected French Critical Essays of the Seventeenth Century in English Translation*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1960, pp. 358 – 370.

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This epoch-making reorientation of European thought in favor of modernity gave rise to what would become the most enduring modern mode of consciousness. From this point on it was a matter of course for "modern" minds to characterize their *philosophie nouvelle* (Condorcet) as "true," "rational," "scientific," and to dismiss the premodern doctrinal corpus as "erroneous," "nonsensical," and "illusory." From the modern point of view, indeed, the radical break with all intellectual tradition was not a loss of knowledge but represented rather the defeat and the extermination of errors and prejudices. As Fontenelle wrote:

> We are grateful to the ancients for having exhausted the store of conceivable false ideas; it was absolutely necessary to pay to ignorance and error the tribute the ancients paid, and we ought not to be harsh towards those who discharged this debt for us.[29]

According to Fontenelle's self-understanding, "modernity" was fundamentally no longer liable to error. For he interpreted the historiographical difference between "past" and "present" as implying an epistemological difference between the search for truth and the possession of the truth. And so he writes:

> In sum, there now reigns not only in our good scientific and philosophical works but also in those on religion, ethics, and criticism a precision and an exactness which have scarcely been known until now... The comparison we have just made between the men of all periods and an individual man may be extended to the whole question of the ancients and the moderns. A cultivated intelligence is composed, so to speak, of all the intelligences of preceding centuries; one intelligence only has been cultivated during all that time. Thus Mankind, which has lived from the beginning of the world to the present day, has had a childhood, during which he concerned himself only with the most pressing needs of life; and a youth, during which he succeeded rather well in the things of the imagination such as poetry and eloquence, and when he even began to think, but with less soundness than enthusiasm. He is now in the prime of life and reasons more forcefully and more incisively than ever; but he would be much farther advanced if the passion of war had not occupied him for a long time and filled him with scorn for that learning to which he has at last returned.[30]

The genesis of modern thought thus gave rise to two imperatives. The first required the presumption of a truth differential between "modernity" and "the past." The latest stage of scientific development was to be regarded always as the highest stage and hence as providing the justification for dismissing earlier results of scientific investigation as mere preliminaries. The second imperative demanded consequently the presumption of an epistemological difference between the present peak of knowledge and the preceding jumble of false opinions.

29 Ibid. p. 358. English: 361–362.
30 Ibid. p. 361 f. English: 363, 366 (with modifications to the translation).

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A relapse into the apparent ignorance of earlier times could best be avoided by methodically blocking any regression to a premodern body of knowledge. Condorcet observed in the *Esquisse d'un tableau des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1793) that the sensualistic epistemology introduced by John Locke had almost immediately been embraced by all philosophers and applied to morality, politics and public economy, to the point that it had become the "universal instrument" for the improvement of all the sciences. And he goes on to say that "It is this new step in philosophy that has forever imposed a barrier between mankind and the errors of its infancy; a barrier that should save it from relapsing into its former errors under the influence of new prejudices, just as it should assure the eventual eradication of those that still survive unrecognised, and should make it certain that any that may take their place will exercise only a faint influence and enjoy only an ephemeral existence."[31]

The imperative, "Thou shalt, in your capacity as a modern human, be superior to everything past" led to the prohibition to overstep the "barrier" between present and past. It precluded *a priori* every attempt to fall back on premodern thought. The ignorance that supposedly held sway in earlier times and was now overcome must be diligently prevented from further spreading. Therefore, as Victor Cousin proclaimed in the *Cours de l'histoire de la philosophie* (1841), in the age of the "moderns" everything that formed part of an earlier body of knowledge should be ignored:

> Except for Bacon and Leibniz, all the great philosophers of the new era (*ère nouvelle*), Descartes, Spinoza, and Malebranche, Hobbes and Locke, do not have the least knowledge of antiquity and do not have for it the least respect, they hardly read in anything other than nature and conscience.[32]

Cousin's idea of "modernity" has nothing in common, apart from the name, with the original notion introduced by Cassiodorus. With the same resolve that Cassiodorus had argued, after the fall of Rome, for a reappropriation of *antiquitas* by the *moderni* in the form of a *translatio studii*, Cousin now rejected all knowledge that did not originate in the exclusive thought of "modern" *philosophes* and declared it the victim of an ostentatious ahistorical ignorance.[33]

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31 Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique de l'esprit humain*, S. 212f. English translation: *The Sketch*, in Condorcet, *Political Writings*, ed. by Steven Lukes and Nadia Urbinati, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 96f.

32 Victor Cousin, *Cours de l'histoire de la philosophie. Histoire de la philosophie du XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Didier, 1829, vol. I, p. 438.

33 Cf. Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (XCVII), p. 201.

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The history of this semantic shift has been sketched in the preceding pages. The analysis of relevant texts brought to light essential elements of the modern mentality, a mentality that is set on contradiction as a matter of principle. It was formed in the Renaissance, asserted itself everywhere within European thought in the transition from the 17th to the 18th century, and has prevailed ever since in the period which we call, appropriately, "modernity." These elements can be ordered systematically as follows:

1. All tradition is subject to the judgment of the present. "Older" doctrines, ideas, and theories are classified as mere "precursors" to current reflections. They are taken, not as models to be imitated, but as the targets of a critique through which the respective present consciousness sharpens itself. The only thing that is excluded from this critique is the principle of a future perfection pertaining to human affairs, the sciences, political institutions, and individual life. Between a past to which one feels superior and a future which one pretends to know, no one asks the question anymore whether a particular action here and now is correct or incorrect, human or inhuman, to be promoted or rejected in consideration of its possible consequences. Instead, only progress-immanent criteria are applied: every activity is regarded as justified if it substitutes something "newer" for something "older." Any consideration regarding the benefits and consequences of an action is guided by a prejudice, i.e. a pre-judgment regarding its "progressivity."

2. The division of the sciences is subverted. Philosophy loses its position as the integrational science that poses the questions concerning the utility and the tasks of each particular science as well as the purpose of scientific activity in general. Instead, the sciences are split between natural sciences and "human" (or "social") sciences. In this context, the natural sciences occupy in the consciousness of the "moderns" a paradigmatic position. They are meant to provide the demonstration of the principle of the linear improvement of human affairs, in other words, the fundamental superiority of the "newer" compared to the "older." Every innovation in the scientific-technological realm is accepted uncritically and irrespective of the possibility of harmful consequences as a further step in the control of nature and the improvement of human living conditions. The human sciences, on the other hand, are measured according to the model of the natural sciences and, even though they are largely insusceptible of quantification, they are criticized for not being as "exact" or as instrumentally "useful" as the natural sciences.

3. The break with "earlier" models, authorities, rules, codified behavior patterns and customary style forms is perpetually reenacted. The historical tradition is not called upon in order to widen the contemporary experiential basis. Instead, the destruction and neglect of "old" things (even when they are only a

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generation "old") is allowed to take place again and again with a characteristic arrogance and under the pretext that they are anyhow no longer "modern."

4. An aimless obsession with innovation holds people's minds in thralldom. In the wasteland of constant quarrels and dissension, revolts and breaks, contradiction is *de rigueur,* and protest as such is regarded as the hallmark of the New. Here everyone is an "original," a genius and critic, a broker, a propagandist, a seller, both an expositor and an exegete of his or her own works. The only thing common to all is the autonomy to put forth one theory beside another theory, one definition beside another definition, beside one new thing an even newer thing. Every attempt to get past this fragmentation of the human world is suspected of trying to establish order where revolts reigns, or to institute a tradition of common beliefs and common symbols where tradition is banned.

5. The truth is historically relativized. The thesis that the truth is the daughter of time is for the moderns a call to arrogance. The past is taken merely as preparation for the present; whoever lives today is *ipso facto* superior to every yesterday, because he or she is in time and by this very fact further advanced in the knowledge of the truth. The "moderns" are the "progressives"; their only criterion of truth is the correspondence of "progress" and "modernity." Accordingly, a temporal distance suffices for being "modern," and thus "more knowledgeable." Alternatively, anyone is "more knowledgeable" who declares himself or herself to be "more modern" than others and thus consigns them to "yesterday."

It is apparent that the experiment of "modernity" has become questionable not only due to its repercussions It rested from the very beginning on the principle of a purposeless dynamic, a dynamic in accordance with which the experiment can never come to a conclusion. The crisis of "modernity" exists since "modernity" exists. Never before had an age been ushered in within a human civilization under the principle that the "newer" is always also the "better," and that nothing is "better" than what happens to be the "newest." Only in the Europe of "modernity" were contradiction, dissolution, negation, and arrogance born of ignorance declared to be the conditions for the improvement of human things. Imbued with the notion that they were "modern," people lost their orientation; they marshalled an enormous power, but this power was abused: it was used against humanity and the human world. Everyone pressed against the threshold of modernity, but no one succeeded in stepping over it. No sooner had someone posed as a "progressive" than someone even more progressive would take his or her place. As soon as a new insight was made public, it was negated. Whenever a new style was created, it would in no time become "passé." Modernity is indeed an experiment. It is an attempt that by its very nature cannot be allowed to succeed definitively; hence, it possesses a sort of con-

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tinuity thanks to the feeling it generates in people to be living in a civilizational crisis, in an age of catastrophes, at the end of an epoch.

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Chapter 3

Discourse On Method

One should not believe everyone, because anyone can say anything.
Montaigne, *Essais*, Book II, Chap. XII
(Apologie de Raimond Sebond)

Sound thinking is the greatest virtue, and wisdom is to speak the truth
and to act according to the nature of things.

Heraclitus, 22b112

Every experiment is a means to a demonstration. A hypothesis must be evaluated, an invention tested; one wants to discover the best method for carrying out a given plan or project. In the case of modernity, experiments serve an extremely complex goal: Modern humanity embarks on the venture of setting up its existence within chaos. It builds in order to demolish (again); it affirms something in order to negate something else; it brings together what it will dissolve again. But how is chaos generated and maintained, and how does one exist within it?

If we try to identify the principles underlying the artistic and literary manifestations of modernity, we come upon a complex network of theorems of chaos. Hugo Friedrich, for example, concluded from his studies on *The Structure of Modern Poetry:* “In modern painting, an autonomous structure of colors and forms now dislocates or totally eliminates the object; in verse, the autonomous dynamics of language, the need for nonmeaningful sequences of sound and curves of intensity, can go so far that the poem is no longer intelligible from its statements. Its actual content is the dramatics of external and internal formal forces.”[1] According to Friedrich, some of the more apt concepts for describing European poetry since Charles Baudelaire, Arthur Rimbaud, and Stéphane Mallarmé would include: disorientation, disintegration of the familiar, loss of order, incoherence, fragmentatism, de-poeticized poetry, bolts of annihilation, strident imagery, brutal abruptness, dislocation, astigmatism, alienation.[2] Clearly, modernity is not characterized by a unique modern style but rather by polished techniques and methods for the creation of chaos. In the previous chapter we depicted how the modern mentality was formed and what its most essential elements

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1 Hugo Friedrich, *The Structure of Modern Poetry: From the Mid-Nineteenth to the Mid-Twentieth Century*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, p. 5.
2 Ibid. pp. 8–9.

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are. In what follows we will discuss the methods by which this mentality, i.e., the existence in chaos, is actualized. The modalities of this existence are: stupefaction, shock, caricature, abnormity, disconcertment, mannerism, fragmentation, eccentricity and, above all, contradiction. Surprise and dissonance can be reproduced only so long as the absolute right to contradiction is asserted. Such canonization of the irregular, however, inverts the original relation between "rule" and "irregularity." It is necessary to be clear about this relation if we want to understand how the inversion takes place. Plato gave a classical exposition of this relation at several points in his works. I would like, therefore, to start by briefly discussing Plato's remarks before I consider the methodology of modernity.

Plato distinguishes between two ways of carrying out an investigation on a given object: the dialectical (*dialektikos)* and the eristical (*eristikos*).[3] In the 5th book of the *Republic*, in the course of a conversation with Glaucon on the subject of the natural difference between men and women, Socrates observes parenthetically: "What a grand thing, Glaucon … is the power of the art of contradiction!" "Why so?" "Because," said I, "many appear to me to fall into it even against their wills, and to suppose that they are not wrangling but arguing, owing to their inability to apply the proper divisions and distinctions to the subject under consideration. They pursue purely verbal oppositions, practising eristic, not dialectic on one another."[4]

We should not give the name of "philosopher" to someone who, filled with supreme confidence, desires to dabble in each and every science and, beaming with joy, sets about it without forethought or restraint. Otherwise, the word "philosopher" would have an expansive and rather odd extension. Curious people, too, are eager learners, but they are not philosophers.[5] Even filled with the desire to learn, a person has no understanding of the nature of things if he or she does not realize "that there are forms for things and won't mark off a form for each one;" hence, "he won't have anywhere to turn his thought, since he doesn't

3 *Philebos* 17a. Plato uses several different designations for the dialectical method: *dialegesthai dynamis* (*Republic* 511b, 533a, 532e), *dialegesthai episteme* (*Republic* 511c) and *dialektike [techne]* (*Republic* 532b). In speaking of eristics he also uses the expressions *antilogike techne* (Republic 454a) and *erizein* (ibid.).
4 *The Republic*, translated by Paul Shorey, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1937, 454a (= Loeb Classical Library).
5 Ibid. 475 c-d.

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allow that for each thing there is a character that is always the same. In this way he will destroy the power of dialectic (*tou dialegesthai dynamis*) entirely."[6]

The dialectic is the method "to find [one's] way to the very essence of each thing."[7] Plato adds that the dialectic makes possible a knowledge of reality and of the realm of thought that is more certain than the one provided by the so-called arts and sciences. In the latter, arbitrary suppositions (*hypotheseis*) are regarded as primordial grounds (*archai*).[8] In the case of a dialectical investigation, however, the suppositions do not become grounds but are in fact treated as hypotheses, that is, as a kind of first stage and run-up on the basis of which one may arrive at, and comprehend, that which does not require any further presuppositions: the origin of all things. Once this is achieved, one holds onto all that which is connected with this origin and thus goes back to the beginning of the investigation.[9] The conceptual progression of *dialegesthai* corresponds to the return (*metastrophe*) from the subterranean shadow images to the things illumined by the sunlight. In the allegory of the cave, Plato describes this return thus: "when anyone attempts through the dialectical method and apart from all perceptions of sense to find his way to the very essence of each thing and does not desist till he apprehends by thought itself the nature of the good in itself, he arrives at the limit of the intelligible, as the other character in our parable [i.e., in the allegory of the cave] came to the goal of the visible."[10]

Just as the "dialectician" attempts to get to the ground of things with single-minded focus, so the "eristician" insists and persists in saying infinitely many things and always something different about a given subject. The eristical battle of words is, according to Plato, the method used by people who are interested in a conversation only out of love of contradiction, and who behave as though they were taking part in a competition for public fame.[11] That is why they are absolutely unwilling to take part in discussions that are focused on the subject matter itself. Rather, Plato goes on, they belong among the *philekooi*, as he calls them, who greedily give ear to every new thing and never tire of doing so. They travel around and never miss a single Dionysian festival, so that they may listen to every choir in the country, just as though they had leased out their ears.[12] One

6 *Parmenides* 135c. In *Plato's Complete Works*, edited by John M. Cooper, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1977.
7 *The Republic*, 532a.
8 511c.
9 511b.
10 532 a-b (translation modified).
11 *Theaetetus* 164c–d. In *Plato's Complete Works*.
12 *The Republic*, 475d.

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gets asked a thousand questions by an eristician, if one engages him in conversation. He rattles off his questions as one who had been lying in wait with this specific purpose and with the attitude of a warrior who, being actually a mercenary, takes part in a conversation just for the money. He will not let go of his interlocutor until the latter is filled with that admiration for his wisdom which was the goal of the whole transaction.[13]

The art of philosophical conversation *(dialektike techne)* and the art of contradiction *(antilogike techne)* exclude one another. Plato maintains that these two methods lead to completely opposite goals. The dialectic is used for obtaining knowledge, that is to say, an insight into the nature of things. "Dialectical" dialogues or investigations, therefore, are not carried out for their own sake. They last only so long as their natural end – the desired insight, the sought-after knowledge – has not yet been attained. Once attained, these products are in turn fixated in concepts that are universally valid on the strength of their being statements about reality.

The eristic, on the other hand, serves rhetorical competition and the speaker's grandstanding. An "eristical" dialogue is a fight with words, where what matters is not what is said but only how skillfully words are used for rhetorical effect. For this reason, and because an eristician has an answer to everything, a fight of words lasts indefinitely. An eristician destroys with his *antilogike techne* the conceptual structure of every dialogue, because he feels free to define a concept in whichever way he finds expedient to contradict his interlocutor's statements. His art of contradiction is rule-free; it is really just a never-ending play with words emptied of their meaning. It is a method that causes a hypertrophy of form along with an atrophy of content.[14]

The foregoing discussion of Plato's distinction between "eristic" and "dialectic" had for its purpose to set out the methodological presuppositions of modernity. Indeed, when we compare the specific characteristics of the eristical method with those of the modern mentality (as described in the previous chapter), we cannot fail to notice a remarkable similarity. Thus, the question arises: Is the eristic the method that corresponds to the modern mentality? In what follows, therefore, we shall look at the methodological origins of modernity. We shall do so through an analysis of two Renaissance works: the *Oratio de dignitate hominis*

13 *Theaetetus*, 165d-e.

14 The formulas, "hypertrophy of form" and "atrophy of content" are borrowed from Hugo Friedrich.

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(1496) by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and the *Libro del Cortegiano* (1528) by Baldassare Castiglione.

Pico wrote the *Oratio* in 1486.[15] It was intended as the preface to a public disputation that Pico wanted to hold at the beginning of January 1487. His plan was to present and defend nine hundred philosophical theses. Pope Innocent VIII, however, prohibited the disputation and had the orthodoxy of Pico's theses examined. The ecclesiastical board of inquiry concluded that the theses were partially contrary to sound faith and condemned their author. Pico fled to France. The *Oratio* was published in 1496, two years after Pico's death, as part of the edition of his complete works by his nephew, Gian Francesco Pico.

The methodological statements of the *Oratio* focus on four points: (1) the justification of the planned public disputation; (2) Pico's eclectic position; (3) his desire of originality; and (4) the stylization of the *Oratio* into a work of genius.

For Pico, philosophizing is a competition. He concedes that many would disapprove in general of a public discussion of scientific questions. They might say that such a thing would be used "rather for the display of talent and learning than for the acquisition of knowledge."[16] But Pico refuses to entertain such objections. He claims that the point of the invitation to attend his public disputation is not merely to engage in arguing and quarrelling.[17] Pico believes that he can justify his hankering after disputations by placing himself behind "Plato and Aristotle and the most upright philosophers of every age." All these thinkers, he tells us, were of the firm opinion that, in the search for the truth, nothing would bring one closer to the goal than frequent exercises in disputation. And that is why he himself does not believe "that the poets signified anything else to us by the celebrated arms of Pallas, or the Hebrews when they say that *barzel* (i.e., iron)[18] is the symbol of wise men, than that this sort of contest is very honorable, exceedingly necessary for gaining wisdom."[19]

Pico himself, however, weakens this pretext for the public disputation by openly declaring that, given his young age (just 24 years old), he also seeks a

15 An overview of Pico della Mirandola's work and recent studies can be found in the *Oxford Bibliographies;* see http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0221.xml#obo-9780195399301-0221-bibItem-0007 (retrieved Jan. 10, 2018).
16 Pico della Mirandola, *On the Dignity of Man,* translated by Charles Glenn Wallis, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1965, p. 18.
17 Ibid. 18–20.
18 The Latin *ferrum* has also the meaning of "sword." The Hebrew *barzel,* on the other hand, means only "iron." Thus, it is not clear whether Pico had in mind the connotation of "sword," which would be more fitting for his comparison.
19 *On the Dignity of Man,* p. 19.

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public "contest" in order to show to everyone how far he has already advanced in the study of philosophy. He enters the arena of public disputation in order to earn either praise or blame – and expects, according to the words of the Roman poet Propertius, which he quotes, that, in such a case, the venture itself is praiseworthy: "... in magnis et voluisse sat est" – "in great things it is enough to have willed."[20] Given his yearning for grandstanding, Pico cannot be content with defending in the disputation just ten (instead of nine hundred) theses. Limiting himself in such manner would not allow him to display publicly the whole spread of his knowledge. And, in turn, he must show that he knows a great deal if he wants to win, in the public "contest" of scholars, the reputation for being immensely well-read and highly educated which he longs for.

For this reason, his appearing at the "contest" requires a specific method: eclecticism. As Pico explains, those who subscribe to the teachings of a particular philosophical school, such as that of Thomas of Aquinas or that of John Duns Scotus, are able, indeed, to put to the test their learning even when discussing only a few questions. This is the reason why he has made use of his own personal mode of doing philosophy (*mecum philosophandi rationem)*. Without swearing allegiance to any one school, he has swooped down on all the great masters of philosophy, browsed in all books, and become acquainted with all schools. Hence, he had to speak about all these things so as not to give the impression that he is committed to any particular thing, an impression he would have conveyed if he had disregarded the rest for the sake of defending only a particular doctrine.[21]

Pico's eristical philosophy does not follow the rules of an object-oriented reflection, in which the primary aim is to attain knowledge of the nature of things. His kind of philosophy is instead subject to the laws of the arena, where the only objective is glory. That is why it must follow the method that holds the best promise of the desired fame. One shows oneself to have an encyclopedic education but binds oneself to no definitive position, because otherwise one might miss the opportunity to throw a further thesis or opinion into the contest when there is a chance to draw applause from the public. This form of doing "philosophy" is necessarily eclectic. It does not put in motion a process of knowledge acquisition. A process of knowledge acquisition has its point of departure in the thing-to-be-known, which also remains the central point around which the entire process revolves. Instead, the competitive form of philosophizing leads to a syncretism of already formed and fixed philosophical "schools," the periph-

20 Ibid. 21.
21 Ibid. 21–22.

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eral combination of which provides no basis to determine what is to be known and how it is to be known. Pico, however, believes that he can make this determination, and refers to Plato as his authority:

> Moved by this reasoning, I have wished to bring into view the things taught not merely according to one doctrine (as some would desire), but things taught according to every sort of doctrine, that by this comparison of very many sects *(complurium sectarum collatione)* and by the discussion of manifold philosophy *(multifariae discussione philosophiae)*, that radiance of truth which Plato mentions in his Letters might shine more clearly upon our minds, like the sun rising from the deep.[22]

As it happens, this is not quite how the relevant passage in Plato's Seventh Letter reads. What Plato actually says is that our soul experiences a brightness of insight into the nature of things, not on the basis of a "discussion of manifold philosophy," but rather on the strength of a "long-continued familiarity with the thing itself." Plato writes:

> For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued familiarity with the thing itself *(ek polles synousis … peri to pragma auto)* and when one really immerses itself in it, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself.[23]

The public grandstanding that is the aim of an eristic philosophy imposes a particular constraint on its practitioners: they must be original. In a contest among scholars, the book learning that one displays is easily neutralized by the book learning that another competitor flaunts. That is why when someone wants to triumph over his adversary, he cannot limit himself to citing the doctrines of all philosophical schools, about which everyone in the arena knows how to dispute. What good would it have been, Pico asks, "to have dealt with the opinions of others in any number, if, as though coming to a banquet of the wise without contributing anything, I brought nothing which would be my own, given birth and perfected by my own talent *(ingenio)*."[24] He would not have had what he needs in order to excel above his adversaries. It is his eclectic approach that paved his path to originality. In a contest on whether he is familiar with more philosophical opinions than his opponents, he could be defeated. But in choosing what he wants to put forth as a demonstration of his genius, he is his own standard. When entering the contest, he has the advantage that his eclectically

22 Ibid. 23.
23 Plato, *Letter VII*, 341 c. In *Plato's Complete Works* (translation modified).
24 *On the Dignity of Man*, p. 24 (translation modified).

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produced “philosophy” is “original,” given that it cannot be compared with anything outside itself. His only remaining fear would be that he might encounter an opponent who proves to be even more original than himself. But, in Pico’s own opinion, that would be a rather unlikely occurrence. He presents his work as a work of inspired genius, scattering scores of new insights, ideas, and discoveries among the crowd. He pits his youth against the *patres colendissimi*, the most venerable fathers of the philosophical fraternity he has in mind. And with the bloom of his youth he associates the bloom of a new philosophy *(nova philosophia)*, which he proffers to the “fathers” with the gesture of a self-assured son demanding either everything or nothing. He does not invite the “fathers” to a conversation in which they could jointly discuss the subject-matter of philosophy. No, he has set up a “new philosophy,” and he demands that it be either praised *(laudare)* or condemned *(damnare)*. He has put down 72 new physical and metaphysical doctrines and, unless he is wrong, “[i]f one holds to them he will be able… to solve any question proposed about the things of nature or of God in a fashion far other than we are taught by that philosophy which is read in the schools and cultivated by the doctors of these times.”[25]

In accordance with this exorbitantly high opinion of himself, Pico, the youthful genius, puffs up his “philosophy” into a teaching beyond compare. And now the *certamen*, the contest, may start. Pico intends to open it with an invitation to discuss his nine hundred theses. But at the end of his inaugural address he will instruct his audience to celebrate the triumph of his own genius over their ignorance: “I wished by this assembly of mine to show not that I know many things, but that I know things which many people do not know.”[26] This provocation of the guests, the insulting condescension that puts them in a combative frame of mind, is Pico’s last and presumably the most promising measure taken by him to put his eristic philosophy on the stage. It will certainly not be a conversation on the subject-matter itself but rather a contest of doctors. Thus, the last sentence of the *Oratio* reads:

> So that the fact itself may now be made evident to you, most venerable fathers, so that my discourse may no longer delay your desire, most excellent doctors, whom not without great delight I see ready and equipped, awaiting battle (may it be happy and fortunate), let us now, as by a trumpet summons, engage hands in combat.[27]

25 Ibid. 25.
26 Ibid. 34.
27 Ibid.

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Pico's rehearsed methodological repertoire becomes finalized and enhanced in the *Libro del Cortegiano* by Baldassare (or Baldesar) Castiglione.[28] The methodological reflections contained in this book bear on (1) the legitimation of the individual style, i.e., the subjectivist *maniera*, as well as (2) the distortion of language. These reflections are part of a theory of courtly manners advanced by Castiglione as a mirror *(speculum)* of manners for the courtiers of his age. Castiglione, inspired by Neoplatonic ideas popular in Renaissance times, believed that the "world of forms" contained not only the forms or ideas of a perfect republic, a perfect king, or a perfect orator, but also the idea of a perfect courtier *(idea del perfetto cortegiano)*.[29] Thus, he explains in his *Libro* the characteristics that a courtier must possess, and how the courtier must conduct himself "at court" in order to actualize in his personal existence this *idea del perfetto cortegiano.*

After its first publication in Venice in 1528, and having gone through forty more Italian editions in the ensuing decades, the book on the accomplished *cortegiano* gained in the course of the 16th century a decisive influence on the courtly culture of Europe. Written by an author who was also a diplomat in the service of the dukes of Urbino and Mantua and was later appointed Pope Clement VII's nuncio at the Spanish court of Emperor Karl V, the book was quickly translated into French (1537), German (1560) and English (1561), and, in the years following its first appearing, it came out in more than a hundred further editions. Assuming a print run of a thousand copies per edition (the number of the first printing), we may assume that some 100,000 copies of the *Libro del Cortegiano* became available in the book market in the following 100 years.[30] The book remained until the middle of the 17th century a formative model for a flood of similar writings, which were in part published in multilingual editions and subsequently repeatedly reprinted and imitated.

28 A brief overview of Castiglione's life and works can be found in the entries in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica:* https://www.britannica.com/biography/Baldassare-Castiglione (retrieved Jan. 15, 2018) and in *Oxford Bibliographies:* http://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195399301/obo-9780195399301-0090.xml (retrieved Jan. 15, 2018).

29 Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, translated by Charles S. Singleton, New York: Anchor Books, 1959, p. 15.

30 Cf. Peter Burke, *The European Reception of Castiglione's Cortegiano*, University Park, Pa.: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, p. 140. For more information on the circulation and influence of the *Libro del Cortegiano* see the entire chapter 8 ("The Courtier in European Culture") in Burke's book (pp. 139–157).

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Besides instructions for the perfect comportment at court, Castiglione incorporated into his theory of courtly behavior *(teoria cortigiana)* a Platonic theory of love, a Renaissance cosmology, a defense of national languages, a cosmological psychology, and a sort of Platonic politics. The influence of the *teoria cortigiana* extended, therefore, all the way from the courtly lifestyle and the worldview of Castiglione's contemporaries to the realm of literature and to the political-cosmological simile of the "roi soleil," whose luster was supposed to be reflected in the refined manners of the courtiers who surrounded him.[31]

Castiglione legitimizes the unique genius by which Pico believed himself to be distinguished. He writes that Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Giorgio da Castelfranco excelled, each of them, in the art of painting. Nonetheless, they are unlike one another in their work, even though none of them appears to lack anything in what is proper to their art.[32] Castiglione rejects the traditional idea that there are universal models of artistic perfection (be it nature or the great masters of earlier times), against which the works of contemporary artists are to be measured. Thus, while holding onto the idea of excellence, he privatizes it by locating the standard for judging a work of art in the work itself. In this way, he measures the excellence of the painters mentioned, not against an ideal of perfection valid for all of them, but rather against the way in which each of them is perfect in his respective style. Each one of them, he adds, is recognized for being most perfect in his own style *(nel suo stilo essere perfettissimo)*.[33]

Castiglione draws a contrast between the concepts of style and perfection. According to the older understanding of art, the style must satisfy the universal ideal of perfection. Castiglione, in contrast, presupposes an autonomy of individual style that, in turn, sets the standard of perfection. The resulting dissimilarity of autonomous styles, however, cannot but cause a collapse of the idea of perfection. Each individual style can be developed into the mastery that is specific to it; and this would mean that there are as many "perfections" as there are styles. Castiglione applies his conception of art not just to poetry and rhetoric; he also sheds light on the process of atomization that results from applying this conception as a method for passing judgment in general. As he writes, "if one were to take thought of all the orators that have ever existed, he would find as many kinds of oratory as orators."[34]

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31 Nicolas Faret, *L'Honneste Homme ou L'Art de plaire à la court* (1636), ed. by Maurice Magendie, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1925, pp. 7–8.
32 *The Book of the Courtier* (I, 37), p. 60.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid. p. 61.

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The artist who follows this conception of art will no longer measure his mastery against the familiar ideas of artistic perfection or against works of earlier masters considered classics. He will instead begin by creating his own unique style. Before directing his attention to "art", he will focus on having his own peculiar individuality recognized, on whose behalf, and for the sake of parading which, he makes use of the medium "art." But in order to prevent his going unnoticed among the multitude of earlier and contemporary artists, he will have to stand apart and create a style so unique and original that it will cause astonishment. His style can never be sufficiently original, but it will be the more eccentric the more he allows himself to cultivate and "develop" his phantasy and the desultoriness of his moments of inspiration. Castiglione believes to be in agreement with Cicero in asserting that there are orators who "imitate no one" and "yet attain to the highest degree of excellence."[35] And he goes on to say that there are other orators who have introduced "a new manner and type of oratory" *(nova forma e figura di dir)* which, while being beautiful, is also unusual among the orators of his age because "they imitated no one but themselves" *(non imitavono se non se stessi).*[36]

A human world in accordance to Castiglione's methodological reflections is a world splintered into sheer loose fragments. Human beings within the sphere of the *teoria cortigiana* do not move within a "common world," the unity of which would be accessible to all of them through a *sensus communis*. Like monads cut off from each other, they lack any common basis for communicating with, and meeting, one another. Their singular originality, by reason of which they are occupied only with their singular selves, keeps them apart and pushes each of them into the center of a self-contained "private world." Castiglione extolls this atomization of the realm of interpersonal communication in two ways. On the one hand, he advocates for a sort of negative education, in which the educator learns from the learner what type of education he is to impart. "Teachers must consider the nature of their pupils," he writes, "and, taking that as a guide, must direct them and help them in the path toward which their talent and natural disposition inclines them."[37]

On the other hand, he advises the budding perfect *cortegiano* to always adapt, in the context of social interactions, his manner of conversation *(conversare)* to the person with whom he happens to be speaking. The reason for this is

35 Ibid.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.

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that an infinite variety of things can occur in a conversation, in addition to the fact that no two human beings are found on earth that have minds totally alike.

> Hence, whoever has to engage in conversation with others must let himself be guided by his own judgment and must perceive the differences between one man and another, and change his style and method from day to day, according to the nature of the person with whom he undertakes to converse.[38]

The principles of Castiglione's *teoria cortigiana* encourage the relevant subjects to become enmeshed in their own individual, autonomous, originality, while dissuading them from agreeing with one another on mutual concerns. When they meet and converse with each other, their conversation is characterized by luxuriating formal games rather than by a density of content. Their communication limits itself to displaying a style and the mannerisms of their distinct individuality, in which each individual finds his or her greatest delight. This game with stylistic, mainly linguistic forms, however, does not fail to quickly cause boredom, especially when it is restricted to dissociating words from their content and language from reality. This draining of the substance of language could only be a one-time event; hence, it would not allow for that cornucopia of variations thanks to which the game with language remains interesting. And thus the question arises: What must happen with language so that the game with language can be indefinitely extended? Castiglione himself needed an exemplary answer to this question, for he had given the *Libro del Cortegiano* the structure of a dialogue that was supposed to have taken place in March of 1507 in a circle of the nobility at the Urbino court. He tells us how this circle had discussed the manner in which the dialogue would be conducted. In this context the name of the method through which language is made into an object of play is disclosed. That name is: distortion.

The verbal exchanges go hither and thither; it is presupposed that everyone may say whatever he or she desires in the course of the dialogue.[39] However, the group resolves to choose one member from the circle to take responsibility for "forming in words the perfect courtier," so that the others may participate in the dialogue by responding to him. So as not to waste more time, and on the Duchess of Urbino's command, Emilia, The Duchess' lady in waiting, asks the Count of Canossa to take on this role. And she provides the following justification for her choice. The Count, she says, is known to them not so much as a good *cortegiano* who knows what is appropriate in each case. Rather, he should as-

38 Ibid. (II, 17), p. 109.
39 Ibid. (I, 11–12), pp. 24–25.

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sume the leadership in the dialogue because he says "everything contrariwise *(dicendo ogni cosa al contrario),*" and, by doing so in the present conversation, "the game will be the more beautiful."[40] The other interlocutors express their hope that he will take on this role, because in this manner everyone would have the chance to reply to him. Signora Emilia adds that, if someone with more knowledge than the Count were to execute this task, there would be no way to contradict *(contradir)* him. The conversation should not be allowed to develop in such a way that the "game would be tedious."[41]

Thus, the Urbino circle declares the distortion of language to be the method of their dialogue. Speaking is a game, and the principle of this game is contradiction, the twisting of words into their countersense. Such a game is "beautiful" because it avoids a contact with the truth and, instead, rouses the passions of the players, who, while playing, forget everything else, including the surrounding reality. And no one who perseveres in the game of language needs to renounce his or her passion or the thrilling allurement of high risk. Everyone can say something in a twisted fashion or contrariwise; he or she needs only to distort again and differently the words that the previous speakers have already twisted into their countersense. According to Castiglione, the courtier should "use certain words sometimes in a sense they do not usually have."[42] He should twist them so that he can transpose them *(traportandole)* to where he can use them, as though he were transplanting them, like someone grafting the offshoot of a tree onto a more fertile trunk. And, thus, by making the words more pleasing and beautiful, like things that are put before our very eyes, he will succeed in producing delight in the listener or reader.[43]

Such utterances are imbued with a magic feeling with relation to the game of language. Castiglione reveals that the method of language distortion is the most effective way to make speaking itself into an art, thus, in turn, causing the art of conversation to fall into oblivion. Whereas the *techne dialektike* produces a knowledge of the nature of things, the eristic, i.e., the speech that is directed towards contradiction, loses itself in nothingness. Freed from reality, it exists merely in that faked appearance of reality produced when words are used that have been emptied of sense. The extreme form of such a game of language is attained in the loss of language. People speak unceasingly and talk into emptiness, because the hollow semblance of such speaking is the only commitment

40 Ibid. (I, 12–13), pp. 25–26 (translation modified).
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid. (I, 34), p. 56.
43 See ibid.

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people can still make: *"Poiché non ci costa altro che parole"* – "For it cost us only words."[44]

Our discourse on modernity was called forth by the question concerning modernity's methodological origins: How did modern humanity produce the chaos in which it exists? What paths did it take to find itself in a contorted world, in which only what is strange, eccentric, fragmentary, and disconcerting counts? How did it come to pass that modern humankind, while acquainted with innumerable forms and models of thought, art, worldly happiness, and public sociability, exists nonetheless merely at the fringes of an inscrutable reality and withdraws to private obsessions that are the signs of its speechlessness and loneliness?

These questions can be answered now after the preceding case studies on Plato, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and Castiglione. Modernity is based on a methodological revolution that has this underlying structure:

1. The eristical method is substituted for the dialectical method. The situation of philosophical thought is fundamentally transformed. The philosophical dialogue in which all the participants have the shared purpose of "finding out precisely that which each thing is," gives way to a philosophizing in competition, in which everyone is a competitor in relation to all others, and in which one's only purpose it to gain the victory. Just as Plato forcefully rejected the fight with words *(erizein)*, Pico arms himself emphatically for the rhetorical contest *(certamen)*.

2. Eristical philosophy puts the person of the speaker in the center of "philosophical thought." He or she no longer portrays reality but merely himself or herself. Here the crowd's approval is decisive for what the speaker says. The speaker fights for public fame, because this is the only remaining measure of the quality of his or her "philosophical thought." Hence, both Pico and Castiglione emphasize the originality, the *ingenium,* of the individual who creates wholly out of himself or herself a "new philosophy" or – in the art of painting – his or her own exclusive style, in which he or she reaches "perfection." This autonomy of idiosyncratic individuality, this apparent right "to imitate only oneself," becomes the supreme principle of human existence in the modern age.

3. The art of contradiction is promoted to the status of Lord of the human world. Contradicting is the simplest act by means of which an individual stands out among all others. Thus, everyone's roused originality can at least exhaust itself in a protest of all against all. Furthermore, the natural circumstances of human existence are freed of all constraints through contradiction. The act of

44 Ibid. (IV, 30), p. 305

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contradicting opens up an infinite number of possibilities of being "autonomous" in one's subjectivist singularity, according to how one either distorts a given thing, or says something in a "twisted" way, or debunks whatever is still regarded as natural or normal by multiple people.

4. A world common to all humans is replaced by the many private worlds of individuals. Instead of a region of interpersonal communication, the sorts of individual convictions, styles, and forms of life are propagated that are proper to people withdrawn into themselves and caught up in themselves. The only purpose of these individuals' actions is to secure and strengthen their autonomy and their self-reliance. They persist in believing that their self-realization can only be enacted by and through themselves. By doing so, however, they flee their own humanity, i.e., that which would bind them all and bring them into accord. As it is, their society is isolation, and their world is chaos. Having removed the limits of human possibilities, they discovered for a moment the power that language grants them: To signify things, to say what these things are, and how they should be named. But at the same time they made this discovery, their game started, that game through which, by distorting language, they also distort things in the fashion demanded by the art of contradiction. But words lost thereby their meaning, and they themselves lost the capacity to say anything about themselves or about reality. In a language of dead words, even the connection to the reality of chaos was broken.

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Chapter 4

The Heritage of the Renaissance: Cosmos and Nature

> The whole spiritual universe is smashed by the hand of atheism and shattered in countless quicksilver dots of selves, flashing, running, straying, converging, and scattering, without unity or consistence. No one is more alone in the universe than an atheist – he mourns with an orphaned heart, which has lost the greatest of fathers, beside Nature's dead body, which no universal spirit moves and contains, and which grows in the grave; and he will continue to mourn until he himself crumbles away from the corpse. The whole world reposes before him like the great stony Egyptian sphinx, half buried in sand; and the All is the cold iron mask of shapeless eternity.
>
> Jean Paul, *Speech of the Dead God from the Universe That There is No God*[1]

The starting point for the present inquiry was the question regarding the origins of modernity. So far two results have been attained. On the one hand, we have described the historic debate through which the consciousness of modernity grew into the characteristic form of an "epoch" in the history of Western civilization. On the other hand, we retraced the methodological revolution which grounds modernity. In the third place we must now proceed to discuss the decisive element in the genesis of modernity: the fundamental change in the attitude of European humanity to its surrounding reality.

The mental revolution leading up to modernity

There is, in my view, no complete and definitive explanation for why the mental revolution leading up to modernity had to take place exactly – with historical necessity, as it were – between the 15th and the 17th centuries, and not earlier. To be sure, things like the weakening of medieval ideas of order, the rise of the nation state, the conflicts arising from the Reformation, and the new enthusiasm for the *studia humanitatis*, would be enough to explain the rise of a fundamentally new understanding of the human and non-human worlds, as well as of human nature and the possibilities of human existence. Still, similar intellectual and social upheavals had often occurred in past history, but no civilization had ever embraced the idea that humankind's vocation is to transform nature and to create, as if endowed with godlike power, a world responding only to

1 Translation from: *Jean-Paul: A Reader*, ed. by Timothy Casey. Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press p. 180.

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its whims. Modern humanity likes to point out that it has finally at its disposal the set of instruments necessary to make use of nature for whatever goals it sets to itself. The development of these instruments, however, – the natural sciences, in other words – is merely a symptom, though certainly the most visible one, of the rise and expansion of the modern worldview. Such a development does not explain why precisely this and not a different worldview became dominant in Europe starting with the Renaissance. The worldview of modernity cannot be explained through the natural sciences; it is rather the natural sciences that demand to be explained by the worldview of modernity.

After all, the "scientific" way of thinking was thoroughly familiar to the Greeks of antiquity, and the quality of their insights is not least demonstrated by the fact that modern representatives of natural philosophy, such as Werner Heisenberg and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, go back to questions posed by Democritus, Heraclitus, Parmenides, or Plato when explaining quantum theory.[2] When the so-called "School of Padua" developed the "new method" of the *scientia de natura*, which is the method that would in time be applied by Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, Robert Boyle, and Isaac Newton, it was aiming at the same connection between mathematical-hypothetical and demonstrative-experimental methods that had already been commended by Euclid and Archimedes.[3]

Thus, the question is this: Why did it not occur to the Greek, Roman, or medieval mind to design the experiments or to make the calculations on the basis of which Galileo would formulate the law of the pendulum and Newton the law of gravity? The American philosopher, Susanne K. Langer, has written in this connection:

> Religion, superstition, fantastic Biblical world-history, were not demolished by "discoveries"; they were *outgrown* by the European mind. Again the individual life shows in microcosm the pattern of human evolution: the tendency to intellectual growth, in persons as in races, from dreamlike fantasy to realistic thinking. Many of the facts that contradicted the-

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2 Werner Heisenberg, *Physik und Philosophie*, Frankfurt a. M.: Ullstein, 1965; and *Der Teil und das Ganze. Gespräche im Umkreis der Atomphysik*, Munich: Piper, 1971; Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *Die Einheit der Natur*, Munich: Hanser, 1971; Léon Robin, *La pensée grecque et les origines de l'esprit scientifique*, Paris: Albin Michel, 1963.

3 Cf. John Herman Randall Jr., *The School of Padua and the Emergence of Modern Science*, Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1961, Chapter 1: "The Development of Scientific Method in the School of Padua" (pp. 13–68); William A. Wallace, *Causality and Scientific Explanation*, vol. 1: *Medieval and Early Classical Science*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974. More recent methodological reflection within the natural sciences revolve around this combination of hypothesis (intuition), deduction, and experiment. Cf. Gerald Holton, *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973.

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> ology had been known for ages, for many discoveries required no telescope, no test-tube, no expedition round the world, and would have been just as possible physically hundreds of years before. But so long as the great Christian vision filled men's eyes, and systems of ethical symbols or great artistic ventures absorbed their minds, such facts as that wood floats on water and stones sink, living bodies have a uniform temperature and others vary with the weather, were just meaningless. Surely sailors had always known that ships showed their topsails over the horizon before they move into full view. Surely the number of known animal species, had any hunter or farmer bothered to count them up, would always have made it obvious that the measurements of the ark could not have accommodated them by two and two, with food-supplies for eight or nine months. But nobody had chosen to take stock of these numbers while reading the measurements. For mythological purposes, the ark was "very big," the animals "very many," and their *Lebensraum* was God's problem.[4]

The French historian of science, Robert Lenoble, has the following to remark on this point:

> *For the founders of modern thought, the mathematical representation of nature was not the result of an induction in the so-called Baconian sense of the word, but a new view of things that was itself dependent on a new standpoint*. If we compare dates, we realize that facts begin to appear as mathematical facts from the day that, instead of contemplating them as comforting productions of a motherly nature, they were approached with the attitude of an engineer. To be sure, these facts came into play, because, without their affirmative answer, the mechanistic idea would have died just like so many others. But in history we find also a good number of facts that either die, pass unnoticed, or do not mean anything, because the minds were not ready for them. After all, mechanistic *observation* could have been born of the principles of Greek atomism! Why the long delay? It's because people were afraid, as Lucretius had already said. However, in 1620, the sunspots and the satellites of Jupiter imparted their lesson. The sky could crumble. Man, once again, felt disposed to rebuild his abode.[5]

And the historian of literature, Leo Spitzer, states:

> The history of the disappearance of the one field [the semantic field for "world harmony" and "balance"] is simply the history of modern civilization, of the Weberian "Entzauberung

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4 Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key. A Study in the Symbolism of Science, Rite, and Art,* New York: New American Library, 1954, pp. 219 – 220.

5 Robert Lenoble, "L'évolution de l'idée de NATURE du 16e au 18e siècle," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, vol. 58, No. 1 – 2, Jan.-June 1953, pp. 121 f. – Analogous arguments are offered by Max Bense, "Über die spirituelle Reinheit der Technik," in *Plakatwelt. Vier Essays*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 1952, p. 64; Alexandre Koyré, *Newtonian Studies*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968, pp. 5 – 6.; Frances A. Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, New York: Vintage Books, 1969, pp. 155 – 156; and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, *Die Einheit der Natur*, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

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> der Welt" or dechristianization, and we see, by our study, the necessity of a new periodization of Occidental history. I shall point out elsewhere how the destruction of the homogeneous "field" began in the seventeenth century and was completed in the eighteenth : the great caesura in Occidental history is precisely this period, not the Renaissance: in fact, to the two periods, pagan Antiquity and Christianity (the latter goes from the first century to the seventeenth, with the subdivisions: Middle Ages, Renaissance, Baroque), we should oppose the epoch of dechristianization (from the seventeenth century on), in which our field is radically destroyed. At the end of the eighteenth century *Stimmung* was crystallized, that is, it was robbed of its blossoming life. We cannot go wrong in ascribing this to the spirit of enlightenment whose deadening effect has been so masterfully described by Novalis in his treatise *Die Christenheit oder Europa* (1798).[6]

Only a relative explanation is possible for the changes that took place in European humanity's understanding of reality and of itself between the 15th and the 17th centuries. It would indeed be arbitrary to suppose that these changes were caused by external circumstances – e. g., geographical discoveries, technical inventions, political events – such that the moment that these appeared would also be the exact point in time at which, with necessity as it were, the European modern age began. We should inquire, rather, what mental transformation brought about European humanity's changed attitude to the surrounding world to the point that it no longer regarded the things in the world with the serene gaze of inwards-looking, god-seeking, pilgrims but set out instead to scout its surroundings with the eyes of a power-hungry pantocrator.[7]

In an investigation of the genesis of modernity, the time factor – its beginning in historical time – is, therefore, of secondary importance. In addition, if one wanted to explain modernity primarily through the historiography of its rise, it would be necessary to proceed on the hypothesis that there is an absolute structure to historical developments. It seems more promising, instead, to investigate the genesis of modernity in the context of the interactions between humankind and reality. In other words, the attempt could be made to provide a relative explanation of the mental revolution leading up to modernity. This revolution could then be interpreted as a special type of change in the general research field of interactions between humankind and reality.

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6 Leo Spitzer, *Classical and Christian Ideas of World Harmony. Prolegomena to an Interpretation of the Word "Stimmung,"* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1963, pp. 75 – 76.

7 On this point and on what follows, cf. Stéphane Toussaint, "La destruction du cosmos: Esquisse d'une analyse," in Tilo Schabert, Matthias Riedl, (eds.), *Die Menschen im Krieg, im Frieden mit der Natur – Humans at War, at Peace with Nature*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2006, pp. 25 – 48.

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The Greeks interpreted these interactions from the standpoint of the Harmonic, the Well-Ordered, and the Good: In the "cosmos" – this is their assumption – there should be a balance between humankind and its surrounding world as if between partners. Similar ideas had held sway in other cultures, such as the Chinese, the Indian, and the Egyptian cultures. The possessive highhandedness of modern humanity vis-à-vis "nature," thus reveals itself, not as a self-explaining curtailment of a balance up to that point respected, but rather as a completely new understanding of the human position in the world. A discussion of the mental revolution leading up to modernity, therefore, must attend both to the change in the inner-cosmic conditions in favor of humanity and to the related transformation of the interactions between humankind and reality. I would like to begin with the latter point.

The Transformation in the Experience of the World: Francis of Assisi and Pascal

In his *Canticle of the Sun* (1224), Saint Francis of Assisi addressed the things of the world as if they were his siblings. He called the sun a beautiful "sister" who shines her light upon us, fire was a powerful and strong "brother," and earth the "mother" who conserves us, provides for us, and brings forth all sorts of fruits and colorful flowers and weeds.[8] When Pascal, on the other hand, jotted down his *Pensées* (published posthumously in 1670) some four hundred years later, he no longer experienced the world with Francis' familiarity; indeed, his encounter with the world was marked by anxiety. When considering the small space which he himself filled and beheld, and which fades away in the immesurable infinity of spaces – spaces he knew nothing about and which knew nothing of him – he felt frightened, and he was astonished to find himself here instead of there. For there is no reason why he should be here instead of there, or why now and not, say, earlier. Whereas Francis of Assisi had found in the world a sister sun and a mother earth, to whom he could speak, Pascal now regards himself as alone in a dumb, dead world: "The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me."[9]

They lived in one and the same world, Francis of Assisi and Pascal, and nonetheless they perceived in their respective experiences two fundamentally

8 San Francesco d'Assisi, *Il Cantico delle Creature*, in: *I Fioretti di S. Francesco*, Turin: Enaudi, 1964, pp. 328–329.
9 Pascal, *Pensées* (fragments 205 and 206), ed. Brunschvicq, Paris: Garnier Frères, 1960, p. 131.

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different "worlds": Francis a divinely animated cosmos, Pascal a mechanically built nature. What had happened in the time between the *Canticle of the Sun* and the *Pensées* that might explain why, while Francis' world had been a community of living beings, Pascal's consisted of geometrical spaces? What ideas had pre-modern humanity associated with the symbol "cosmos," for which modern humanity would substitute the symbol "nature"?

What does "cosmos" mean?

The word "cosmos" is of Greek origin and means in general "order," in the sense of well-orderedness, i.e., in the sense of a meaningful and good order.[10] As is clear from passages in Homer, Hesiod, and Thales, the word was initially applied mainly to the community of human beings. The polis represented a cosmos, in the sense that the right order for the coexistence of human beings was enacted in it. A household and an army were a cosmos too, because the family members, in one case, and the soldiers, in the other, came together to form a functional group. This idea of order had also an association to the notions of beauty and purposeful articulation, i.e., to something that is good and keeps due measure. Thus, the word "cosmos" could also refer to a woman's finery, a poet's epos, or the human soul by reason of the well-formed shapeliness of these things.

The symbol "cosmos" retained its conceptual elasticity in referring to the multifariousness of human experience until the classical age of the Greeks. Its most significant semantic expansion occurred when the symbol was applied to the description of the order-structures of reality in general. The word "cosmos" occurs for the first time in the sense of "world" in Anaximander's and Anaximenes' fragments (6th century B.C.). Subsequently, increasingly nuanced statements on the cosmos, i.e., on the orderly articulation of the world, are to be found in pre-Socratic philosophy, especially in the Pythagorean tradition as well as in Heraclitus, Parmenides, Empedocles, and Democritus. But here too, in the medium of the interpretation of reality, "cosmos" is not merely a name for the world. The world is a cosmos because the world is the well-orderedness of all things. The order *(taxis),* in which all the things in the universe find themselves, circumscribes for each thing and every being its proper place, by virtue of which they all relate meaningfully to one another in the total articulation of the

10 For what follows cf. Walther Kranz, *Kosmos*, Bonn: Bouvier, 1955 (*Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, edited by Erich Rothacker, vol. 2, Part 1); and Pierre Duhem, *Le Système du Monde. Histoire des doctrines cosmologiques de Platon à Copernic*, 10 volumes, Paris: Hermann, 1914–1954.

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universe. That is why the order of the universe can also be rightfully called a good order *(eutaxia)*. This order has a "cosmic" quality, insofar as it configures the relations of all things into a world that is well-balanced in its proportions, i.e., into a cosmos whose beauty arouses wonder and admiration in humans.

Such wonder at the cosmos, at the well-orderedness of the world, had two consequences for understanding the world as both unchanging and as preserved in its unity. On the one hand, the notion of an ontological connectedness of all things persisted in the consciousness of the Greeks. To the extent that all living beings and all things have constancy only within the cosmos – i.e., within the thorough articulation *(diskosmesis)* of Being into "things" and "living beings" – this cosmos was common to all: gods and mortals, stars and earth, animals and plants. According to Heraclitus, the cosmos preceded all beings as their primordial form: "This ordered world (*kosmos*), which is the same for all, was not created by any one of the gods or of humans, but it was ever, and is, and shall be ever-living Fire, kindled in measure *(metra)* and quenched in measure."[11]

On the other hand, the intelligible structure of this world-order became transparent in the experience of the world as a cosmos. That is to say, as an order that articulates Being, the cosmos could be intellectually apprehended in human consciousness. To the extent that the world disclosed itself to human beings as a cosmos, i.e., as a well-orderedness of all things, the intelligible apprehension of the cosmos of the world corresponded to the actuality of this cosmos. This discovery of a congruence between human knowledge and cosmic world-structure was expressed most pithily by Parmenides: "For it is the same thing to think and to be."[12] But humankind understood this statement correctly only so long as it understood it from the perspective of the other essential aspect of Greek cosmology, namely through the intuition that the cosmos, the order of all things, is prior to these things. The congruence of knowledge and Being related only to the primordial world, the inner structure of which humans can indeed cognize, but which is also a pregiven condition for their cognizing. It did not entail that whatever human beings believe to know by and from themselves is *ipso facto* real. Such a view could only become prevalent when modern human beings no longer grasped the cosmos, that primary order of the world against which they could measure the reality-content of their thought.

It is not necessary to elucidate here in detail the cosmology of the Greeks, their conception of the origin, inner articulation, and hierarchical organization

11 Heraclitus, Fragment B 30. Kathleen Freeman, *Ancilla to the Pre-Socratic Philosophers. A complete Translation of the Fragments in Diels, Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1948, p. 26. (Translation modified).

12 Parmenides, Fragment B 3, *Ibid.*, p. 45.

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of the cosmos of the world. With regard to the concept of "nature," however, which had an essentially lesser significance in the worldview of the Greeks than it would later acquire in that of modernity, the most important elements of Greek cosmology must be briefly elucidated.

According to Heraclitus, "all human laws are nourished by one [Law], which is divine. For it governs as far as it will, and is sufficient in the totality, and prevails."[13] The experience that all things are ordered with reference to a cosmos was the ground for the realization that a "divine law" *(nomos tou theiou)* is active in this well-orderedness of things. From this law proceeded the regularity, purposeful articulation, and inner balance which human beings could observe in the world they inhabited. Hence, human laws could be nourished by the law of the Divine; these laws imitated a "justice" *(dike)* existing among all things from the beginning and through which things had a reciprocally coordinated existence. Besides *Nomos* and *Dike*, the Greeks emphasized in the cosmos of the world also its intelligibility. The well-orderedness of the world, which human beings can apprehend in their thought, testified to a divine *Nous* present throughout the totality of Being. By participating in this Nous, humans are able to become aware of the *Logos*, i.e., of the meaning-structure immanent in the world. Furthermore, the meaningful order of all things within the cosmos of the world revealed a providence *(pronoia)* which takes in its care the existence of every thing and every living being. The logos of the world, on the other hand, understood as the always already pre-given primary order of the world, could be interpreted under the aspect of necessity *(Ananke),* which expressed the unavoidability proper of the laws to which the world is subject. The concept of "nature" *(physis)* made its appearance in Greek cosmology only towards the end of this hierarchy of *nous* and *logos, nomos* and *dike*, *pronoia* and *Ananke*. The concept of nature was meant to designate the animating power, the "force" that inheres in all things and conserves them in existence. "Nature," therefore, could in no way be equated with Being in general, as it would eventually happen in modernity. *Physis*, in the specific sense of the natural animating force of things, had a significantly narrower meaning than the modern concept of "nature," which encompasses such different concepts as "world machine" and "world harmony," "world of nature" and "matter," "nature of things" and "system of natural laws." To the Greek mind, while the symbol "cosmos" embraced all aspects of the experience of reality, the concept of *physis* captured only one of these aspects.

13 Heraclitus, Fragment B 44, *ibid*., p. 36. (Translation modified).

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In the development of Greek cosmology, from its beginnings in Thales to the systematic elaboration that it received in Plato's hands, the human wonder at the beauty and excellence of the cosmos was constantly present. The well-orderedness of the world was supposed to be a divine work. A dictum of Thales' has come down to us according to which "everything is full of gods."[14] Plato, for his part, called the cosmos a "visible" or "perceptible" god (*theos aisthetos).*[15]

The Christian De-Deification of the Cosmos

The idea of a cosmos that is divine, and hence worthy of human veneration, remained prevalent in the ancient Greek and Roman world up to the rise of Christianity, which introduced into Western culture ideas about the essence of the world and of human existence that were completely different. Jesus, in the course of the interrogation that preceded his crucifixion, was asked by Pilate what he had done to incite his own people to hand him over. Jesus replied: "My kingdom is not of this world *(kosmou)*. If my kingdom were of this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But, as it is, my kingdom is not from here." (John, 18, 35–36). Here, Jesus distances himself from "this" world; he comes from the Father into the cosmos only to reveal God's name to human beings (John 18; 17, 6). Before being seized at the Mount of Olives, he pleads with his Father, not on his own behalf but on behalf of those whom his Father had entrusted to him. For they have nothing in common with the world; indeed, they are hated by the world, because "they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world." (John 17, 9–14). Now, when he is about to leave the cosmos, and indeed is already no longer in it, he asks the Father to protect in His Name those He had given to him and who are still in the world (John 16, 11). To his disciples Jesus promises that they will have peace in him. In the world, however, they will face tribulation. But they should take courage; for he, Jesus, has conquered the world (John 16, 33). Jesus' teaching implies that the cosmos can no longer be called a perceptible god. Here the cosmos is not a world of the Good and the Measured, but rather a world of hatred, menace, and evil. Human beings are unhappy and troubled in the world; a savior is needed who conquers the world for them and saves them from it. Those who follow Jesus, on the other hand, know that they have been freed from the bonds of this world.

14 Quoted by Aristotle in *De Anima,* 411 a7–8.
15 *Timaeus,* 92c.

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In the same vein, Paul warns his fellow believers in Rome to not be conformed to this world (Romans, 12,2). As he declares in his first letter to the Corinthians (7,31), the present form of this world is passing away. In his letter to the Ephesians, he explains that the struggle *(pale)* of Christians is not primarily against enemies of blood and flesh, but rather against the rulers, the authorities, and the cosmic powers *(kosmokratoras)* of the present darkness, as well as against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places *(epouraniois)* (6,12). Paul negates thus all that had characterized the cosmos of the world in Greek eyes: its supratemporal duration and the purposely articulated beauty of its figure, as expressed in the perfectly circular motion of the heavenly bodies; and he also negates the presence of gods acting in the cosmos of the world. He instead urges Christians to turn away from the cosmos, i.e., from this work of transitoriness. He regards this cosmos, not as a well-orderedness of things, but as the rule of evil. And to strengthen the resistance of his fellow believers to the power of the world, he urges them to abandon the idea of a cosmos full of gods and turn instead solely to the one god:

> Indeed, even though there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as in fact there are many gods and many lords[6] – yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Corinthians 8, 5–6).

The purposely articulated cosmos of the Greeks, which was "full of gods," has given way, in Christian consciousness, to a godless world. Christians recognized the Divine only in the one transcendent God who is beyond all worldly things. The opposites divine-earthly and immortal-mortal recede here into the opposition between the absolute transcendence of a God beyond this world and the contingent immanence of a nondivine, earthly, world.

In the subsequent development of Christian doctrine, however, the Church Fathers would incorporate into their teaching some elements of ancient (i.e., pre-Christian) cosmology in reaction to this radical "de-deification" of the cosmos,.[16] They took up in particular the concept of "nature" in the meaning that the Stoics had given the word. It is true that the Romans possessed in the word *mundus* a symbolic concept that corresponded to the exegesis of reality that the Greeks had captured in the symbol *cosmos*. Yet compared to the Greek concept of *physis,* the meaning of the corresponding Roman concept of nature was significantly broader.[17] For the Romans, *natura* represented not only the nat-

16 Cf. Kranz, *Kosmos*, pp. 100 ff.
17 Cf. ibid., pp. 64 ff.

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ural animating force of particular things but also, in general, the life force of the cosmos. Thus, Zeno of Citium, for example, regarded "nature" as "thoroughly an artist" *(natura non artificiosa solum, sed plane artifex)*,[18]and Seneca equated it straightforwardly with Jupiter.[19]

By adopting this Stoic idea of a creative, life-giving, *natura*, the Church Fathers were able to soften somewhat the Pauline condemnation of everything worldly – a Christian, after all, had to live an entire life in the world – without having to incorporate the ancient idea of a cosmos "full of gods" into the Christian doctrine of the essence of the world. Thus, a Christian's understanding of reality was quite able to be interwoven with a belief in the wondrous forces of ghosts and demons active in the world, while still holding the conviction that, without God's life breath, which has maintained it in existence from the moment of its creation, this world would be nothing.

The Development of the Modern Idea of "Nature"

This symbiosis of the Stoic-ancient conception of nature with the Christian doctrine of creation formed the foundation for the development of the modern idea of nature which would take shape in the Renaissance and would determine the human view of the world in the realm of Western culture up to the present day. The earliest preliminary form of this idea of nature was developed during the 12th century in the school of Chartres. We must stress that we are dealing here with a *preliminary* form, which in no way betrays a specifically *modern* thinking in those who put it forth. It would be more appropriate to say that the nature speculation of the Chartres philosophers represented something of an "extravagance" compared to the then accepted medieval cosmology. Hence, when we draw here a line from the philosophers of Chartres to the nature philosophers of the Renaissance, this should not be interpreted as a statement on the general historical development of philosophy from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. This preliminary form of the idea of nature was in fact a deviation from the orthodox medieval world understanding. It was far from being the normal view at the time, and it appears as a prototypical element in the genesis of the modern worldview only in hindsight.

18 Zeno, *Fragment* 172, in: *Stoicorum Veterum Fragmenta*, ed. by Hans von Arnim, vol. I: *Zeno et Zenonis Discipuli*, Stuttgart: Teubner, 1964, p. 44.
19 Seneca, *Naturales Quaestiones* (II, 45, 2), Lat.-Engl., trans. Thomas H. Corcoran, vol. I, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 173.

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As Tullio Gregory has shown in his study, *Platonismo medievale* (1958),[20] Bernard of Chartres, his brother Thierry of Chartres, and especially William of Conches sketched, in works revealing the influence of the scientific conceptions of the Arabs, the idea of an "autonomous, or rather cooperative, nature … itself endowed with a creative power …"[21] When developing this idea, they began by combining the ancient cosmological idea of a "world soul" *(anima mundi)*[22] with the Christian doctrine of the "holy spirit" *(spiritus sanctus)*. This combination they then identified with the Stoic idea of a *naturalis vigor* that produces the world and proceeded to declare, finally, that in this animating force a *natura* expresses itself which embraces and animates all things in the world. A diagram of this derivation of the idea of nature as developed in the School of Chartres would look like this (diagram 1):

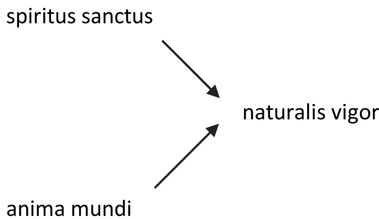

Diagram 1.

The significance of this conception for the genesis of the modern idea of nature, however, does not rest merely on the novel notion of an autonomous nature, which assists, continues, and completes God's work of creation; this significance is connected also, and especially, with the thought dynamic that expresses itself in the development of such a notion. As is visible in the diagram above, a considerable change in the understanding of the process of world creation and world conservation expresses itself in the conceptual derivation of this concep-

20 Tullio Gregory, *Platonismo medievale. Studi e ricerche*, Rome: Istituto Storico Italiano Per Il Medio Evo, 1958, pp. 22 ff.

21 Ibid. p. 54. In a different passage, Gregory explains this nature as "intermediaria tra Nous e il mondo sensibile … che garantisce l'intima coerenza e continuità del cosmo" ("intermediary between the Nous and the sensible world, that guarantees the inner coherence and continuity of the cosmos"), p. 137.

22 The idea that the world, too, has a "soul" goes back to Plato's *Timaeus* (30 b-c). It remained an essential component of philosophical cosmologies until the 17th century. From then on it fell increasingly in oblivion (Schelling is the exception).

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tion. At the beginning are introduced, in a sort of cosmic duplication, *anima mundi* and *spiritus sanctus*, the ancient and the Christian symbols respectively for the creative force that produces the world. In the end, a new, more secular, doctrine of creation announces itself in place of the older (ancient and Christian) doctrines of creation: the idea of a "nature" which now itself creates and conserves all things in the world.

This novel, early modern, understanding of the process of world creation is more clearly discernable when we compare the idea of nature in the School of Chartres with the cosmological doctrines universally accepted at the time. Take, for instance, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), who incorporated allegorical representations of her cosmological ideas into her *Liber Divinorum Operum Simplicis Hominis* (ca. 1200).[23] These allegories still depict a circular, closed, cosmos, hierarchically ordered towards the center. The single members of the cosmic order are grouped in such a way that they form a static hierarchy. Nothing here points to that dynamic of nature that draws everything towards itself, which is characteristic for the cosmology of the philosophers of Chartres. In Hildegard of Bingen's cosmology, all creation exists under God, from whom the spirit (the N*ous)* proceeds, which in turn configures, and rules over, matter, the stuff for all things. The N*ous* or (in relation to matter) nature, is in turn surpassed and encompassed by God. The cosmology represented in Hildegard of Bingen's allegories can be graphically represented as follows (diagram 2):

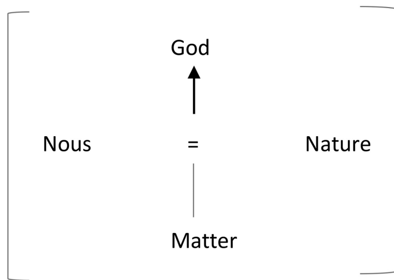

Diagram 2.

23 Hildegard von Bingen, *Wisse die Wege – Scivias*, trans. and ed. by M. Böckeler, Salzburg: Otto Müller, 1963, esp. the figures on pp. 17–85.

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According to this cosmological model, nature is part of a static cosmos presided by God. One does not encounter here that sovereignty and creative power which in the model of the School of Chartres emerges almost as God's competitor. In the course of the 15th century, however, just such a competition begins to make its appearance in the world as understood by European humanity. The intellectual attempt to explain the process of world creation and world conservation grew more and more into the dynamic of an unfettered investigative impulse. This impulse was no longer satisfied with the traditional conception, prefigured in Christian faith, according to which everything in the world is dependent on the efficacy of God's spirit. But given that the specific modality of divine efficacy eluded human knowledge, the hunger for knowledge had to be directed at the visible, perceptible, work of God – in other words, at the world of earthly things. A fundamental change takes place here in the direction of an investigation on the origin, cohesion, and structure of the world. While the activity of God as creator of the world continued for some time to be recognized (though no longer emphasized) in the human understanding of the world, the attention of European humanity is now increasingly focused on the world of nature, whose phenomena, inner processes, and laws can be physically experienced and methodically investigated. This shift of emphasis in the human interest in the world appears quite visibly in the cosmological model of Nicolas of Cues (1401–1464), which can be summed up in this diagram (diagram 3):

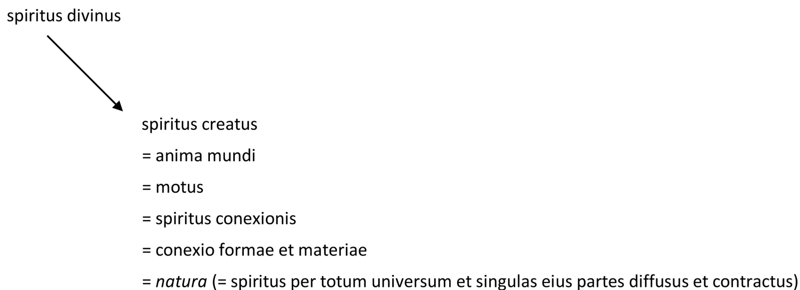

Diagram 3.

Nature, the "created spirit" through which all things of the world exist, is still understood by Nicolas of Cues as an emanation from the "divine spirit." But all events in creation, such as the motion of Becoming, the combination of form and matter, and the enfolding of materiality into the form of individual things, take place, according to him, on the side of nature. The "divine spirit," on

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the other hand, collaborates only at the periphery, and it seems to have been emptied of all creative power, which is now in the hands of a ubiquitously active nature.[24]

The Operative Nature Philosophy of Modernity

The definitive abandonment of the idea of a divine spirit's directly acting on the world's events occurs in the thought of Pietro Pomponazzi (1462–1525)[25] and Bernardino Telesio (1508–1588).[26] These thinkers are the fathers of the modern idea of nature. In their works, they laid the foundations for the operative nature philosophy of modernity. In their investigations and reflections on the essence of this world they assumed from the start the idea of an autonomous nature as the creative origin and the caring protector of all things in the world. In his work, *De immortalitate animae* (1516), Pomponazzi calls this autonomous nature "active nature" *(natura agens)* and does not hesitate to give to it the title of *motor universalis,* which had been previously reserved for God.[27]

Martin L. Pine, in his study, *Pietro Pomponazzi. Radical Philosopher of the Renaissance,* describes the limitation of God's activity, so conceived, as follows:

> So Pompanazzi concludes that we must grant that God is indeed omniscient and omnipotent but that He Himself limits His own powers by refusing to know or act before the appropriate time sequence. This makes his own knowledge or action contingent until the fact or action becomes definite within time. Only at a time that man performs a specific act does God "allow" Himself to know it and to "concur" in its production ... These definite, if limited, incursions on divine power in the name of logic and freedom denied to divinity some of the overwhelming power it had possessed for centuries in Christian thought.[28]

In his work, *De rerum natura* (1586), Telesio, for his part, sets down the methodological principle that nature must be investigated according to its own principles

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24 Nikolaus von Kues, *De docta ignorantia – Die belehrte Unwissenheit* (1440), vol. II, Latin-German edition by Paul Wilpert, Hamburg: Meiner, 1967, pp. 78 ff.

25 On Pomponazzi's life and works see the comprehensive article in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pomponazzi/ (retrieved February 1, 2018).

26 On Telesio's life and works see the comprehensive article in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy:* https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/telesio/ (retrieved February 1, 2018).

27 Pietro Pomponazzi: *De immortalitate animae* (1504), ed. by Giovanni Gentile, Messina-Rome: Giuseppe Principato, 1925, p. 71.

28 Martin L. Pine, *Pietro Pomponazzi. Radical Philosopher of the Renaissance*, Padua: Editrice Antenore, 1986, pp. 367 f.

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(juxta propria principia). He no longer abides by the model of earlier cosmologies, which had always assumed that the phenomena of nature are caused by non-natural efficient forces. For Telesio, nature exists from itself; he derives its activity neither from the influence of the holy spirit nor from the efficiency of a world soul. Nor does he see in nature the beauty of a cosmos arousing pleasure in its beholder through its symmetrical proportions. He also distances himself from the categories of philosophical-logical thought by refusing to describe nature, as Nicolas of Cues had still done, as a composite of "form" and "matter," or as a "potentiality" that has become an "actuality."

Telesio does none of these things. He wants instead to explain nature solely as a dynamic complex of physical laws. He writes, at the beginning of his book, that he intends to investigate the world in itself and each of its individual parts, as well as the essential constitution and activity of the things that form part of it.[29] This "construction of the world" *(mundi constructio)* is to be investigated, not by means of reason, but only through sensory perception.[30] Nature always agrees with itself and is consistently active in the same way. Given this indivisible, persistent, and continuous identity of nature, human reason cannot be the critical or decisive instance in the investigation of nature. Reason must remain subordinate to the senses and exclude from human cognition anything that does not agree with sensory perception.[31]

Telesio's conception of the "principles" of nature conforms to this sensualistic methodology of the investigation of nature. He maintains that the forces that bring about the existence of all things are cold and heat.[32] In a longwinded exposition almost bare of empirical content, he sets about to derive all other laws of nature from the interaction between these two forces. Still, he does anticipate here, in some passages, the formulations of later interpreters of nature. Just like Newton later on, he restricts, for example, the only valid time experience of human beings to physical time and defines this time through motion *(motu)* and change *(mutatione)*.[33] Yet the bulk of his two-volume work is devoted to the justification of the one thesis that stands at the beginning of the modern

29 Bernardini Telesii, *De Rerum Natura*, Ed. by Vincenzo Spampanato, 2 vols., Modena: A. F. Formiggini, 1910, vol. 1, p. 6.
30 *De Rerum Natura*, p. 5.
31 Ibid., p. 6.
32 Ibid., p. 16.
33 Ibid., p. 102.

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idea of nature: that this one nature is all there is, that it constitutes all that is active, and that it is the only aspect of reality perceptible by the senses.[34]

From Cosmos to "Nature"

In presenting both the ancient understanding of the cosmos of the world and the formation of the modern idea of nature, I have been guided by two motives. On the one hand, I wanted to show what different human attitudes to the surrounding reality are expressed in the symbols "cosmos" and "nature." On the other hand, I have attempted to bring to light the decisive element in the genesis of modernity, namely the reorientation of the European interpretation of reality, which takes place in the Renaissance, and which entails a transition from "cosmos" to "nature". To illustrate the point I offer here, once again, a diagram (diagram 4):

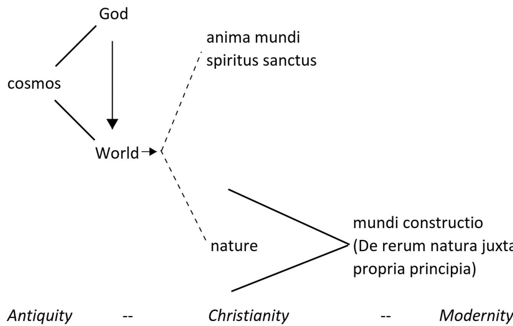

Diagram 4.

I have already elucidated in detail the historical conditions of this reorientation. I summarize them here in outline form:

34 Hence the concise formula: "Una enim quae agit natura, alia entium condicio nulla forte sensu percipitur" (ibid. p. 178). "For one nature it is that acts; no other condition of beings can be perceived by sense."

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(1) The Christian doctrine of the depravity of the world exerted a distinct influence on the "de-deification" of the Greek "cosmos," which was "full of gods."

(2) The readmission of elements of ancient cosmology into Christian theology made possible the postulate of a divine ensoulment of the world *(anima mundi + spiritus sanctus*) without rejecting the idea of a radically transcendent God.

(3) The resulting conception of a creative-autonomous nature, while relinking the Divine with the Earthly, split the direction of the human interest regarding the world. On the one hand, God's one-time creation of the world was a matter of passive faith; the immanence of the world, its internal processes, structures, and laws, on the other hand, became a subject of active research.

(4) The unleashing of the thirst for the knowledge of nature, regarded absolutely for itself, brought about a changed attitude of human beings regarding their surrounding reality. Humankind was seized by ambition for unraveling the creative work of nature and harnessing it into the service of his own power.

What was the precise nature of this change in the human attitude regarding its surrounding reality? To what extent did such a change affect human self-understanding? How did it influence human action in the world? What did it mean to live as a human being, no longer in a cosmos of the world, but in the world of nature? And what exactly could prompt humanity to switch worlds in this manner?

The World of "Nature"

Timaeus asks at the beginning of Plato's eponymous dialogue for the reason for the creation of the cosmos, the well-orderedness of the world. And he answers his own question by saying that the founder of Becoming and this universe was good and had wanted that "everything" became "similar to himself" *(panta paraplesia eauto)*, i.e., good. However, the god had found all visible things, not at rest *(esychia),* but in a condition of aimless and disorderly movement *(kinoumenon)*. He had thus brought these things out of disorder *(ataxias)* into order *(taxin)*, deeming the latter as in all regards better than the former.[35]

In a later passage, Timaeus explains the meaning of sight, this particular gift of God to humans. According to him, we draw great advantages from it. None of the treatises that have been composed about the universe would have ever been written, he says, had human beings not seen the sun, the stars, of the sky. As it

35 Plato, *Timaeus*, 29e-30a.

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is, the sight of day and night, as well as of the months and the years, led to the invention of numbers and gave us both the concept of time and ideas as to how to investigate the nature of the universe. From this we gained philosophy, a good greater than which the gods have never, nor will they ever, grant to mortals. God gave us the gift of sight that we may contemplate the orbits of Reason in the heavens and adjust the circuits of our own thinking in conformity to them. The latter are akin to the former, in other words, the restless is akin to the restful. Thus, by learning to participate in the order of calculations that are correct by nature, and by imitating the always unchangeable paths of the god, we can direct our own wanderings onto ordered paths.[36]

These meaningful relations in the cosmos of the world were lost in the world of nature. In the nature philosophy of the moderns, experiences of the world were simplified down to mere perceptions of physical facts. With regard to the *mundi constructio* there were data, but there was no meaning. In his cosmology, Plato could speak about each thing in a double, or more precisely, in a hermeneutic respect: about the *nature* of each thing, on the one hand, and about its *signification*, on the other.[37] Put differently, his understanding of the power of sight was not restricted to its physical function alone, i. e., to the visual perception of colors, contours, bodies, and their motions. He conceived of it also as a "gift of God to humans," which makes it possible for them to rise from the immediate visual experience of the cosmos to the noetic insight into its structure. Someone like Telesio, on the other hand, was not only uninterested in such questions regarding the signification of things, but he went so far as to carefully insulate his concept of experience against such questions. Experiences that cannot be described as physical events or phenomena, i. e., as measurable motion, bodily resistance, quantitative divisibility, or rising or falling temperature, should be left out of the investigation of this world.

Those who succumbed to this concept of experience became blind for the cosmos of the world, i. e., for the well-articulated meaning-structure of all things. What they perceived instead was the world of nature, that is to say, an endless space with individual bodies scattered in it. If they inquired about the essence of these bodies, they were informed that bodies were impenetrable and offered resistance to every other body that might come into contact with them. If they asked about the reason for this world, or to what this or that phenomenon pointed, what this or that thing meant, or finally who was at work here, it was ex-

36 *Timaeus*, 47a-c.

37 On Plato's hermeneutics, cf. my text, "Things Turned into Sounds: The Eranosean Hermeneutics," in Tilo Schabert (ed.), *The Eranos Movement. A Story of Hermeneutics*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2016, pp. 12–19.

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plained to them that the *mundi constructio* gave very doubtful, if any, answers to such questions. Or more precisely: it gave no answers at all. The new world of nature had laid waste to the old meaningful arrangement of the cosmos of the world. John Donne is, from among the witnesses of this event, the one who has depicted in the most eloquent way what this momentous break in the European experience of the world meant for the European consciousness. Hence, it has become a time-honored practice to quote the relevant lines from his poem, *An Anatomy of the World* (1611):

> And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
> The Element of fire is quite put out;
> The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no mans wit
> Can well direct him where to looke for it.
> And freely men confesse that this world's spent,
> When in the Planets, and the Firmament
> They seeke so many new; they see that this
> Is crumbled out againe to his Atomies.
> 'Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone;
> All just supply, and all Relation:
> Prince, Subject, Father, Sonne, are things forgot,
> For every man alone thinkes he hath got
> To be a Phoenix, and that then can bee
> None of that kinde, of which he is, but hee.
> This is the worlds condition now, …[38]

Donne's plaintive words, "Tis all in peeces, all cohaerence gone," point to a fundamental paradox in the new world conception of the moderns. On the one hand, the new philosophers of nature, Telesio, Galileo, Bacon, Newton, Mersenne, and Descartes, among others, claimed that, unlike earlier interpreters of the world, they had surveyed the entire system of this world and had been able to explain its actual, i.e., its physical, make-up, with indubitable, mathematical, precision. But, on the other hand, this *système du monde* seemed in many respects more mysterious and thus more frightening for humans than, for instance, the Greek cosmos.

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38 John Donne, *An Anatomie of the World. The first Anniversary*, in: *The Poems of John Donne*, Herbert Grierson (ed.), London: Oxford University Press, 1933, (reprint 1964), pp. 213 f. – "Donne was one of the first to understand that the world would never be the same again" – thus David Wootton writes in his book, *The Invention of Science. A New History of the Scientific* Revolution, London: Allen Lane, 2015, p. 10. He buttresses this thesis with a series of suggestive pieces of evidence (pp. 8 – 10), such as the possibility of an acquaintance of John Donne with Galileo.

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The Paradox of modern world experience: real but also unreal

Plato's Timaeus saw in the cosmos an image of God, of the creator of Becoming and the universe. Hence, he did not expect that an understanding of reality could be gained solely from an investigation of the material actuality of this world. He assumed, on the contrary, that the intelligible, purposeful, articulation of the cosmos of the world, as reflected in the consciousness of the human being who apprehends it in thought, becomes transparent for the logos of divine reason that underlies this articulation. To the extent that the cosmos resembled an image of God, two dimensions of order were involved in it, namely a worldly-cosmic one and a divine-noetic one. Thus, the human search for knowledge of reality could also move in this bidimensionality of the cosmos. If, when focusing on the material actuality of this world, a particular experience of reality within this physical dimension remained unintelligible, the search was never useless. For this actuality of the world was at the same time the great symbol for the actuality of God. The symbolic dimension of reality, namely the transparence of the worldly-cosmic order for the godly-noetic order, opened the possibility of bringing human inquiry close to the divine origin of all that was encompassed by this inquiry.

In the modern conception of the world, on the other hand, the bidimensionality of the cosmos was levelled down to the one-dimensionality of nature. Here it was assumed that the *natura agens* embraces and effects all things, and that the standard for the human knowledge of the world must be found in principles immanent in the *natura agens*. The validity of the human experience of the world was thus restricted to the physical dimension of reality, and its symbolic dimension was no longer taken into account, in fact it could no longer be even understood. How indeed could modern humanity still think that there is a Reason "in heaven," the always identical "orbits" of which are supposed to be the paradigm for the logic of human thought? In the context of the modern interpretation, in which the world had been leveled down to the one-dimensionality of nature, such an expectation had to strike humankind as irrational. A telescope could make out no "reason" in the sky; with it one could only observe the moon revolving around the earth and the planets, including the earth, revolving around the sun. Not only could the geometrical paths followed by the moon, the earth, and other planets be described, but human observers could also discover the physical laws which all bodies in the universe obey. Was not the world thus satisfactorily explained?

It was – but only so long as human interest remained fixated on the physical make-up of the world. But the world became mysterious as soon as the question arose as to why the world of nature is as it is, what is intended with it, and

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whether it was one among many worlds or the only possible world. Modern humans, who grasped the world only in the physical dimension of reality, had to grant that, for them, the existence of the world was not certain but merely probable. As David Hume showed with exemplary clarity, the confidence that the world of nature will still be in existence tomorrow can be justified only with the probability with which, according to universal human experience up to now, night has always been followed by one more day, and day by one more night.[39]

In this way, modern humanity could not escape a fundamental paradox in the interpretation of its world experience: the world of nature could be explained, and nonetheless it could not be explained. The world was "real" but also "unreal;" it existed in the mode of necessity but also in the mode of probability. According to Plato's *Timaeus*, the cosmos of the world emerged from the creative activity of God, who harnessed everything irregular and disordered into the one well-orderedness of things, so as to make it "similar to himself." Thus, the cosmos of the world could be regarded as a manifestation of divine reality, as a *theos aisthetos*. And human beings could gain from their world experience a familiarity with this cosmos, which was not just any world but the one and only representation of the reality of all the Real, that is, of God.[40] It was meaningful to study the cosmos of the world. Such a study revealed not only a world of nature, which could be so or otherwise, but led also to a knowledge of that which *Is* in general. Human beings who experienced the cosmos of the world did not need, like modern humanity, to set out beyond their experience of the world to search for reality in general. The One reality, which neither comes into being nor goes out of being, but is unchanging, was always already present in the cosmos, in the visible manifestation of the invisible God, in the visible order of things according to the invisible divine measure. As the image of God, the world was already "explained": humans could trust their world experience. They were not restricted to a rootless inquiry which made them doubt *if* what they experienced as the world was also reality. Rather, they could ask, still unknowing and nonetheless already knowing, *what* this one reality is that is given prior to their own existence and which they unreflectingly experience every day in the cosmos of things.

But modern humanity could no longer muster such an intimate familiarity with the cosmos. Deprived of an understanding for the symbolic dimension of

39 Cf. e. g., David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), V, 1, and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker: *Die Einheit der Natur*, pp. 120 ff.
40 On cosmology under the aspect of partnership, see Plato, *Gorgias* 508a.

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reality, the phenomena of the world had lost for it any meaning that might directly point to a cosmic structure of meaning beyond immediately perceptible effects. A gap had opened in its understanding of reality between the world of its everyday experience and the world of its mathematical conceptualizing.[41] On the one hand was the experience of time according to the cosmic rhythm of days, months, and years; on the other hand was the experience of time as measured according to the mathematical number of equal distances on an infinite line of homogeneous motion. But in this physical dimension of reality, to which the modern understanding of the world had shrunk, the time experience according to cosmic rhythms was meaningless. Within the world of nature, modern humanity no longer understood itself as a partner in the cosmic association of all things, in which the *one* well-orderedness of the world manifests itself in *different* ways. Having reduced all modes of perception possible to humans to the one "scientific" mode, the turn from the cosmos of the world to the world of nature had already taken place in its understanding of the world.

Galileo, for example, could rightly point to the fact that the "natural sciences" *(scienze naturali)* had the advantage over all other forms of human knowledge that their conclusions possessed binding force and were correct beyond doubt.[42] This undeniable superiority of the natural sciences with respect to the determination of the physical make-up of this world did not mean, however, as Galileo was inclined to assume, that the dynamics of nature should provide the model for all forms of human knowledge.[43] Such a methodological fallacy was likely the result of the fascination which Galileo shared with many of his contemporaries concerning the possibilities that the natural sciences seem to create with regard to both an absolute certainty of human knowledge and a control of the world by humankind. This fascination led modern humans to forget that their scientifically certain knowledge of the world of nature could not make up for the loss of their sensitivity for, and their knowledge of, the cosmos of the world. They could, indeed, mathematically calculate the physical forces through which the space of the universe is harnessed. And yet they could say nothing about this space except that it is a great emptiness in which the quantum of matter condensed into bodies vanishes as if it were almost nothing. The cosmos of the world was destroyed in the consciousness of the moderns due to their unfettered desire to know the world of nature above all other things. The

41 Cf. Alexandre Koyré, *The Significance of the Newtonian Synthesis*, in: Alexandre Koyré, *Newtonian Studies*, pp. 3 – 24.
42 Galileo Galilei, *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* (1632), in *Opere*, Pietro Paganini (ed.), vol. II, Florence: Salani, 1964, p. 161.
43 Ibid. p. 481.

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symbolic transparence of the cosmos, including the divine Logos of reality, was now replaced by the mysteries of nature, which humans can indeed calculate but are no longer able to understand.

Newton's Perplexity

In his *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica* (1687), Isaac Newton had set forth a mechanical model for the explanation of the world of nature which he himself called *systema mundi*[44] or *machina corporum*.[45] According to him, the order and motion of all bodies in space, including the celestial bodies in the planetary system, were determined by a universally active force of attraction through which each body persists in its state of rest or of uniformly linear motion, as long as it is not forced, by the attraction of another body acting upon it, to change its state. By mathematically demonstrating the universal validity of gravity and of the resulting laws of motion, Newton was able to formulate a mechanistic physics that explained the natural-objective make-up of this world to a certain degree sufficiently, i.e., in an experimentally verifiable manner.[46]

But Newton's mechanistic model of explanation failed in one decisive point of the human inquiry into the world of nature. In his *Scholium Generale*, which was added to the second edition of the *Principia*, Newton asserts that there must be final causes *(causae finales)* in the philosophy of nature *(philosophia naturalis)*, and that it is legitimate to inquire about the end for which the world was established.[47] But Newton himself admitted that, concerning the gravitational force, he could explain nothing beyond the phenomena produced by it, neither its origin nor its mode of action. When asked about this point by the Cambridge classicist, Richard Bentley, he rejected, in one of his four letters of reply, both the idea that gravity inheres in matter and the other possible explanation, namely that gravity could exercise its action through the vacuum of space:

44 Isaac Newton, *Philosophiae naturalis principia mathematica*, Editio tertia aucta et emendata, London 1726, p. 286; Reprinted With Variant Readings, in Alexandre Koyré (ed.) *Opere*, Isaac Bernard Cohen (ed.), vol. II, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972, p. 549.

45 *Unpublished Scientific Papers of Isaac Newton*, A. Rupert Hall, Marie Boas Hall (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, *Scholium Generale*, MS C, p. 358.

46 Concerning the need for a correction of the Newtonian worldview as a consequence of the development of modern quantum physics, cf. the works by Werner Heisenberg and Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker mentioned above.

47 *Unpublished Scientific Papers* ..., *Scholium Generale*, MS C, p. 355.

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> It is inconceivable, that inanimate brute Matter should, without the Mediation of something else, which is not material, operate upon, and affect other Matter without mutual Contact, as it must be, if Gravitation in the Sense of *Epicurus*, be essential and inherent in it. And this is one Reason why I desired you would not ascribe innate Gravity to me. That Gravity should be innate, inherent and essential to Matter, so that one Body may act upon another at a Distance thro' a *Vacuum*, without the Mediation of any thing else, by and through which their Action and Force may be conveyed from one to another, is to me so great an Absurdity, that I believe no Man who has in philosophical Matters a competent Faculty of thinking, can ever fall into it.[48]

What were, then, the *causae finales* of this world of nature? To what end was this world established? Newton had no answers to these questions. He himself wondered, in another letter to Bentley, how it came to pass that matter should divide itself into two kinds, and that one part, fit to compose a shining body, should fall down into one mass and make a sun, while the rest, which is fit to compose an opaque body, should coalesce, not into one great body, like the shining matter, but into many little ones. None of this, Newton adds, could be explained by mere natural causes and he was forced to ascribe it to the counsel and contrivance of a voluntary agent.[49]

Newton was hesitatingly moving towards the idea of a non-physical ground for the world, which he had otherwise explained physically. He added, in his response to Bentley, that the motions which the planets now have could not spring from any natural cause alone, but were impressed by an intelligent agent.[50] For this reason, the "harmony" in the system of the world can be regarded as the effect of choice rather than chance.[51] Newton, however, was not prepared to understand this "agent," who produces the world, other than in the categories of his mechanistic physics: "To make this System therefore, with all its Motions, required a Cause which understood, and compared together, the Quantities of Matter in the several Bodies of the Sun and Planets, and the gravitating Powers resulting from thence."[52] In Newton's interpretation, the laws of mechanics are at

48 *Four Letters from Sir Isaac Newton to Doctor Bentley containing Some Arguments in Proof of Deity*, London 1756. Reprinted in *Isaac Newton's Papers and Letters on Natural Philosophy*, Isaac Bernard Cohen, Robert E. Schofield, (eds.) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1958, pp. 302f. (Letter III, of Feb. 25, 1693). On the background history of the Newton–Bentley correspondence, see Perry Miller "Bentley and Newton", ibid. pp. 271–278.
49 Ibid. p. 282 (Letter I, of December 10, 1692).
50 Ibid., p. 284.
51 Ibid. 289.
52 Ibid. 286.

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the basis of everything, even of the "agent" who is supposed to be the "cause" of this world. His understanding of the non-physical ground of this world did not seem to go beyond the level of a verbal reminiscence of the person of a world-transcending God, as the words "voluntary," and "intelligent" suggest. These words actually lend force to the suspicion that Newton introduced them only due to his inability to explain in the language of physics the *causae finales* of the world of nature.

By unwaveringly clinging to a mechanistic model of explanation of the world, Newton was in no position to add to his mathematical conception of gravity any essential knowledge of gravity's origin or mode of action.[53] No answers were to be found in his mechanistic physics to the questions of whence, why, or to what end this world came into being. When he admitted that the planets could have been put in motion by gravity, but that, without a "divine power" gravity could never have given them a circular motion such as they have around the sun,[54] Newton demonstrated his honesty. He would offer no answers when he had none. All the less can his vague, philosophically diffuse, statements concerning an "agent" who produced the world obscure the fact that, after his *Principia*, the world was again a mysterious world. Newton informed his readers of the mathematical principles of the world, but he also communicated to them his own perplexity regarding the first, meaning-giving, ground for these principles: "Gravity must be caused by an Agent acting constantly according to certain Laws; but whether this Agent be material or immaterial, I have left to the Consideration of my Readers."[55]

The One-Sidedness of Experience – Partial Speechlessness

Newton's perplexity throws into sharp relief the qualitative difference that separates the pre-modern understanding of cosmos from the conception of nature of the moderns. The switch from the cosmos of the world to the world of nature did not represent a progress in the European understanding of reality, as the moderns themselves like to think, but rather a step back. Newton wanted to explain the world exclusively in the language of his mechanistic physics. This restriction corresponded to the reductionist modern understanding of the world

53 In the *Scholium Generale* Newton declares tersely: "Moreover I have not yet disclosed the causes of gravity nor have I undertaken to explain it since I could not understand it from the phenomena." (*Unpublished Scientific Papers*, MS A, p. 352).
54 *Four Letters*, p. 298 (Letter II, of January 17, 1693).
55 Ibid. p. 303 (Letter III, of February 25, 1693).

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as a "nature" in which only the physical, hence no longer the symbolic, dimension of reality comes to the fore. In its research of nature, i. e., of the physical make-up of this world, modern humanity developed a "scientific" language that allowed it to adequately elucidate the course and the results of this research. But the region of "nature" did not coincide with the totality of the regions of the reality of human experience. Not all of humankind's experiences of the things of this world refer merely to it physical dimension. And the advancing process of scientific knowledge transformed not least the scientific language itself.[56] Nonetheless, the idea remained dominant in the consciousness of the moderns that all regions and all forms of human experience of reality must be described exclusively in a so-called "scientifically objective" language.[57]

This theoretical postulate has remained hitherto not only unachieved; it has also prevented modern humanity, in the linguistic interpretation of its experiences, from remaining as open to the variety and multiplicity of these experiences as pre-modern humanity had been. Thanks to its sensibility for the symbolic dimension of reality, pre-modern humanity had been able to develop linguistic images or symbols that corresponded to its particular experience of objects or events. It thus interpreted its experience of the *One* cosmos of the world in vastly *different* symbols. *Nomos* and *dike*, *nous* and *logos*, *pronoia* and *ananke* – all of these symbols related in equal degree to the order of the world; but each symbol for itself concerned a different aspect of this world order, namely either that which is right by nature (i. e., the presence of the Divine) or the course of things.[58]

The ability of pre-modern humankind to keep its language and thus its thought open to the multifariousness of its experience was lost to the humankind of modernity. The latter equated the world of its experience with the

56 We could point here, for example, to the development of the concept of physical space (from Newton to Faraday and Einstein) or the reinterpretation of the concept of scientific "objectivity" in quantum theory. Cf. also the chapter, "The Language of Physics," in Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker's study, *Die Einheit der Natur*, pp. 61–83.

57 Cf. e. g., Condorcet, *Esquisse d'un tableau historique du progrès de l'esprit humain*, pp. 80 f.; or Antoine Louis Claude Destutt de Tracy, *Elémens d'idéologie*, Paris: V. Courcier, 1824–26, vol. 2, pp. VIII ff. Tracy, who coined the term "idéologie", called *idéologie* explicitly a *science des idées*, a *méthode des méthodes*, or also a *science des sciences*.

58 Cf. Henri and Henriette Antonia Frankfort, "Myth and Reality", in Henri Frankfort (ed.), *Before Philosophy: an Essay on Speculative Thought in the Ancient Near East*, Chicago: Chicago University Press 1949, pp. 11–36; Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, pp. 142 ff.; Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, vol. 1: *Israel and Revelation*, Collected Works, vol. 14, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2001; vol. 2: *The World of the Polis*, CW, vol. 15, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000; vol. 3: *Plato and Aristotle*, CW, vol. 16, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000.

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world of nature and concentrated its efforts on reducing the multiplicity of its perceptions to the simplicity of invariable causes.[59] Through this oversimplification of its experience, however, its understanding of the things of this world became impoverished. Surely, modern humanity was able in this fashion to make the "mysteries" of nature increasingly accessible to itself and to put the forces of nature into the service of its own ends. But by thus persisting in this modality of experience, it made all other possible ways of experiencing the world inaccessible to itself. In the world of nature there was only one symbol for each object, namely the mathematical sign for its physical make-up. In contrast to the plurality of symbolizations available to pre-modern human beings, modern humanity narrowed its world exegesis down to a single symbolization. It regressed from the linguistic diversity corresponding to the diversity of human experience to a partial speechlessness, in which, when it came to non-physical experiences, it had either no words or only words put together from older symbolic languages.[60]

This partial speechlessness – which represents in fact the loss of the familiarity of partnership with the cosmos – was not necessarily felt by the moderns as a disadvantage. On the contrary, they felt encouraged by it to follow that motif which came to the fore in their estrangement from the cosmos of the world and in their curiosity for the world of nature: they no longer wanted to understand the world but to control it. Every modality of the understanding of the cosmos of the world excluded the idea that this cosmos could or should be controlled by humans. A domineering attitude of humans towards the world could arise only in consequence of a partial obscuring of reality within human perception. To the extent that the moderns no longer understood the primary order of the world, which is pre-given to every human being and whose existence it encompasses, they could be captivated by the idea that the proper, hitherto not assumed, place of human beings in the world is that of masters.

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59 Cf. e.g. Newton's *Regulae Philosophandi* in: *Philosophiae Naturalis* ..., pp. 387 ff.,vol. II, pp. 550 ff.

60 We must add here, however, that contemporary representatives of the natural sciences have begun once again to emphasize the symbolic quality of these sciences. According to this position, the natural sciences represent, not *the* (exclusive) interpretation of human world experience, but only a particular interpretation of the world which bears on a limited *aspect*. Cf. e.g., W. Heisenberg, *Physik und Philosophie*, p. 40: "we must bear in mind that what we observe is not nature itself but nature as exposed to our mode of inquiry." Cf. also Ilya Prigogine, "Ereignis und Gesetz. Das Zusammenspiel von Ordnung und Unordnung im Universum," in Tilo Schabert, Erik Hornung (eds), *Strukturen des Chaos*, Munich: Fink, 1994, pp. 129 – 149.

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The Human Control of Nature: Towards the Genealogy of a Motif

We may distinguish four stages in the genealogy of the motif of the human control of nature. I would like to illustrate each of them by referring to representative texts.

(1) According to Christian teaching, the existence of things came out of a collaboration between the spirit of God *and* nature. This cooperative relation of nature to God was no longer accepted in modern thought. Instead, nature was regarded as a competitor of God or, the other way around, God was regarded as a competitor of nature. Indeed: Why would the world still need God's action, when a *natura agens* was inherent in it that was itself a creator and conservator of all things? And ultimately, as Newton argued, a demonstration of the existence of an *ens perfectum* does not suffice to show that nature needed God's action. If someone demonstrates the existence of such an *ens perfectum* without also showing that this *ens* is the "master of the world or pantocrator," he has not demonstrated that there exists a god. Nature, after all, is also "eternal," "infinite," "omniscient," and "omnipotent," and it is also the "necessarily existing author of all things." Thus, the existence of God is not demonstrated by demonstrating an *ens eternum, infinitum, sapientissimum, summe perfectum*. This in fact simply demonstrates nature.[61] Newton sheds light here on a dilemma that confronted the moderns in the development of their idea of nature. They assigned to nature all the attributes of God, but then they had to wonder whether there could be another God besides this quasi-divine nature. Newton solved the problem he himself had posed by transferring the question of God from the realm of philosophical thought to the region of a mentality of royal subjects. He declared that "God" is a relative name which makes reference to the respective "servant." This is the reason, he continues, why we do not say "my," "our," or "your *ens perfectum*," but "my God," "our" and "your God," which means "my supreme Lord," "our supreme Lord," "your supreme Lord."[62] While this distinction might still have made sense for Newton, it was not long before Diderot and Rousseau would reject the existence, alongside a divine nature, of this God for whom Newton had allowed only the title of a "Lord of servants" *(dominum servorum).*[63]

Alexandre Koyré remarks on this development as follows:

61 *Unpublished Scientific Papers* …, *Scholium Generale*, MS C, p. 359.
62 Ibid., pp. 358 f.
63 Ibid., p. 359.

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> Once more the book of nature seemed to reveal God, an engineering God this time, who not only had made the world clock, but who continuously had to supervise and tend it in order to mend its mechanism when needed (a rather bad clockmaker, this Newtonian God, objected Leibniz), thus manifesting his active presence and interest in his creation. Alas, the very development of the Newtonian science which gradually disclosed the consummate skill of the Divine Artifex and the infinite perfections of his work left less and less place for divine intervention. The world clock more and more appeared as needing neither rewinding nor repair. Once put in motion it ran for ever. The work of creation once executed, the God of Newton – like the Cartesian God after the first (and last) *chiquenaude* [*flick*] given to matter – could rest. Like the God of Descartes and of Leibniz – so bitterly opposed by the Newtonians – he had nothing more to do in the world.[64]

(2) According to the conception of the moderns, the absolute autonomy of nature was demonstrated by the unchangeableness of its laws. The word "law of nature" became in their thought the byword for what is indubitable and absolutely valid. Worldly events were unquestioningly accepted if they happened with "natural necessity." Statements about historical or social processes were more impressive if someone managed to show that it was all really a "natural process." According to the view of the moderns, this absoluteness of the laws of nature was binding even for God. They even became fond of demonstrating in God the unconditional validity of all laws of nature.

Montesquieu, for example, declared in his *Lettres persanes* (1721): "although God is all-powerful, he cannot break his own promises nor deceive man. Often, indeed, the lack of power is not in him, but in related things; that is the reason why he cannot change their essences."[65] In this manner, Montesquieu affirmed, on the one hand, God's omnipotence, but maintained, on the other, that this omnipotence was limited by the unchangeable essence of things. He did not mean to merely formulate a paradox with his argument. His point was rather to display, precisely with regard to God's omnipotence, which was commonly deemed unrestricted, the even greater power of natural relations in this world. According to Montesquieu, even God's omnipotence must capitulate before the unchangeableness of the laws of nature. Reality as a whole, he declared at the beginning of his work, *The Spirit of the Laws (De l'esprit des lois,* 1748), is subject to laws which allow no exceptions:

64 Alexandre Koyré, *Newtonian Studies*, London: Chapman Hall, 1965, p. 21.
65 Montesquieu, *Persian Letters*, translated by Margaret Mauldon, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 97.

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> Laws, taken in the broadest meaning, are the necessary relations deriving from the nature of things *(nature des choses)*; and in this sense, all beings have their laws: the divinity has its laws, the material world has its laws, the intelligences superior to man have their laws, the beasts have their laws, man has his laws.[66]

For this reason, Montesquieu emphasized in his *Lettres persanes* that, if there is a God, he must necessarily be just.[67] Otherwise, according to Montesquieu, God would be the worst and most imperfect of all beings. The spirit of the laws demands that God, too, as is to be expected of him, strictly observes the laws of his own godliness.

(3) The development of the motif of human control of the world reaches its decisive stage in this elevation of the law of nature even above God. It is possible for human beings to compare themselves with God. Previously, in the context of an understanding of reality influenced by Christianity, it would have been absurd to speak of an equality between human knowledge of the world and divine wisdom. But now, in the context of the modern understanding of reality, there was a neutral terrain, in the form of the laws of nature, for equating both. According to the moderns, God might have created the world, but, after establishing it, he was no longer in a position to change anything in the *nature des choses*. Thus, before the absoluteness of the laws of nature, God and the human being are equal: God, just like the human being, cannot but recognize the "objective," i.e., mathematical, lawfulness which all things in this world inexorably follow.

In the same vein, Galileo stated explicitly in his *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo* (1632) that there is no qualitative difference between divine and human knowledge. The truth of the knowledge provided by mathematical demonstrations (of physical nature processes), he writes, is the selfsame truth which divine wisdom knows.[68] If the human knowledge of the world is measured not so much by its quantity as by its quality, one can say that the human understanding *(inteletto umano)* understands something so perfectly and with such an absolute certitude *(assoluta certezza)* as is found not even in nature itself.[69] The divine understanding *(inteletto divino)*, it is true, grasps infinitely more propositions *(proposizioni)* in the pure mathematical sciences *(scienze matematiche pure)* than the human understanding, because it grasps them all. But in the case of the propositions grasped by the human understanding, human knowl-

66 *The Spirit of the Laws,* translated by Anne M. Cohler et. al., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, p.3.
67 *Persian Letters,* p. 113.
68 Galileo Galilei, *Dialogo sopra i due massimi sistemi del mondo*, in *Opere*, pp. 237 f.
69 Ibid., p. 236.

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edge does equate the divine knowledge with regard to its objective certainty *(agguagli … nella certezza obiettiva)*. The human understanding is capable of grasping that necessity *(necessità)* beyond which there can be no greater sureness *(sicurezza)*.[70]

Galileo uncovered the psychological sources of the modern motif of the human control of the world through this comparison between human and divine understanding. Human beings who believe that they are equal to God with regard to the knowledge of nature, adopt a completely different position before the world than, for example, a Platonic *philosophos* or a Pauline *pneumatikos*. Humankind sees itself here as pantocrator, as a kingly lord of a world subject to it. This self-understanding is precisely the kind of human attitude to the world that corresponds logically to the postulate of an equality between human and divine world knowledge. If the *necessità* according to which the things in this world happen is the absolute measure in exactly the same degree both for the divine and for the human knowledge of the world, both humankind and God find themselves in the position of the creator of the world. Human beings grasp and comprehend the plan of creation which nature enacts every day because nature cannot do otherwise than follow it. A human being is thus distinguished by divine honors. Galileo's comparison flatters a particular penchant of human beings: their vanity. The pantocratic attitude towards the world typical of the humanity of modernity is ultimately rooted in the universal human penchant for self-glorification. Fixated in their wonder at the greatness of the human spirit, moderns such as Galileo were elevated ever higher onto the vainglorious heights of a human smugness in which humankind is so proud of itself that it positively envies itself:

> I have run through so many and such wonderful inventions made by men both in the arts and in the sciences ; and I have reflected on my own intellect, which is very far from hoping to discover anything new or even to learn some things already known; all this makes me feel confounded with wonder, afflicted with despair, and almost depressed. When I look at one of the excellent statues, I ask myself: "When will you know how to remove the excess from a piece of marble in order to disclose the beautiful statue which lay hidden within it? When will you know how to mix colors, spread them on a canvass or wall, and thereby represent all visible objects, as Michelangelo, Raphael, and Titian were able to do?" If I think about what men have discovered by dividing musical intervals and formulating precepts and rules for manipulating them to give marvelous delight to the ear, when shall I cease to wonder? And what shall I say of the multitude and variety of instruments? When reading

70 Ibid.

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> the best poets, what wonder fills those who carefully consider the creation of images and their expression! What shall we say of architecture? What of the art of navigation?[71]

(4) In *pre*-modern ages, human beings exhibited in general admiration for the cosmos, the well-orderedness of the world. They saw in the primary order of this world the divine standard for the actualization of their human existence. In the modern epoch, on the other hand, human smugness triumphed over human sensibility for the cosmos of the world. Humankind was now seized by a feverish delight in its own existence. It marveled no longer at the cosmos but only at itself. The human being appeared to it as the wonder of wonders, seeing how it had begun to investigate and control the world of nature, how it surpassed the beauties of nature with the perfection of its works of art, and how it accumulated in its mind ever more knowledge and strove towards an infinite improvement of this knowledge.

Modern humanity turned away from the cosmos of the world and toward the world of nature, because, being concentrated on its own self-satisfaction, it would no longer see in the world a divine measure and instead took itself as the measure of all things. Thus, Francis Bacon, for example, asserts in his book, *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), that, while God's works show the omnipotence and wisdom of their creator, they are *not* his image. According to him, the world had been previously viewed as the image of God, and humankind had been seen as the image of the world; but, in embracing this view, humankind had deviated from the "sacred [i. e., Christian] truth." Nowhere in Sacred Scripture is the world granted the honor of being represented as an image of God; instead, the world is presented merely as "the work of his hands." The Scriptures speak of no image of God other than humankind.[72]

Bacon's comments explain why European humanity abandoned its partnership with the cosmos of the world in the 16th and 17th centuries. Seized by a sort of anthropocentric jealousy, it no longer tolerated that anything be closer to God than humankind itself. Given its success in the investigation of nature, it no longer doubted that it was the equal of God. God, just like humankind, could fathom the *necessità* but was unable to change it. The certainty that modern humankind possessed as a *filosofo naturale* (Galileo) contradicted, however, the idea of a cosmos of the world in which the presence of the gods inserted itself like a sym-

71 Ibid., p. 239. English translation in *Galileo on the World Systems. A New and Abridged Translation and Guide* by Maurice A. Finocchiaro, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997, pp. 115 f.

72 Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. III, pp. 349 f.

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bolically transparent veil *between* humankind and the ultimate ground of Being. Modern humanity tore in its vanity this veil and assumed an all-controlling, God-equal, position, to which it believed to be entitled, and which placed it *above* all things in the world. It began to live, no longer in a cosmos "full of gods" but in the world of nature. Humankind could rule unrestrictedly in the world of nature, but it no longer found in the infinite spaces of nature anything or anyone from which or from whom it could learn anything about either itself or this silent universe.

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Chapter 5

The Heritage of the Renaissance: On the Misery and Dignity of the Human Being

And you will be like God, knowing good and evil.
Genesis, 3,5

The Motive for the Experiment of Modernity

The change in the attitude of European humanity to its surrounding reality in the Renaissance included, besides the turn from the cosmos of the world to the world of nature just described, also an equally fundamental turn in the self-understanding of European humanity. Without this new conception of the human place in the world, which assigns to humankind a kingly rule over the entire universe, there would have been no motive for a new orientation of humankind towards reality. The turn from the cosmos of the world to the world of nature took place, after all, not in the world itself, but in the consciousness of human beings who had rejected their inherited cosmological understanding of reality and had replaced it with the conception of a *natura agens* understood as the creator and conservator of reality. But why was it that thinkers like Pomponazzi, Telesio, Galileo, and Newton were inclined to see in the world only the effect of physical laws and no longer the presence of the gods? Why did they adopt the attitude of an engineer fond of experiments towards the world? Why were they unwilling to recognize the divine Logos, in addition to their own human understanding, as the standard in their research of nature? Why did their methodological reflections level out the difference between divine and human knowledge of the world, and why did they elevate the *nature des choses* to a power which must be obeyed not only by humankind but also by God?

This "modern" attitude towards the world developed in unison with the conception of a creative-autonomous nature, because this attitude had placed in the realm of the possible three objectives for human knowledge that had previously been regarded as unattainable: (1) The world of nature was limited; this made possible to envision a point in time in which humanity could attain the outer limits of the world and thus survey the world of nature as a whole. (2) Nature was a closed system of unalterable laws; humanity should thus be able to eventually succeed in exploring and grasping the inner constitution and dynamics of nature, i.e., all the laws of the *mundi constructio.* (3) Human beings attained all their knowledge by their own power. They opened up the world of nature with

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autonomous independence and could survey the total structure of its laws. What stood now in the way of humankind's comparing itself with the being who had designed the *mundi constructio* and possessed a knowledge of the world that was indeed prior, but no longer superior, to human knowledge? The turn from the cosmos of the world to the world of nature in the European understanding of reality would never have taken place if it had been merely a matter of an improved knowledge of nature. After all, this turn meant that the familiar world was exchanged for an unknown world, and that the existential security of humankind in the cosmos of the world was replaced by an existential insecurity when it contemplated the empty spaces of the world of nature. The motive for European humanity's decision to undertake the experiment of modernity had to be stronger than all considerations and fears regarding the concomitant costs in terms of human labor and self-discipline on the one hand, and its harmful consequences for the human community and the good life in this world, on the other. Galileo, Newton, and Bacon repeatedly expressed in their works a quite definite conviction: The growth of the *filosofia naturale*, the *natural philosophy* ushered in by them, would give humankind such a superior position vis-à-vis nature that it would have the right to be proud of itself, of the might of its thoughts, and of the power of its works. The experimental outline of the world of nature was able to become the decisive conception in the modern understanding of reality because it made European humanity realize that one of the strongest desires, if not *the* strongest desire of the human soul, could finally be satisfied: namely pride, the lust for power. Forgetting that the Greeks had regarded human *hubris* as the greatest crime, and that, according to Christian teaching, human beings had been expelled from paradise because of their *superbia*, the European humanity of the Renaissance was seduced precisely by such a vain self-glorification to abandon the cosmos of the world and to enter the world of nature. It believed that in this world of nature it would be the lord and master of a world of its own and would thereby fulfill the desire that tends to overcome humankind because of its pride: the desire to be like God.

The Excellence of the Human Being

It might not be obvious why the experiment of modernity should arise from the human yearning for self-achieved godliness. What did "godliness" mean in this context anyway, and what exactly is this human desire to be like God? Yet one cannot help noticing the frequent, indeed constantly recurring, passages in which early modern authors clearly and unmistakably formulate the existential consummation which they believe human beings must attain:

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> God is everything and everything is in God: Man desires to be everywhere … . God is the author of everything and enjoys making everything: there is no greater pleasure for man in this world than to produce many things … God contemplates himself and admires himself: man regards himself and marvels at his own excellence, holds himself to be better than all the other creatures and strives with all his might to preen himself and to honor himself and to display that which is excellent in him … All this made the ancient Zoroaster exclaim with astonishment: *Oh man, what a truly magnificent work thou art!* – as if he could not understand that in this base and mortal world, in the midst of mire and filth, a being could be found so powerful as to be elevated beyond the heavens and who, through the knowledge of so many things and his imitation of divine actions, would almost deify himself in this life *(quasi se deifiast soymesmes en ceste vie)*.[1]

Such glorifications of humankind as an incomparable "marvel" reveal the anthropological foundations of modern humanity's self-understanding. The above quotation from Guillaume Du Vair's work, *De la constance et consolation és calamitez publiques* (1594), highlights some of the essential points:[2] The greatest human pleasure is to be active in this world, human beings admire their own excellence, they are powerful beings who can rise beyond the heavens, and a human being can become a God, and indeed in this life.

The transformation in the self-understanding of European humanity in the Renaissance was expressed in hymnic programs for the self-deification of humanity. It is true that we find panegyric works in antiquity in which humankind is praised for its "dignity" and its "excellence." The theme of the *dignitas hominis* had been discussed in great detail and developed in its various aspects in Stoic and patristic writings as well as in medieval literature and philosophy.[3] This an-

1 Guillaume Du Vair, *De la Constance et consolation és calamitez publiques*, in Guillaume Du Vair, *OEuvres*, Paris 1641. Reprint Genf: Slatkine, 1970, pp. 381 f.

2 For an overview of Guillaume Du Vair's life and works, see *New World Encyclopedia:* http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org /entry/Guillaume du_Vair (retrieved February 3, 2018). See also the section on Du Vair in Jerome B. Schneewind (ed.), *Moral Philosophy from Montaigne to Kant*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003, pp. 201–215.

3 Cf. Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness. Humanity and Divinity in Italian Humanist Thought*, 2 vols., Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970; Herschel C. Baker, *The Image of Man. A Study of the Idea of Human Dignity in Classical Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1947; Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Concepts of Man*, New York: Harper & Row, 1972. It is obviously possible to go back to even earlier ages in human history, that, regarded from a contemporary standpoint, were "foundational." The derivation of the dignity of humankind from a realm of meaning and actuality transcending the physical and social reality of human beings was expressed with concepts for which we now have the words "soul," "spirit," and "self." In earlier ages the corresponding words were *atman* in Sanskrit, *spiritus* and *mens* in Latin, *thymos* or *psyche* in Greek, *ruach* in Hebrew, *ba* or *ka* in Egyptian, and *nafasun* in Arabic. According to the Jewish bible, the absolute dignity of each man

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cient and medieval literature on the dignity of humankind, however, was accompanied by reflections on the aspects of human existence that make up its misery (*miseria)*. Thus, the overall discussion took the form of a debate in which an emphatic description of human dignity was counterbalanced by an overstated presentation of human misery, and the *dignitas*, in turn, was re-emphasized when the *miseria hominis* had been stressed in too one-sided a manner. This debate on the dignity and the misery of humankind continued in the Renaissance with an intensity fueled by the general feeling of a new dawn. In the process, the perspectives became rigid and the judgements more dogmatic. Whereas in earlier times a single author had been prepared to defend and explain with equal interest and conviction both themes, hardly anyone was now willing to maintain such an argumentative balance. Those who still participated in the debate were now split into two opposing camps; while some glorified humankind, others debased it. Thus a controversy ensued which was supposedly about humankind but was really about a being who was regarded by some as a god and by others as an animal.

A Decisive Debate on the Dignity and the Misery of the Human Being

In what follows I intend to shed light on the anthropological turn that constitutes the decisive motive for the emergence of the modern age through a survey of the debate on the dignity and the misery of humankind, as it took place for a last time in the Renaissance. For this purpose, I have chosen three works that are representative of both the chronological and the intellectual range of this debate: (1) *Der Ackerman aus Böhmen (The Ploughman from Bohemia,* 1401) by Johannes von Tepl, (2) the *Oratio de dignitate hominis* by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, and (3) Michel de Montaigne's *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, which is part of the *Essais* (1580).

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and woman came from Yahweh's "breath" *(ruach)* in their existence; he or she was a living being – *nephesh* in Hebrew – through God's breath in him or her. In ancient Greek culture, starting with Homer, the element of the absolute in human existence was increasingly elucidated as its "discovery" grew. (Cf. the classical study by Bruno Snell, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes,* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1946, and Jan Bremmers, *The Early Greek Concept of the Soul*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). On the basis of the knowledge of this element of the Absolute present in human being, a "divine" (that is, inviolable) dignity was understood to have been given to them.

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The Human Being: "God's Most Excellent Creature" *(The Ploughman)*

"Everything is vanity, a sickness of the soul" *(Death)*

Der Ackerman aus Böhmen by Johannes von Tepl (1350 – 1414) presents a debate between a "ploughman" and "Death." The ploughman's wife has recently died, and, in his grief, he insults and curses Death, who has deprived him of his wife, the "pillar of his happiness"[4] and the "sun of his salvation."[5] Death is taken aback by these accusations[6] and in reply declares that he, Death, has sway over all human beings, regardless of their worldly power, age, beauty, and their medical or magical arts. The ploughman, therefore, has no grounds for complaint if Death has carried out his "work of grace" in the ploughman's wife.[7]

In response, the ploughman attempts to isolate Death from the world. He summons creation to rise up against Death as against a stranger who has illicitly found his way into the world.[8] Death replies by taking up the ploughman's line of thought and turning it against him; he argues that it is the ploughman, not Death, who is out of place in the process of creation.[9] In his lack of understanding for the "mixture of worldly things," the ploughman has not noticed that all created things – plants and stones, animals and human beings – must return to nothing. Every human being must go from Being back into Nonbeing. On what ground can then the ploughman demand that his wife be exempted from what must befall all human beings? Death reproaches the ploughman for placing his personal lot above the general fate of all things in the world. The ploughman demands an exception where there can be none; his complaint against Death is in fact a complaint against the natural order of creation.[10]

But the ploughman will take no lessons from Death concerning his revolt against the order of things. Instead, he assumes the role of a judge and requires Death to justify himself and his actions. Since, as he states, Death is the "evil-

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4 Johannes von Tepl, *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen*, Original Text and Translation into Modern German, Postscript and Notes by Felix Genzmer, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1970, pp. 44 f. English translation: Johannes von Tepl, *The Husbandman and Death*, translated by Michael Haldane (electronic text: http://www.michaelhaldane.com/Husbandman%20and%20Death.pdf), Chapter 3. Henceforth the English translation will be cited by giving the chapter number.
5 Ibid. p. 46. (Ch. 5).
6 Ibid. p. 45. (Ch. 4).
7 Ibid.
8 Cf. ibid. p. 48. (Ch. 7).
9 Cf. ibid. p. 50. (Ch. 8).
10 Cf. ibid. pp. 50 f. (Ch. 10).

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doer," he demands to know who Death is, where he is, how long he has been in existence, and what his function is. He feels himself challenged by Death and by the great power exercised by him with no warning. [11] Death responds by rejecting the anthropomorphic notions the ploughman wants to apply to him. With greater tact than previously, he again gives the ploughman to understand how little he knows of him.

The ploughman is deprived of an actual opponent when he feels "challenged" by Death. Should he try to find Death somewhere or seize him somehow, the "event" Death would be nowhere to be found. As Death tells the ploughman, "You ask where we are. We are not ascertainable."[12] It would be of no use for human beings to try to stand up against the configurations in which their own figure is inscribed: they will still be assailed and buried by Death. Thus, the ploughman has once again been unsuccessful. His attempt to justify his rebellion by depicting Death as an insidious agent of destruction has failed. Death escapes this role, and he also reminds the ploughman of the original guilt of humankind. This guilt comes from the Fall, which humans must make good through their death. Death goes on to reveal himself as the beneficial power that maintains the biological balance on this earth.[13] Nonetheless, the ploughman will still not tire of his revolt. He restarts the debate by raising a new accusation: He charges Death of being utterly unjust in the way he picks out who is to die.

Death reacts to this new accusation in a different way from before. Whereas he had so far attempted to convince the ploughman of the necessity and the benefits of his existence, he now makes the ploughman the butt of his scorn. Irony is the only device which does not fail before the incorrigibility of the ploughman, who makes himself the judge of Death's actions despite all the latter's expostulations. Death now makes the ploughman's judicial claims his own, appoints him the representative of humanity, and lists all the distinctions that the "ploughman" (i.e., humankind) has experienced or earned in history:

> We were there when the Sibyll informed you with wisdom ... We saw you count the stars, calculate the number of grains of sand, and of fishes in the sea, and measure raindrops ... When, in Academia and in Athens, you debated with distinguished, knowledgeable masters, who spoke so expertly about divinity, yet you so wisely prevailed over them, then We were especially delighted ...We saw you in your workshop, weaving a noble garment out of rainbows; angels, birds, animals, and all kinds of fish were fashioned in it ... We laughed especially hard and extolled you when, in Paris, you ... danced on an ox's hide, worked in the Black Arts and exorcised the Devil into a peculiar glass. When God called

11 Ibid. p. 56. (Ch. 15).
12 Ibid. (Ch. 16).
13 Ibid. p. 58 (Ch. 18), 49 (Ch. 8).

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> you to His council, to speak about the Fall of Lady Eve, then, for the first time, We became cognisant of your great wisdom.[14]

Pretending to be greatly impressed by such advantages of humankind, Death begs the ploughman to excuse his lack of respect for human existence. All this is pure irony, however. Human powerlessness is all the more glaring the more impressively that dignity and preciousness is portrayed which humankind sees belittled by Death, without being in the least able to do anything about it.

The ploughman is offended by Death's irony. He feels that he must warn Death about his wantonness. Self-righteously he calls upon Death to take an example from his (the ploughman's) own moderation. He has kept his equanimity and has refrained from seeking revenge even in the moments when Death behaved maliciously or unjustly towards him. If he has acted in any unfair or inappropriate manner towards Death, he is willing to make amends. In contrary case, however, Death owes him compensation for damages. Propped by his own bluster, the ploughman comes to believe in the end that he is even in a position to threaten Death. He demands that Death either make good for the harm done to his wife, himself, and his children, or appear alongside him before God, the just judge of everything in the world, even of Death.[15]

After this threat, Death seems to find it hard to tell the ploughman more than he has already done. For this reason, he takes up again, in different variations, the theme of the necessary process of creation, in which human beings, too, must go from being to nonbeing.

Death uses a last amplification of this theme to challenge the ploughman in his turn. He suggests to the ploughman that there are two possible reasons for his rebellion: Either he is overwhelmed by suffering or folly dwells in him. If he has lost his reason, the ploughman should ask God to restore it to him. But if he is overwhelmed by suffering – and this is obviously Death's assumption – he should refrain from further complaints and console himself instead with the insight that "the life of human beings on earth is but a breath of wind."[16] The ploughman accepts the challenge and at the same time tries to resist it. This is because Death has expressed, in metaphorical garb, the opinion that the life of human beings on earth is not after all worth living. The ploughman fights back against this contempt for human existence in the world. He does not directly dispute Death's thesis but attempts rather to upstage it by means

14 Ibid. pp. 59 f. (Ch. 18).
15 Ibid. p. 61 (Ch. 19).
16 Ibid. (Ch. 22).

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of an apology of human love of life. When joy, love, delight, and amusement are banned from the world, he posits, the world is in a bad shape. And his main argument is this: "For the thoughts of man's mind cannot be idle: it must be working good or evil at all times … If good thoughts were taken from the mind, evil ones would enter. Good out, evil in; evil out, good in."[17]

In his response to Death's challenge, the ploughman has cleverly pointed to human joy in the world as the most important condition for right human action in this world. According to the logic of this apology of human joy of life, Death ought not to have deprived the ploughman of his wife. It is Death's fault that he is now in the throes of suffering; Death delivered him over to tribulation when he took his wife from him and with her all incentive to do good. That is why the ploughman cannot accept his wife's death; he *must* rebel against Death so as to be a good man.

Death is not impressed by this sophistical argumentation and becomes impatient and angered at the ploughman's obduracy. Since the latter has not followed the "advice" to desist from his useless complaining, why should he, Death, keep trying to enlighten him? But the dispute does not come to an end at this point. For one last time the ploughman and Death lay out the fundamentals of their views on human life and on the rank and position of humankind in this world. But now their statements are no longer meant to be persuasive. They are more like manifestos in which the incisiveness of expression stands in the service, not of the dialogical exchange, but only of the hardening of the respective positions. Thus, while Death insists in seeing in humankind only the most miserable of all beings, the ploughman gives an intransigent defense of human dignity.

Death's discourse on the misery of humankind was provoked by the ploughman's final refusal to put an end to his suffering by banning from his mind the memory of his beloved. This refusal implies the thesis that every human being is irreplaceable and in himself or herself the greatest of all goods. Hence Death now charges the ploughman not only with violating the hierarchy of all things but also with attempting to modify it in favor of humankind:

> Your short understanding, your clipped mind, your hollow heart, will make more of humankind than it has the power to become. Make of a man what you will, yet he cannot be more than this I say to you, with the leave of all pure women: a human is conceived in sin, nourished with impure, unspeakable feculence in the maternal body, born naked and smeared like a beehive; a mass of refuse, a churn of filth, a dish for worms, a stinkhouse, a repulsive washtub, a rancid carcass, a mildewed crate, a bottomless sack, a perforated pocket, a bel-

17 Ibid. p. 66 (Ch. 23).

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> lows, a rapacious maw, a reeking flagon of urine, a malodorous pail, a deceptive marionette-show, a loamy robber's den, an insatiably slaking trough, a painted delusion. Let recognise who will: every human created to completion has nine holes in his body; out of all these there flows such repellent filth that nothing could be more impure. You would never see human beauty, if you had the eyes of a lynx, and your gaze could penetrate to the innards; you would shudder at the sight. Strip the dressmaker's colouring from the loveliest of ladies, and you will see a shameful puppet, a hastily withering flower, a sparkle of little durance and a soon decomposing clod of earth! Show me a handful of beauty of all the belles who lived a hundred years ago, excluding those painted on the wall, and you shall have the Kaiser's crown! Let love flow away, let grief flow away! Let the Rhine run its course like other waters, you wise lad from Assville![18]

Once Death has finished, the ploughman proclaims the opposite manifesto: he gives a speech on the dignity of the human being. He proves the special position of human beings in the world by falling back on the classical argument of his predecessors in defense of human dignity. These had argued that, according to the biblical account, God had created humankind according to His own image,[19] and hence that a human being possesses, as *imago dei*, a unique dignity. The ploughman, however, does not limit himself to using this old argument; he also has recourse to the two arguments which would increasingly be taken as decisive in the further course of the debate on human misery and dignity in the Renaissance: (a) the dignity of humankind has its foundation, among other things, also in the fact that God has conferred humanity dominion over all things, and (b) human beings can surpass even the godhead in their thought. Addressing Death, the ploughman exclaims:

> Pah to you, you evil sack of shame! How you destroy, maltreat, and dishonour noble mankind, God's dearest creation, thereby reviling divinity! Now, for the first time, I see that you are mendacious and not created in Paradise as you claimed. Had you been in Paradise, you would know that God created man and all things, and created them wonderfully well; He set man above them all, conferred on him dominion over them all, and made them subservient to his feet … Sir Death, cease your pointless yapping! You sully God's most splendid creation … [M]an is the most noble, the most skilled, and the most free of all God's works. God formed him in His image, as He Himself proclaimed at the Creation of the World.
>
> Where has a workman ever effected so skilled and rich, so masterly and small a sphere as the human head? … In the eyeball there is the face, the most reliable of witnesses, masterfully worked in the way of a mirror … In the ears is the far-reaching sense of hearing, perfectly grated with a thin membrane for the perception and differentiation of a host of sweet sounds… [A]lso the tongue's thin leaf to pass thoughts between humans … And then, in the head, there are thoughts coming from the depths of the heart, with which man-

18 Ibid. p. 67 f. (Ch. 24).

19 *Genesis*, 1, 27.

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> kind rapidly reaches as far as he wills; with his thoughts, man clambers towards, and even above, the divine. Only man is in possession of reason, the noble treasure … Let go, Sir Death! you are the enemy of man: that is why you speak him ill.[20]

Although the disputation between the ploughman and Death has at this point reached a pitch of antithetical discord, the solution is still postponed. The confrontation even collapses in a sort of anticlimax. After Death has once again asserted that human beings, despite all their "knowledge, beauty, and dignity," are completely in his power,[21] the ploughman suddenly gives in and humbly asks Death for his advice. But he wants to be advised in a quite particular manner: he wants to live again in the married state.

This time around, however, Death shows no inclination to offer advice; he is more inclined to berate the ploughman. He accuses the ploughman of failing to understand that a wife is mostly a burden, and that everything in the world is either a "concupiscence of the flesh," or a "concupiscence of the eyes," or a "haughtiness of life."[22] This charge rekindles the debate one last time. The ploughman does not take Death's rebuke without protest; he now charges Death with contradicting himself in his claims. And he goes on to express a fundamental suspicion which undermines everything that Death has said. Death's blundering and unsettled speech, he says, has achieved only one thing: to deter him, the ploughman, from his complaint. That is why he now wants to appear before God alongside Death and justify himself, in the hope that God may give Death, not him, the "evil Amen."[23]

Death's Critique of the Present Age

Death, too, now wants to be done with the controversy. Yet he does not refrain from concluding with a discourse, directed at the ploughman, on the impermanence of all earthly things. But Death does not discuss his theme in the way he had previously done. This time he wants to approach it from a rather different angle. While he had hitherto concentrated on bringing out in general terms the fragility and infirmity of all created things, he now includes in his discourse a set of reflections on the behavior of humankind "in this age." Death formulates a critique of the present age. Humanity, he believes, is in the process of pervert-

20 Johannes von Tepl, *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen*, pp. 68 f. (Ch. 25).
21 Ibid. p. 70 (Ch. 26).
22 Ibid. pp. 73 (Ch. 30) and 75 (Ch. 32).
23 Ibid. p. 77 (Ch. 31).

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ing the order of the world. Instead of measuring their life against its longest span, i.e., death, human beings have become immoderate out of vanity, lust for power, and thirst for glory; instead of considering the impermanence of their works, they have become enslaved to an uninhibited bustle. Death's speech on impermanence is thus particularly marked by the admission that human beings "of this age" are no longer interested in his ideas about the "misery" of humankind but only in the ploughman's ideas on the "dignity" of human beings.

> We have said and We say – and this by way of conclusion –: the Earth, and all it contains, is founded on temporality. In this age, she is become prone to change, for all things are reversed: back has moved to front, and front is back; depths have shifted to mountains, and heights to valleys; the mass of mankind has made evil into right … All humans are inclined more to evil than good. When someone does do good nowadays, he is acting from fear of Us. All people, and all their activity, are full of vanity. Your body, your wife, your children, your honour, your belongings, and all you possess, all flees away; it disappears in a moment; it drifts away in the wind, neither shine nor shadow can remain. Look, see, observe and note the intentions of souls on this Earth: how they burrow through hill and vale, wood and field, Alps and deserts, the depths of the sea, the bowels of the Earth, for the sake of earthly goods; how they drive shafts, tunnels and mines down into the earth, boring through Earth's veins, to seek glittering stones, which they love before all things on account of their rarity; how they fell trees, paste together walls, barns and houses like swallows, plant and graft orchards, till the fields, lay down vineyards, build mills, raise the rent, practise fishery, hunting and gaming, drive large herds of cattle together, own numerous serving-lads and maids, ride high on horse, have chests and houses full of gold, silver, precious stones, costly garments and other wares, foster pleasure and lust, which they pursue and strive after night and day – what is the sum of this? All is vanity, a sickness of the soul, as transitory as the day that passed yestereve. They gain this through war and rapine; the greater the possessions, the greater the robbery. They bequeath it to discord and conflict. Oh, mortal man is always in fear, in affliction, in sorrow, in care, in dread, in terror, in days of pain, in days of sickness, in sadness, in mourning, in misery, in grief and in multeity of irritations; and the more worldly wealth a man has, the more annoyances he encounters. And this is the greatest of all, that a human cannot know when, where and how We shall suddenly overfall him and drive him the way of all flesh … O mournful prospect, and so little regarded by the witless! When it is too late, they would all be virtuous. All this is vanity over vanity and sinking of the soul.[24]

The disputation is now over. Death and the ploughman remain silent in order to listen to God's judgment. After a dispute that was not without logical reasoning and was well fought on both sides, God confers something to each of them: to the ploughman honor and to Death victory.[25]

24 Ibid. pp. 77–79 (Ch. 32; translation modified).
25 Ibid. p. 80 (Ch. 33).

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When Johannes von Tepl composed his work, *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen,* he probably did not have for his main goal to become a participant in the debate on the misery and the dignity of humankind. It is possible that it was his wife's death that chiefly motivated him on August 1, 1400 to raise his voice against death in a fictional dispute in the person of the "ploughman." He himself mentions another motive for his work. After the book's publication, he sent a copy along with a letter to "his dear associate Peter von Tepl, citizen of Prag." Johannes von Tepl explains in this letter that his main intention in composing this work had been to excel in the art of the well-placed, imaginative, and figurative speech. An attentive reader, he says, should be able to find in his work all that is a part of rhetoric.[26]

His principal interest in oratory, however, did not prevent Johannes von Tepl from making the contemporary spiritual situation of his age the subject of his exemplary exercises in the art of rhetoric. This rhetorically elaborate and highly elegant disputation between the "ploughman" and "Death" resulted in one of the subtlest introductions to the early humanistic debate on the misery and the dignity of humankind. The devices of the art of rhetoric contributed here to making visible the thematic structure of the debate by giving it a formal organization that included the dialogical form of a disputation and the monological form of a manifesto.

In *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen* the conceptions of the *miseria hominis* and the *dignitas hominis* are still balanced out. The exchange between the ploughman and Death proceeds in several phases and the balance between the contrary conceptions expressed by them undergoes a corresponding modification. During the first phase, although engaged in a disputation, the ploughman and Death attempt to make their points of view intelligible to each other. In a subsequent phase of the confrontation, they withdraw more and more into their respective positions, which they put forth with increasing intransigence. This phase ends when Death gives up his attempt to make the ploughman understand his position. In the next and last phase, the formal structure of the dialogue collapses and is replaced by the monological form of the manifesto. The balance between the two disputants is still preserved – the ploughman and Death each proclaims his own manifesto – but this balance rests only on negation: the ploughman, too, now refuses to resume the dispute.

26 Cf. Heinz Otto Burger, *Renaissance, Humanismus, Reformation. Deutsche Literatur im europäischen Kontext*, Bad Homburg: Gehlen, 1969, pp. 48–52; Gerhard Hahn, *Die Einheit des Ackermann aus Böhmen. Studien zur Komposition*, Munich: Beck, 1963; Konrad Burdach, *Der Dichter des Ackermann aus Böhmen und seine Zeit*, Berlin: Weidmann, 1926–32.

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The Apotheosis of the Human Being

Almost a hundred years after the publication of *Der Ackermann aus Böhmen*, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) wrote his *Oratio de dignitate hominis*. All balance between the ideas of *miseria hominis* and *dignitas hominis* has now completely vanished. The only thing that has a place in Pico's mind in this regard is the idea that humankind is the "most happy" being and a *magnum miraculum*.[27] He is completely silent about the suffering and infirmity, in other words, about the misery, of human existence. Pico adopted for his discourse the classical title, "On the Dignity of the Man," but its contents would be much more accurately described with a title such as, "The Apotheosis of Man." Indeed, in his contribution to the debate on the dignity and misery of the human being, Pico took the idea of *dignitas hominis* to its extreme, namely to the idea of a *theos anthropos*. Already Johannes von Tepl had put in his ploughman's mouth the thesis that humankind can in its thought surpass even the godhead. But Pico takes a much wider perspective in his discourse: he outlines a program for the self-deification of the human being.

This program is based on these three principles: (1) there is no specific human nature, (2) human beings can make out of themselves whatever they want, (3) the "great marvel" of this world is humankind because, through its self-determination, it can even become the God from whom it came.[28]

Right at the opening of his speech, Pico quotes his authorities for the thesis that humankind is a *magnum miraculum:*

> Most venerable fathers, I have read in the records of the Arabians that Abdul the Saracen, on being asked what thing on the world's stage he viewed as most greatly worthy of wonder, answered that he viewed nothing more wonderful than man. And Mercury's dictum, "a great wonder, Asclepius, is man!" agrees with that opinion.[29]

Pico immediately adds that, after pondering the meaning of these words, he is not yet convinced by the frequent and numerous arguments offered for the excellence *(praestantia)* of human nature. He mentions especially the ideas that the human being is an intermediary between creatures *(creaturarum internuntius)*, an interpret of nature *(naturae interpres)*, something in between the standstill of eternity and the flow of time *(stabilis aevi et fluxi temporis interstitius)*, and the bond tying the world together *(mundi copula)*. All this, Pico says, is of

27 Pico della Mirandola, *De dignitate hominis*, pp. 26–27. (English translation: pp. 3–4)
28 Cf. Pietro Pomponazzi, *De immortalitate animae*, pp. 6f.
29 Pico della Mirandola, *De Dignitate Hominis*, pp. 26–27 (English: p. 3; translation modified)

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great, but still not of fundamental, importance, and does not in itself justify humankind's claim to be the object of supreme admiration.[30]

This dissatisfaction with the hitherto insufficient justification of a human privilege of "supreme admiration" does not lead Pico to conclude that this "great marvel," the human being, cannot be thoroughly understood and explained. He had expressed his dissatisfaction only to whet the expectation for the arguments in favor of humankind's admirability which he himself means to put forth. Pico wants to satisfy very high expectations indeed. Attempts to demonstrate the special dignity of human nature being so far apparently unsuccessful, Pico now steps up to announce that he has fathomed out "why man is the animal that is most happy, and is therefore worthy of all wonder; and lastly, what position has been allotted to man in the succession of things that should arouse the envy not just of brutes but also of the stars and even of the minds dwelling beyond the world."[31]

Pico communicates his knowledge in the form of a cosmological fable. His narrative starts on the day after God had already created the world. God had decked out the supracelestial region with spirits, had animated the paths of the Aether with eternal beings, and filled with a diverse throng of animals the cast-off and residual parts of the lower world. God's work, the creation of the world, was completed *(consumato)*. Pico's tale relates that at this point God "yearned *(desiderabat)* that there be someone to reckon up the meaning *(ratio)* of such a big work, to love its beauty, and to wonder at its greatness."[32]

This "someone" is, of course, the human being. Pico has skillfully framed his fable in such a way that the reader eagerly looks forward to finding out where, God having already "completed" his work, the human being fits into creation. Thus, the impression arises that God's creation of the world is merely the prehistory of the most important cosmogonic event, the creation of humankind. On the one hand, humankind is still "missing" (Pico is silent about the possibility that there might also be a world with no human beings), and, on the other hand, God "yearns" for an admirer of his works. Pico's fable implies, therefore, that humankind's existence arises from a necessity in divine existence itself: God's yearning for admiration is fulfilled only in humankind.[33]

Pico purposely worded his tale in such a way as to give the impression that he was more or less just retelling the biblical story of creation. He does indeed

30 Pico della Mirandola, *De Dignitate Hominis*, S. 26 – 27. (English: p. 3).
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid (English: p. 4) (translation modified).
33 Cf. *Nicolai Cusae Cardinalis Opera*, Paris 1514, vol. I, reprint Frankfurt a. M.: Minerva, 1962, *De Ludo Globi*, Book II, Fo. CLXVII v.

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introduce Moses as a witness for the credibility of his fable.[34] A comparison between his account and *Genesis*, however, shows that, while Pico deals with the same material as the first book of Moses, i.e., *Genesis*, he modifies the structure of the Mosaic story of creation at a crucial point. According to *Genesis*, God separated the light from darkness, created heaven and earth, the sea, the sun and the moon, the stars, and the plants of the earth. At this point, according to the biblical account, God continues his work:

> God made the wild animals of the earth of every kind, and the cattle of every kind, and everything that creeps upon the ground of every kind. And God saw that it was good. Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (*Genesis* 1, 25–27)
>
> God said, "See, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is upon the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit; you shall have them for food. And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, everything that has the breath of life, I have given every green plant for food." And it was so. God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all their multitude. And on the seventh day God finished the work that he had done, and he rested on the seventh day from all the work that he had done. (*Genesis* 1, 29–2, 2).

If we compare this story of creation with Pico's fable, we immediately notice a fundamental divergence. According to *Genesis*, God created humankind *before* the completion of his work. According to Pico's fable, on the other hand, God thought *(cogitavit)* of the creation of humankind after "all things had been completed, as Moses [!] and Timaeus testify."[35] In Pico's narrative, the sequence described in *Genesis* (first creation of humankind and then completion of creation) is inverted (first completing of creation, then creation of humankind).

Pico knew exactly what he intended with this inversion. He had found with it the basis for all his other arguments regarding humankind's special dignity. For if the creation of humankind is part of the whole process of creation, as *Genesis* relates, then it has no special place in the world. Humankind might surpass the other creatures and even rule over them, but it too has at one point emerged from God's *one* creation, just like everything else that surrounds it in the world. But Pico could not, on the basis of such a position of humankind *within* the whole of creation, justify any special claim of humankind to the highest admira-

34 Pico della Mirandola, *De Dignitate Hominis*, pp. 28–29 (English: p. 4).
35 Ibid. pp. 27–29 (English p. 4).

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tion. On the other hand, just such a justification could be provided on the basis of his inversion of the biblical sequence. If God created humankind only after he had already completed his creation, then humankind could indeed be praised as the most outstanding of all beings. On the one hand, God would have set humankind apart from the remaining creation by creating it in a kind of second creation exclusively devoted to it; and, on the other hand, God would have been driven by a quite special motive to create it. Humankind would have, indeed, a unique position both with regard to God, who had "yearned" for it, and with regard to this world, which God had presented to humankind for its pleasure.

When further developing his cosmological fable, Pico deduces the particulars of such a unique position of humankind from the circumstances in which God created it. Once creation had been completed, and God thought of creating humankind – Pico's narrative continues – there was among the archetypes *(archetypis)* none left out of which he might have formed a new descendant *(novam sobolem)*. There was nothing left in his treasure-house to confer upon his new son *(novo filio)* for his inheritance. And there was no place left in the whole world which humankind, this contemplator of the universe *(universi contemplator),* could take. Everything was already full *(plena)*; everything had already been apportioned to the upper, middle, and lower orders. But the Father's power could not fail with regard to his final creature, nor could his wisdom be overcome by perplexity concerning such a necessary deed. At this point the good creator determined that "that to which nothing of its very own *(nihil proprium)* could be given should have a share in whatsoever had belonged individually to each and every thing."[36] He decided, therefore, that humankind should be a work having no proper distinguishing characteristics *(indiscretae opus imaginis)*. Having placed humankind in the center of the world *(in mundi meditullio)*, he spoke to it thus:

> "We have given to thee, Adam, no fixed seat, no form of thy very own, no gift peculiarly thine, that thou mayest feel as thine own, have as thine own, possess as thine own the seat, the form, the gifts which thou thyself shalt desire. A limited nature in other creatures is confined within the laws written down by Us. In conformity with thy free judgment, in whose hands I have placed thee, thou art confined by no bounds; and thou wilt fix limits of nature for thyself. I have placed thee at the center of the world, that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world. Neither heavenly nor earthly, neither mortal nor immortal have We made thee. Thou, like a judge appointed for being honorable, art the molder and maker of thyself; thou mayest sculpt thyself into whatever shape thou dost prefer. Thou canst grow downward into the lower natures

36 Ibid. pp. 28–29. (English: p. 4; modified).

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> which are brutes. Thou canst again grow upward from thy soul's reason into the higher natures which are divine."[37]

Pico's central thought is formulated in God's speech: Humankind is the being who, among all beings, deserves the highest admiration, because it alone possesses the absolute freedom to be whatever it wants to be. While every other being is formed according to an "archetype," humankind can choose whatever configuration it wants to represent. While all other beings are limited in their existence by their respective "natures," humankind can adopt a "nature," which corresponds to the form of existence it chooses. While everything else in the world finds itself from the beginning in an exactly circumscribed "place," humankind can survey the entire world from its center and from here choose the "place" in which it wants to dwell.

There is in Pico a radical repudiation of the anthropological ideas of the classical-Greek and Christian tradition. By laying down the principle of the unrestricted autonomy of humankind, he had placed himself in fundamental opposition to some of the most essential of these ideas. In Greek thought, the dignity of humankind was grounded in the fact that it has a unique place in the hierarchy of things. This is precisely the reason why every attempt by humankind to rise above its position in the cosmos was regarded as reprehensible, as an act of hubris. Pico, however, refuses to recognize any natural "restrictions" to the actualization of an autonomous human existence. He also gets rid of the idea of human nature. According to both Greek and Christian thought, something belonged to humankind that only it possessed among all living beings. Aristotle, for instance, had taught that humankind is distinguished from all other living beings by the fact that it is endowed with reason *(zoon logon ekhon)*.[38] Paul spoke for his part of a divine spirit *(pneuma)* that dwells in every human being and through which all human beings, regardless of whatever differences there might otherwise be among them, are equal before God.[39] Pico, on the contrary, asserts that humankind is precisely a configuration *without* a unique property *(indiscretae opus imagines)* because God assigned to it *no* property that would be exclusive of them *(nec munus ullum peculiar)*. Finally, Pico also disregards the key thought of a Christian conception of humankind. According to the Mosaic story of creation, God created humankind in his image, i.e., as an image of God *(Genesis* 1, 27). According to Pico's fable, on the other hand, humankind

37 Ibid.

38 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098 a 1–5 and *Politics* 1253 a 10.

39 Cf. *Romans* 8, 14 and 16*; 1 Corinthians* 3, 16; 13, 13; *2 Corinthians* 3, 17; *Galatians* 3, 26–28.

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can be neither an *imago Dei* nor in general be the representation of an "archetype." A human being must first decide in which form he or she will appear before one can know what he or she actually is.

In the end, humankind, as portrayed in the *Oratio*, is a being superior to God. Humankind has the option, as Pico puts is succinctly, "to have what it desires, to be what it wants" *(id habere quod optat, id esse quod velit)*.[40] Not long afterwards, Pietro Pomponazzi will likewise say, in his work on the immortality of the soul *(De immortalitate animae*, 1504), that humankind is a "great marvel" *(grande miraculum)*, because it can transform itself into "any variety of [human] nature, given that it has the power to pursue those properties of things that it favors *(cum in unamquamque naturam vertibilis, cum sibi data est potestas sequi quamcumque proprietatem rerum maluerit)*".[41]

Pico was obviously aware that humankind cannot attain, in its absolute freedom, anything higher than divine existence. But precisely because at the moment when it has not *yet* decided to be either a God or an animal, humankind could feel superior to God. God latter was always God and would remain God. Humankind, on the other hand, had a choice that God never had. Prior to selecting, from among the numerous possibilities of self-formation, this one – to become God – humankind could still consider whether it wanted to be a God at all.

Still, Pico exhorts his fellow humans to fully realize the potential greatness of their human existence. He calls them to let their soul be seized by a "holy ambition" and to not remain content with mean things but to aspire, rather, to the highest things and strive with all their forces to attain them.[42] Pico emphasizes once again the role of the will in the self-formation of humankind: "nati sumus conditione, ut it simus quod volumus" – we are "born in this state so that we may be what we will to be."[43] And he derives from this state the specific human vocation. Given that they have it in their power to reach the highest things, humans must see to it that they rise to a form of existence in which the words of the prophet Asaph[44] become applicable to them: "Dii estis et filii excelsi omnes" – "Ye are all gods, and sons of the most high."[45]

40 Pico della Mirandola, *De Dignitate Hominis*, pp. 28–29 (English: p. 5). Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, p. 29.

41 Pietro Pomponazzi, *De immortalitate animae*, p. 117.

42 Pico della Mirandola, *De dignitate hominis*, pp. 32–33 (English: p. 7).

43 Ibid.

44 There is more than one character in the Bible by the name of Asaph. Pico has probably in mind Asaph, David's music director, who also composed psalms and was a prophet (see *1 Chronicles* 6; 16, 24; *1 Chronicles* 25; 1, 6; *2 Chronicles* 29; 30).

45 Ibid. Pico is here quoting Psalm 81, 6.

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Pico expressed his thoughts on the dignity of humankind on the basis of his claim to have understood why humankind is the happiest of all beings and thus worthy of general admiration. Pico vindicated this claim as one of the protagonists of an anthropological revolution. Traditional anthropology of classical-Greek and Christian origin contradicted his attempt to see in humankind purely a "great marvel." In order to justify humankind's "privilege" of "supreme admiration," Pico had to begin by laying down the principles of a new anthropology. That is why his contribution to the debate on the dignity and the misery of humankind is doubly significant: it characterizes the phase in which the debate swerved towards laying the foundation for a new, "modern," anthropology, on the one hand and, on the other, his contribution conveyed the most fundamental principles of this anthropology by being already grounded in these principles.

When we compare the *Oratio* with *Der Ackemann aus Böhmen*, we realize the great distance that separates Pico from the formal and thematic origins of the debate. Johannes von Tepl's work reflects in its formal structure the breadth of the debate. It is organized as a disputation between two protagonists, one (Death) who sets forth the principle of the *miseria hominis* and the other (the ploughman) who develops the theme of the *dignitas hominis*. The relation between the two themes is structured in a way that remains consistent until the end of the dialogue: Death appears as a representative of the natural order of things, whereas the ploughman assumes the role of the rebel who rises against this order and wants to one-sidedly modify it in favor of humankind. Thus, no matter how skillfully the ploughman puts forth his ideas of a human dignity that surpasses everything, given the thematic disposition of "order" and "rebellion" he is never able to erase the impression of immoderateness that attaches to these ideas.

In the *Oratio*, on the other hand, the incomparable dignity of humankind is assumed as obvious. Pico is no longer concerned with demonstrating the "excellence" of human nature. He is convinced from the start that humankind is the most sublime and most admirable of all beings, and his argumentative efforts are directed solely at replacing a hitherto faulty justification of human advantages by a more correct and complete one. That is also why Pico no longer preserves the form of a debate in the *Oratio*'s set-up. He presents his arguments for the dignity of humankind with great pathos and simply passes over in silence the arguments that point to the misery of humankind. It is, therefore, hardly a coincidence that his fable of the creation of the world and of the human being does not touch on the account of the Fall of Humankind in the Bible.

A "fall" of humankind, indeed, would have been incompatible with the new anthropology introduced in Pico's fable, because this fable refers solely to human beings who are free of all infirmity and defects and are the autonomous

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masters of their own existence. Pico formulates these principles quite clearly. The supreme principle posits the freedom of choice *(libera optio)* thanks to which humankind has total power to determine the conditions of its own existence. There being no limitations to actualizing its chosen form of existence, humankind can let itself sink to a brutish level or soar up towards a divine existence. This supreme principle is supplemented by two correlative principles. According to the first, humankind is a "work with no proper distinguishing characteristics," so that it would be futile to try to determine what is specifically human in human beings. According to the second supplementary principle, humankind is its own work. It can be whatever it wants to be. When laying down these principles of the new anthropology, Pico was likely unaware that their logical consequence would be humankind's pantocratic attitude towards reality. His original *intention* was merely to justify the dignity of the human being in a conclusively satisfactory manner. But in the *execution* of his intention, he developed far greater plans. He demanded of his contemporaries that they let go of their merely human existence and aspire instead to be something greater: to be gods in this world.

A Confusion of Thoughts: The Hypertrophy of Human Arrogance in the Unrestricted Freedom of the Human Imagination

When Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) wrote his *Apologie de Raimond Sebond* and registered his protest against the new anthropology and its promotion of the self-deification of the human being, there were very few among the major authors of his time who cared to mention the deficiencies and the misery of human existence in the midst of the widespread enthusiasm about the "great marvel" that is the human being. Montaigne was in fact the only author of the 16th century who attempted to subject once more the idea of *dignitas hominis* to a fundamental and comprehensive critique. The fact that he is an exception may explain the severity of Montaigne's critique. Montaigne seems to have been aware of the enduring psychological results of the debate on the dignity and the misery of humankind. The fact is that his habitual assumption in the *Apologie* was that his contemporaries' self-understanding was characterized by a blind belief in the godlike loftiness of humankind and in humankind's right to rule over all the things in this world. But Montaigne seems also to have been convinced that the approval with which these ideas of a *dignitas hominis* met among his contemporaries was not a good reason to discontinue the theoretical debate regarding whether these ideas accorded to the real conditions of

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human existence in this world. Precisely the social effects of the new anthropology demonstrated in his eyes the urgent need of a critique of the same.

In the context of the debate regarding the dignity and the misery of the human being, the *Apologie* has therefore a twofold signification. On the one hand, it represents the conclusion of this debate and, on the other, it already embodies a psychological analysis of the transformation in the self-understanding of European humanity which was then taking place and which was articulated in the debate itself. In his own contribution, Montaigne did not merely speak the closing words of the vanquished. It is true that he discussed with great verve once more the *miseria hominis*, but he evidently knew that he would not be able to persuade his contemporaries of the vanity of their existence, given that they were already focused on establishing the unrestricted dominion of humankind over the world of nature. Under these circumstances, it seemed to him more useful to uncover both the motives behind this enterprise and the expectations that might be tied to them. By posing this task to himself and accomplishing it, he expanded his critique of the new anthropology by building upon it a theory of the psychological-existential processes that gave rise to it. Thus, although he could do nothing about the social success of this anthropology, he was able to diagnose its principles as symptoms of intellectual blindness.

Montaigne utilized a variety of methods in the execution of his task. The first consisted in contrasting the fundamental principles of the new anthropology with corresponding experiences and observations. At one point, for example, he mentions Hermes Trismegistus' famous words on humankind, the *magnum miraculum:* "Just listen to Hermes Trismegistus praising our sufficiency: 'Among all the things which can astonish us, one thing has surpassed astonishment itself: Man's capacity to discover what the Divine nature is and then proceed to create it.'"[46] In this quotation, according to Montaigne, the great discrepancy between humankind's claim to divine dignity and the real conditions of human existence becomes clear. Somehow "man must be out of his mind. He cannot even create a fleshworm, yet creates gods by the dozen."[47] Likewise it would be stupid arrogance on our part to esteem ourselves the most perfect being *(chose)* in the universe. After all, for example, we could never make this world. Therefore a more excellent being *(nature)* than we are must have taken

46 Michel de Montaigne, *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, in Michel de Montaigne, *Essais*, II, 12, in *Oeuvres Complètes* (henceforth OC), p. 511. English translation: Michel de Montaigne, *The Complete Essays*, translated and edited by Michael Andrew Screech, London: Penguin Books, 1991, p. 594).
47 Ibid.

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this task in hand.[48] And harking back to Paul (1 Corinthians 8,2; Galatians 6,3), Montaigne declares that, if someone is too proud of their knowledge, they do not know what it really means to know anything. Would not humankind deceive itself, Montaigne asks in conclusion, by assuming that it is something when in fact it is nothing?[49]

Montaigne asserts that these "sentences of the holy spirit," as he calls them, quite clearly and forcefully express what he wants to say. But he also acknowledges that it is only with regard to people who submit to and obey the Holy Spirit's "authority" that he has no need of further proofs.[50] His critique of the new anthropology, however, is directed at those among his contemporaries who had rejected the Christian image of humankind and had developed instead that new self-understanding which renders them profane gods and makes them jealous of the transcendent God. As Montaigne realizes, these contemporaries want that they be, as he puts it, "whipped at their own expense" and demand that we do not "fight their reason save by reason alone."[51] This is why Montaigne introduces a second method of investigating the idea of "*dignitas hominis*." He goes back to the postulates set down by the new anthropology and then asks what the real situation of humankind in the world would have to be if these postulates were true. Montaigne sets out on this new train of thought by saying: "So let us consider for a while Man in isolation – Man with no outside help, armed with no arms but his own and stripped of that grace and knowledge of God."[52] We might then see how much constancy there is in all his "fine panoply." Montaigne is now addressing some questions at "man," i.e., at those human beings who insist on their own incomparable *dignitas,* which supposedly surpasses everything else, and who take themselves as lords and masters of nature. And Montaigne would like them to explain to him, using all their eloquence, on what basis they have built those great advantages they have above other living beings. He also would like to know who has put the notion in their heads that the marvelous rotation of the celestial vault, the everlasting light of those tapers coursing so proudly overhead, or the dread surging of the boundless sea had been established and had been preserved for so many centuries for their conven-

48 Ibid.
49 OC, p. 427. (English: p. 502) Cf. the even more emphatic statement: "La peste de l'homme, c'est l'opinion de sçavoir" (OC, p. 467; English: 543 f.: "There is a plague on Man: his opinion that he knows something.")
50 OC, p. 427. (English: p. 502).
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.

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ience and their service.[53] With these few questions Montaigne has already reached the goal of his demonstration. If one regards humankind for a moment as though it were in fact the lord and master of all things, then it appears as a grotesque figure in the "fine panoply" of its claim to godlike dignity and power. Humankind can be taken seriously only as long as it is mocked. And thus Montaigne concludes his demonstration simply by wondering whether it is possible to imagine anything more laughable than "this pitiful, wretched creature – who is not even master of himself, but exposed to shocks on every side – should call himself Master and Emperor of a universe …"[54]

This idea of the laughability of humankind who calls itself master and emperor of the universe, leads Montaigne to utilize the grotesque as a method for the unmasking of human presumption. He does this by, for example, transferring these egocentric claims of humankind to a different being in the world, which then utters the same presumptuous words that humankind uttered in its own self-centeredness. Why could not a gosling, say, speak like this:

> "All the parts of the universe are there for me: the earth serves me to waddle upon, the sun to give me light; the heavenly bodies exist to breathe their influences upon me; the winds help me this way, the waters, that way: there is nothing which the vault of Heaven treats with greater favour than me. I am Nature's darling: does not Man care for me, house me, serve me? It is for me that Man sows and grinds his corn; it is true that he eats me, but he also eats his fellow-men, and I eat the worms which kill him and eat him." [55]

The effect of this fictional transfer of human presumption to a gosling's self-satisfaction is obvious. If one observes it from "outside" and does not share in its self-satisfaction, the gosling and its "egocentric" affectation make a laughable impression. But just as laughable should be the impression humankind makes when it no longer wants to see beyond itself and relates instead everything to itself. We would be no different from a gosling, Montaigne implies, if we were to say that the fates and the world existed only for us; in other words, that there is thunder and lightning for our sake, that the creator and the creatures, everything in sum, were there for us, that we were the goal and the point towards which the universe of things were directed. Let us consider, Montaigne adds polemically, what philosophy has recorded about celestial affairs for more than two thousand years: "the gods have acted and spoken only for Man."[56] For Montaigne the grotesque of human arrogance is not least also the grotesque of phi-

53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 OC, p. 514 (English: p. 597).
56 Ibid. (English: p. 597).

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losophy. He believes to have found among those who are customarily regarded as "philosophers" not only genuine but also especially those false "philosophers" whom he calls, with Plato, *philodoxoi*, the lovers of opinion. It is from such a race of "foolish people" that we have learned to appoint ourselves as judges of the world, and it is also from them that we have the ridiculous idea that human reason can survey everything beyond and within the vault of the heavens, that it encompasses everything and can do anything, and that it is by virtue of this reason that we can know and recognize everything.[57]

Montaigne regards such ideas not as the result of philosophical reflection but as the product of human arrogance. This arrogance gives a very strong impetus to his critique. He thinks it important to humble humankind in its arrogance as much as possible. His preferred method here is to compare humans with animals. Humankind in its arrogance assigns distinct roles to animals, humankind's "brothers and companions," and apportions to them capacities and forces as it sees fit, without having the slightest idea of what goes on inside them. Shouldn't one start by asking what comparison provides the basis for attributing stupidity to animals? When Montaigne plays with his cat, who can determine who whiles away the time with whom: He with the cat, or the cat with him? If there is a lack of communication between animals and us, it could be either because of us or because of them. Therefore, it is not possible to determine whether the blame for the lack of mutual understanding lies with animals or with us. We do not understand animals better than they understand us, and for this reason they might take us for simple-minded just as we take them for simple-minded.[58]

With his questions, Montaigne goes down the ladder, as it were, from human pride to human simple-mindedness. He interprets the self-importance with which humans judge animals as arising from that ignorance in which human beings find themselves about animals, their "brothers and companions". Humankind does not exhibit much intelligence when declaring, without having much of a basis for it, that animals are dumb beings. Rather the opposite: they run the risk of behaving simple-mindedly by forming a judgment without examining and pondering the relevant evidence. Montaigne seems to be convinced not only that human beings consistently yield to the temptation to form arrogant prejudices, but also that they do so because the quality of their life is actually inferior to that of animals.

> To ourselves we attribute goods which are purely imaginary and fantastical; future, absent goods, which it exceeds our human capacity, of itself, to vouch for; or else they are goods

57 OC, p. 523 (English: pp. 607 f.). Cf. also OC, p. 540.
58 OC, p. 430 (English: pp. 505 f.)

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> which our unruly opinions attribute to ourselves quite wrongly, such as knowledge, rationality or pre-eminence. We abandon to animals a share in solid, palpable goods which really do exist: peace, repose, security, innocence…[59]

According to Montaigne, all beings in the world are "equal" in some respect or another. Each one of them is characterized by a peculiar kind of "intelligence" and possesses its own "advantages" by virtue of which it is "superior" to other beings which lack such "advantages." When one compares two different kinds of living being, say humans and animals, one will only be able to point out their respective excellences, which each of them possesses in a peculiar way. Each can actualize the advantages present in its nature, but as long as a human being does not become an animal, and vice-versa, neither the human being nor the animal would excel regarding those things in which the human being needs the animal's advantages or the animal the advantages of a human being. Humankind seems "superior" to animals when animals are measured by the advantages of the human being, and the animal seems "superior" to humans when the human is measured by the advantages of the animal. Thus the attempt to make humankind the measure for judging all other beings would be not only an unjustified and arbitrary enterprise, but would also lead, if carried out with logical consistency, to the opposite result. Here, human beings would be not only the measure but also that which is measured, because they would also have to be able to measure themselves against everything for which they want to be the measure.

In this way, Montaigne concludes, we are neither "above" nor "below" everything else. Everything under the sun is subject to the same fate and the same law. There are indeed differences, hierarchies, and gradations, but always within one identical nature. Humankind must be forced back to its proper limits; it has the same entitlement as every other creature of its kind and thus no privilege or any other genuine and real excellence. The feeling of superiority in which it indulges is quite baseless. And even if it is true that human beings alone among living beings possess the "freedom of imagination" *(liberté de l'imagination)* and the "confusion of thoughts" with which they can conceive both things that are and things that are not, as well as what they want, and the false and the true, they have to pay a high price for this distinction, for it is the chief source of the woes which beset them: sin, sickness, irresolution, confusion, and despair.[60]

Montaigne had a particular interest in this discussion of the different aspects of the discrepancy between the pantocratic claims human beings are bold

59 OC, p. 464 (English: p. 540). Cf. also pp. 465 f (English: p. 541).
60 OC, pp. 436 f. (English: p. 514); cf. OC, pp. 432 f., p. 444.

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enough to make and the conditions to which human existence is actually subject. He wanted to determine the psycho-existential processes that underlie the human project of ruling and possessing the world. And the degree to which he succeeded in attaining this goal was directly proportional to the degree in which he uncovered the connection between human arrogance and human imagination.

According to Montaigne, there is one desire among all the desires possible to human beings that surely and permanently "confuses" their thoughts: their arrogant desire to be superior to all other things of this world, as well as the most exquisite and pre-eminent of all beings in the universe. Those who impose this desire upon their perceptions must believe to experience and recognize themselves in their perceptions as the measure of all things.

> The natural, original distemper of Man is presumption. Man is the most blighted and frail of all creatures and, moreover, the most given to pride. This creature knows and sees that he is lodged down here, among the mire and muck of the world, bound and nailed to the deadest, most stagnant part of the universe, in the lowest storey of the building, the farthest from the vault of heaven; his characteristics place him in the third and lowest category of animate creatures, yet, in thought, he sets himself above the circle of the Moon, bringing the very heavens under his feet. The vanity of this same thought makes him equal himself to God; attribute to himself God's mode of being; pick himself out and set himself apart from the mass of other creatures.[61]

Montaigne, therefore, believes that it is possible to ascertain the psycho-existential processes that are the source of humankind's project of rule and possessing the world. This process is the result of a "confusion of thoughts," which in turn stems from a *hypertrophy of human presumption* in the *unrestricted freedom of the human imagination*. The more what is imagined flatters human pride, the more inflated in turn becomes the pride which must be satisfied by the work of the imagination. Through this mutual escalation of presumption and imagination, arrogance becomes ever more enduringly an everyday activity. Arrogance is that form of existence in which the supremacy of the imagination is perpetuated in human thought and is protected from perceptions that might otherwise threaten it.

According to Montaigne, this arrogance harms human beings in two different ways. It pushes them outside the common paths (*voyes communes*) of humanity, and it makes them infatuated with the latest novelties *(nouvelletez)*.[62]

61 OC, pp. 429 f. (English: p. 505).
62 OC, p. 478. (English: p. 555).

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The thesis concerning the loss of intellectual commonality with other human beings is readily intelligible when seen against the background of Montaigne's discussion of the "confusion of thoughts." The connection that Montaigne sees between humankind's pride and its inclination to become interested in novelties for novelty's sake requires, however, further clarification. First, we must point out that Montaigne is not merely applying the old concept of "curiosity" *(curiosité)* but is also reviving its original meaning through his concept of "love of novelty" *(amour de la nouvelleté)*.[63] He ranks this "love of novelty" with sensations and passions such as fear, ambition, envy, obsession with honor, and arrogance, and thus understands it as a type of perverted "love," as an addiction, in other words. Indeed, he regards it also as a symptom of the type of emotional disturbance *(agitation)* that may arise due to the impression produced by the knowledge that a human being *believes* to possess of things. Our minds, Montaigne says, are dangerous tools, rash and prone to go astray: it is hard to reconcile them to order and moderation.[64] Were someone to ask humankind whether it possesses the power to find what it seeks, and whether this centuries-long search has brought him any new force or any reliable truth, it must confess that it has gained nothing except a realization of its own weakness. Montaigne adds that the same fate befalls people who attempted and investigated everything and, instead of getting hold of something firm or secure, found in this accumulation of knowledge and this mass of multifarious things nothing by vanity. They finally gave up their presumption and rediscovered the natural conditions of their existence.[65]

Thus, Montaigne sees human beings desirous of knowledge placed before a fundamental alternative: They can, on the one hand, become entangled in the *amour de la nouvelleté*, or they can become conscious of the limits of their knowledge, that is to say, of their knowing unknowingness. The first case takes place when the experience of the weakness of human knowledge is covered up by the human presumption that fancies to be in possession of a knowledge which in fact does not have.[66] In this case it is possible that the intensity and extravagance of the *amour de la nouvelleté*, which is ever searching novelties in order to shun reflection, will cause the limits of human possibilities to be forgotten. But those who observe these limits and are willing to admit that the

63 OC, p. 483. (English: p. 561).
64 OC, p. 441 (English: 560 f.); cf. OC, S. 516 (English: p. 629).
65 OC, p. 480. (English: 557 f.).
66 OC, p. 468. (English: p. 544).

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knowledge that is possible to the human mind lies in knowing unknowingness will be following Montaigne's advice:

> My advice to you is to cling to moderation and temperance, as much in your opinions and arguments as in your conduct, fleeing what is merely new or odd.[67]

67 OC, p. 541 (English: 629).

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Chapter 6

The Mastery Over Nature

Thus, knowing myself to be the master of the Earth,
whose fire breath nothing finite can withstand,
I look around, and the earth is my footstool
and the sky is the baldachin of the throne of my glory.
Ferdinand Lasalle, *Kriegsmanifest*

The "Kingdom of Man"

The symbol that most clearly expresses the goal of a modern civilization was introduced by Francis Bacon in the *Novum Organum*, published in 1620. He speaks here, in an implicit reference to a theological model, of the "kingdom of man, founded on the sciences" *(regnum hominis, quod fundatur in scientiis)*.[1] What Bacon means with the analogy between the *regnum Dei* and the *regnum hominis* should be evident: A new science of nature would enable human beings to establish by their own means, independently of divine revelation and of the promise of God's kingdom on earth, a mastery over all things in this world that would be, as the symbolic analogy suggests, in no essential way inferior to God's own mastery of the world. And yet it would be inaccurate to conclude that the *regnum hominis* envisioned by Bacon was identical to the *regnum Dei*. His symbolic analogy was likely intended to point out a difference rather than an identity. Bacon associated his *Novum Organum* with the idea of a turning point in European civilization. He placed himself in opposition to the Aristotelian tradition, in which, as he asserts, all philosophers had hitherto stood, and who precisely for this reason had given a fanciful, rather than a correct, depiction of the world of nature. He claims to be the first to have laid down the foundations for a true science of nature, one that would finally make it possible for humankind to discover the "causes and motions" as well as the "occult forces in nature" and thus extend its "control over nature" *(imperium in naturam)* to the "limits of what is possible."[2]

1 Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum* (LXVIII); English translation: John M. Robertson (ed.), *The Philosophical Works of Francis* Bacon, London: Routledge, 1905, p. 274.
2 See the relevant formulations in *New Atlantis*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, London: Longmans, 1857–1870, vol. III, p. 156; as well as in *Novum Organum* (CXXII), p. 216. (English: p. 297).

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His enthusiasm for such an epochal leap in human civilization, along with his self-perception regarding the role which he saw himself playing in it, might have prompted Bacon to announce this hoped-for control of humankind over nature as a "kingdom of man." This expression – "kingdom of man" – is obviously used here in analogy to "kingdom of God," which in turn represented for the Christian Bacon the supreme and most perfect form of dominion. This analogy was not immune to a possible fundamentalist reinterpretation, according to which this *regnum hominis* would anticipate, and perhaps even replace, the *regnum Dei*. And, as a matter of fact, the *philosophes* of the 18th century would perform just such a secularizing, fundamentalist, turn by defining man as the *roi de la terre*, without whose quasi-divine position in the center of the world everything else in the world has no meaning. There is nothing in Bacon's own works, however, that would indicate that he himself understood the concept of a *regnum hominis* as anything other than a symbol for the human control of nature. This was the chief aim of his efforts as a scholar and a writer. And yet, by defining the human control of nature as different from, but also as equal in rank to, God's world-rule, he also adverted to the pancosmic competition which humankind enters when striving for control over nature, i.e., for the position of master of the earth. Humankind must repeat in its science the creation of the world; it must bring the world that is to be controlled into the circle of its own existence. Without a perfect knowledge of its causes, motions, and hidden forces, humankind's control of nature would not be sufficiently justified; and, if human power did not match natural causality, humankind could not exercise its control over nature unrestrictedly. In order to be the master of nature, humankind must compete against it. For as long as any aspect of its reality eludes human knowledge and power, nature still guards "secrets" that render it superior to humankind despite the human claim to control everything that nature produces.

The Competition Between Humankind and Nature

As we know, the contest between humankind and nature is even today, in the first third of the 21st century, not yet decided, and, after a run of four hundred years (and counting), it generates among those aware of its consequences no longer a Baconian enthusiasm but rather an expectation of impending catastrophes. When thinkers such as Descartes and Bacon succeeded in tying modern consciousness to the idea that the greatest human task is to take possession of nature, it was impossible to foresee all the consequences that this civilizational experiment might have (even though Johannes von Tepl had already in 1401

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expressed himself quite clearly regarding this point through Death's mouth in the latter's debate with the ploughman). This might be the reason why, at the beginning, much reflection was devoted to the ways and means for a human domination of nature but very little to how the corresponding actions might affect human beings and their existence in the world. A typical example for this theoretical negligence, which to contemporary observers appears odd, is found in Bacon's pronouncement:

> Only let the human race recover that right over nature *(jus suum in naturam)* which belongs to it by divine bequest, and let power be given it; the exercise thereof will be governed by sound reason and true religion.[3]

From the standpoint of its genesis, the modern idea of a human control over nature was connected to a speculation regarding how humankind's new creation of the world through natural science and philosophy was to be conceived. The focus of this speculation, therefore, was not the practical feasibility and the repercussions of such a project but rather the logical sequence of the stages the new creation of nature would need to go through. My objective in what follows is to outline this sequence. I will have recourse here to statements by several thinkers, such as Francis Bacon, René Descartes, Georges-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling. We are dealing here, indeed, with a problem common to all of them, such that the partial contribution each of them makes can be integrated into an overall presentation of the most essential aspects of the problem.

The first stage of the sequence was determined in thorough accordance to "modern" consciousness: A *new beginning* was posited. Bacon wrote his *Novum Organum* as the counterpart to Aristotle's *Organon*. The anti-Aristotelian orientation of Bacon's thought was the result not only of his personal dislike of Aristotelian philosophy, which he felt already as a sixteen-year-old student at Cambridge as well as throughout the rest of his life,[4] but it was also the logical consequence of his fundamental philosophical conception. Aristotle was the most important representative and the most influential authority of the philosophy taught in the "schools," i. e., in colleges and universities, and Bacon saw precisely in this school philosophy the obstacle that stood in the way of the development of what for him was the only true science: the "science of nature." Philosophy up to now, Bacon asserts, has produced only useless and imitative

3 Bacon, *Novum Organum* (CXXIX), p. 223 (English: p. 301).
4 William Rawley, *The Life of the Right Honourable Francis Bacon*, in: *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. 1, pp. 3–18.

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models of the world with the help of human phantasy, models that deserve to be thoroughly destroyed.[5] Hitherto, however, no one has mustered the necessary mental rigor and perseverance to sweep away *(abolere)* all theories and traditional ideas so as to put together everything again by the understanding thus made fair and even.[6] The human mind must finally produce the true picture of the world, but not as traditional understanding dreamed it up but as discovered through investigation.[7]

Science as the Instrument of the Domination of Nature

Bacon's task is thus clearly formulated. His scholarly interest is directed at the research of the inner motions and forces of nature, and his practical goal is humankind's domination of nature. He rejects the assumption that immediately suggests itself to the effect that philosophy, the enterprise of knowing the essence of things, which was already quite old in Bacon's time, might contribute anything at all to the science of nature. To him it is clear that the philosophy of the past not only contributes nothing in this regard but also that it is a hindrance to a profitable investigation of nature. The science of nature required, therefore, according to Bacon, a destructive overcoming of the philosophy of the past as well as a constructive new founding of science in general. But given that "no one" has as yet dared to "throw away" the whole of traditional philosophy and to see to it that the entire work of the understanding be "commenced afresh" on the basis of the *tabula rasa* thus created, Bacon could not reject the consequences of his own logic and not be himself the one who "threw away" everything. He declared that his intention was to "open a new way for the understanding,"[8] because the goal was nothing less than a "restoration of learning and knowledge."[9]

In Bacon's and Descartes' parallel reflections on science, the project of a restauration of science was conditioned by the premise that science must be the instrument through which humankind is to subject nature to its control. A "restoration of learning and knowledge" meant, therefore, above all, a new determination of the *function* of the scientific enterprise. But In order to undertake this new determination, it was necessary to distinguish between two kinds

5 Bacon, *Novum Organum* (CXXIV), p. 298.
6 *Novum Organum* (XCVII), p. 288.
7 *Novum Organum* (CXXIV), p. 298.
8 *Novum Organum*, [Author's] Preface, pp. 256 f.
9 Ibid. p. 154.

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of “science”: the “older” science cultivated hitherto and the “newer” one that was now desired. This distinction was made by means of the criteria that embodied the characteristics of the “new” science. Bacon, for example, made the following remark concerning the “older” kind of science: “the sciences we now possess are merely systems for the nice ordering and setting forth of things already invented; not methods of invention or directions for new works.”[10] It is quite obvious that Bacon’s disparaging judgment of the “older” kind of science had its basis in the definition of the function of the “newer” science favored by him:

> [T]he true and lawful goal of the sciences is none other than this: that human life be endowed with new discoveries and powers.[11]

Thus, in order to promote the human plan of attaining control over nature, the “sciences” had to satisfy very precise requirements: they had to be useful and practical, and they must lead to immediately applicable results. Such results would be “inventions” and “plans for new works,” through which the human race might be “enriched,” i. e., might presumably become more powerful than nature. This new, modern, definition of the function of “science” was later used by Descartes to draw the terminological distinction between an “older” and a “newer” form of science. For, as he writes in the *Discours de la méthode:*

> It is possible to arrive at knowledge that would be very useful in life and that, in place of that speculative philosophy taught in the schools, it is possible to find a practical philosophy, by means of which, knowing the force and the actions of fire, water, air, the stars, the heavens, and all the other bodies that surround us, just as distinctly as we know the various skills of our craftsmen, we might be able, in the same way, to use them for all the purposes for which they are appropriate, and thus render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature *(maîtres et possesseurs de la nature)*.[12]

Thus, according to Descartes, the transition from the *philosophie speculative* to a *philosophie pratique* not only provides humanity with a new understanding of its own knowledge and power but also opens up for it the whole world of nature as the territory of its dominion and possession. Descartes, however, attached a specific condition to all of humankind’s scientific endeavors in the context of this

10 *Novum Organum* (VIII), p. 260.
11 *Novum Organum* (LXXXI), p. 280.
12 René Descartes, *Discours de la Méthode*, p. 61 f. English translation: René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy,* translated by Donald A. Cress, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1998, p. 35.

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promise of a "kingdom of humankind." A "science" that will serve to establish humankind's control over nature must be a "perfect" and reliably "certain" science *(science parfaite, science certaine).*[13] It ought not to lag behind the mathematical regularity with which all the processes immanent in nature take place. And thus the human beings who want to appoint themselves masters and possessors of nature must first rise to the challenge that nature poses to their science. The *philosophie pratique* must be perfected into a *science certaine* having a degree of certainty equal to that of the laws of nature. Humankind will be able to conquer and control nature only on the basis of such a congruence of "science" and "nature," that is to say, only when human beings are able to themselves produce what nature produces.

Bacon makes his point very aptly: "I stake all on the victory of art over nature" *(victoria artis super naturam).*[14] If human beings were indeed in a position to develop all their knowledge and power into an *ars,* i.e., a *techne*, through which they imitated or even surpassed the works of nature, they would then in fact have achieved control over it. They would not only be independent of nature but would make nature itself dependent on their desires and plans. If nature should fail to produce the desired results, humankind itself could get to work and, if it seemed expedient to make use of the forces of nature, it would redirect and integrate these forces into the world it had created by means of its art.

Such a victory of human art over nature, however, would presuppose humankind's thorough knowledge of the inner processes or "secrets" of nature. In order to be able to imitate it, human beings must first investigate nature's core and its acting forces and modes of action. Only in this way will they discover the "art" of nature, which they must make their own in order to be able to themselves produce all that nature accomplishes. Humankind must, as Bacon so vividly expresses it, find its way from the "outer courts of nature" into its "inner chambers":

> But if any man there be who, not content to rest in and use the knowledge which has already been discovered, aspires to penetrate further; to overcome, not an adversary in argument, but nature in action; to seek, not pretty and probable conjectures, but certain and demonstrable knowledge; – I invite all such to join themselves, as true sons of knowledge, with me, that passing by the outer courts of nature, which numbers have trodden, we may find a way at length into her inner chambers.[15]

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13 René Descartes, *Les Principes de la Philosophie*, in Ferdinand Alquié (ed.), René Descartes, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, vol. III (1643–1650), Paris: Garnier, 1973, p. 146; *Règles pour la direction de l'esprit*, in *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, vol. I (1618–1637), Paris: Garnier, 1963, p. 81.

14 Bacon, *Novum Organum* (CXVII), p. 295.

15 Ibid. "Author's Preface to the Novum Organum," pp. 257 f.

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This image of humankind, who "finds its way" into nature's "inner chambers," suggests the idea that, in the investigation of nature, humankind must overcome moral barriers as well as spatial distances. When speaking of the method by which humankind may uncover the "secrets" of nature, however, Bacon is working with the idea of a nature composed of parts, i.e., with the idea of a *mundi contructio*. The human mind cannot have a true picture of the world, he says, without undertaking a very diligent dissection and anatomy of the world *(mundi dissectio)*.[16] With this methodological instruction to "dissect" nature "into parts" *(naturam secare)* in order to investigate it,[17] Bacon clarifies what he means by his demand that humankind finally "find a way" into nature's "inner chambers." At the same time, he shows the path on which human beings may attain the "art" of imitating nature in their own works. If the world of nature can be equated to a *constructio* composed of separately subsisting bodies and parts, its *dissection* is indeed the best way to discover the art underlying its *composition*. The manner and the source of the composition of any given thing would be revealed in the process of dissecting or de-composing it. Thus, to the extent that nature is "dissected," its "construction" is "repeated" in the inverse direction. In the end, when the whole world of nature has been "de-composed," the component bodies and parts would lie there separately, on the one hand, and, on the other, the one who had "dissected" that universal dynamic structure which we call "nature" would now possess the knowledge necessary to recompose it.

Humankind would thus obtain a double advantage from a "dissection" of nature. First, it would be in a position to perfectly see through the inner processes of nature, i.e., through the composition of the *mundi constructio*. In other words, it would have arrived from the "outer courts of nature" in its "inner chambers" so that none of its secrets would be hidden any longer. Second, this insight into all the "secrets" of nature would bring humankind closer to the goal which it had set to the "dissection" of nature: the victory of human art over nature.

In *Die Bestimmung des Menschen (The Vocation of Man*, 1800), Johann Gottlieb Fichte explained how this victory can be achieved in a perfect manner:

> Science, first called into existence by the pressure of necessity, shall afterwards calmly and carefully investigate the unchangeable laws of Nature, review its powers at large, and learn to calculate their possible manifestations; and while closely following the footsteps of Na-

16 *Novum Organum* (CXXIV), p. 298.

17 *Novum Organum* (LI), p. 267. Cf. ibid., Book 2: "De interpretatione naturae sive de regno hominis", aphorisms I and XVI.

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> ture in the living and active world, form for itself in thought a new ideal one. Every discovery which Reason has extorted from Nature shall be maintained throughout the ages, and become the ground of new knowledge, for the common possession of our race. Thus shall Nature ever become more and more intelligible and transparent, even in her most secret depths; and human power, enlightened and armed by human invention, shall rule over her without difficulty ...[18]

Fichte reemphasizes here that a victory of human art over nature can only be obtained through a competition between humankind and nature. His description of this competition begins by referring to the methodological turn, already described, according to which a complete knowledge of the world requires the detour through the dissection of the world. He can thus proceed to concentrate on the formal result of this turn and describe accordingly the competition between humankind and nature as a contest in which humankind is no longer fundamentally inferior to a nature which it does not know but which it wants to imitate and even subjugate. Fichte regards the human being who has penetrated nature and has acquired the capacity to both "review" its powers at large and "calculate" its possible developments, a competitor who is the equal, if not the superior, of nature. He thus logically places over against the "living" and "active" nature that "new nature" which humankind forms for itself "in thought." By penetrating the "most secret depths" of nature, humankind has appropriated the "art" which is at the foundation of the dynamic structure of nature. Thus, it may now marshal this art in order to compete with nature. Humankind is able to do this by forming a "new nature," whereby at first it merely reproduces the "active" nature but then also increasingly conquers it.

The "new nature" which humankind builds for itself "in thought" may at first "closely follow the footsteps" of the "living" and "active" nature. But it can also – to stay with the metaphor – hurry on ahead and separate itself from this original nature. Assuming that humankind once succeeds in appropriating the "art" which is at the foundation of the dynamic structure of nature, it will also be able, with the help of a "nature"-creating "art," to transform the original nature into a totally different, i.e., into an artificially recreated nature. The process of such a transformation of nature, however, would be equivalent to a process of human inventions. Inventions (or "discoveries"), as defined by Francis Bacon, "are as it were new creations, and imitations of God's works."[19] As an inventor, as a *homo faber* who has made the forces of nature its own, humankind

18 Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, Hamburg: Meiner, 1962, p. 104. English translation: Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, translated by William Smith, La Salle, IL: Open Court, 1965, p. 117 (with modifications).
19 Bacon, *Novum Organum* (CXXIX), p. 300.

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would not have to limit itself to form a "new nature" merely "in thought." It would stand before nature, as Fichte puts it, "armed" with its inventions. Human beings would then actually control nature, because they would know how to use *its* forces in order to transform it into *their* projects of "nature."

The Transformation of Nature Through the Reality-Founding Power of Humankind

In the short essay, *La Nature* (1764), which he included in the 12th volume of his *Histoire Naturelle*, Buffon depicted with the enthusiasm characteristic of Enlightenment *philosophie* the image of the human being who transforms the *nature brute* into a *nature nouvelle*. It is humankind, he writes, who first produces among all living beings order and harmony; and it is only then that nature is beautified and refined. "See these wastelands and these barren regions," he exclaims, "where man has not settled down yet."[20] "Raw nature" *(nature brute)* is ugly, it is indeed a dying nature. Only at the moment when humankind exclaims: "It is I alone who make nature complaisant and living," is everything transformed: a "new nature" *(nature nouvelle)* issues forth from humankind's hands. Buffon expresses his admiration at how beautiful nature is when cultivated by human hand, at how it becomes as glorious as it can be only by humankind's care and solicitude.[21]

Thus carried away by an intemperate verbal enthusiasm, Buffon does not fail to also bring out, in his picture of the new creation of nature by humankind, the shadows that humankind casts on nature in the radiance of its power over it:

> Man, the master of the territory of the earth, has transformed and renewed everything in the world. And yet his mastery rests only on the right of the conqueror.[22]

Buffon's words not only communicate the enthusiasm which the idea of a new creation and domination of nature kindled in 18th century *philosophes;* these words also express the attitude that human beings adopt towards nature in their attempt to transform it into their unrestricted property. According to Buffon, humankind adopts in its transformation of nature the posture of a "conqueror" who sees his "ego" as the center of all things. To nature, in contrast, Buffon as-

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20 Buffon, *La Nature*, in Buffon, *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1954, p. 33.
21 Ibid. p. 34.
22 Ibid.

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signs merely the status of a "raw nature" which, in the absence of humankind's "solicitude," exists in the mode of dying rather than in the mode of living. Its existence should depend as it were on humankind alone, on the "ego" that gathers together the whole of reality in itself and thus first brings all the things of nature into "actuality" by uttering the words: "It is I alone who make nature complaisant and living."

The process of the transformation of nature through humankind would thus take place on two different planes. On the one plane, the transformation would take place of itself, as just described in detail: Humankind would first "penetrate" nature, then "dissect," it, and finally recreate it into a "new nature." On the second plane a fundamental "shift of power" would take place in the relation between humankind and nature: humankind would, on the one hand, increasingly disempower nature and, on the other, would concentrate all power over the things in the world in itself. In what follows, I would like to describe the conceptional sequence of this process of gathering together all reality-founding power into humankind, a process that would, in turn, result necessarily from the process of the transformation of nature through humankind.

(1) A "power shift" in the relation between humankind and nature would begin with a "spatial" dissociation of humankind from nature. Humankind would conceive itself as existing "outside" nature, and thus as not belonging to the realm of objects which it calls "nature." Without this conception of a "spatial" dissociation, the idea of human control over nature could not be maintained. One cannot control something of which one is a part. Thus, in the consciousness of the human beings who want to control nature, "humankind" and "nature" must come apart through a spatial distance. This methodologically necessary spatialization of the thought involved in establishing the human control of nature manifests itself also in the corresponding geometrical imagery employed by Bacon and Descartes.

(2) On the basis of this spatial distance, humankind could then "survey" nature from "outside." Nature would thus appear from afar as a "whole" which could be "encompassed" and into which one could "penetrate." Humankind would assume that, in its role as a "researcher" with a scientific interest but otherwise personally uninvolved, it could traverse back the distance to nature and find its way from the "outer" regions of nature into its "innermost" core. Once it had traversed and investigated the entire "space" of nature, and having returned to a spatial distance to it, it would have to control, and be able to make use of, all of nature's inner processes (which at this point would be fully understood) from the "outside."

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> If someone were able to make not just a particular discovery, no matter how useful, but rather to kindle a light in nature that would illuminate the regions that lie beyond our present knowledge of nature and then, raised higher, would uncover and bring into the open its most hidden secrets, this man I would regard as the founder of a human dominion over nature *(humani in universum imperii)*, the champion of freedom, and the conqueror of necessity.[23]

(3) Through a "spatial" dissociation from nature, humankind would thus occupy what is likely the most advantageous starting position for a victory over nature. But the question is "where" this position would be, in which "place" humankind would be when it found itself "outside" nature. What would be this "outside" if not the infinity of all points from among which humankind would need to choose one as its fixed "place" in its relation to nature? It is true that humankind could make its choice arbitrarily, but still the question is: How would it know "where" it should turn? "Hither"? "Thither"? Standing "outside" nature, from where it would "survey" nature, it would no longer see what it itself is. Hovering without orientation in a shapeless space, humankind would find itself in the situation of that human being, described by Pascal, who no longer knows the place of his or her existence in the world:

> He is visibly confused, because it has fallen from his proper place and cannot find it again. Full of restlessness, he searches for it everywhere but cannot find it in an impenetrable darkness.[24]

(4) The experience of the uncertainty regarding the human "place" in the world could, of course, be felt with different degrees of intensity. And, correspondingly, there would be different ways of coming to terms with it. Still, all these different ways would have in common the fundamental intention of recovering a "place" or "fixed point" to which humankind could fasten its existence, which would have become unmoored from nature. Pascal felt this experience very intensely; he saw humankind helplessly and hopelessly adrift in an infinite, empty space. He was convinced that the human desire for a firm ground could not be fulfilled but nonetheless spoke of it: "We burn with the desire to find a firm foundation *(assiette ferme)* and an ultimate, immutable, basis."[25]

Bacon, on the other hand, had by far not as many doubts regarding the stability of the humankind who undertook to take possession of nature, and this was because he had neutralized the problem through a logical circle. Human-

23 Bacon, *De Interpretatione Naturae Prooemium*, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, vol. III, p. 518.
24 Blaise Pascal, *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 1159.
25 Ibid. p. 1109.

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kind should be not only "master" but also "servant" *(minister)* of nature. "Nature to be commanded must be obeyed."[26] Thus, according to Bacon, in establishing its control over nature, humankind has its "place" or "position" already determined by the ambiguous role that it itself plays here. It makes itself the "master" of nature, on the one hand, but it also acts, on the other, as a "servant" and "interpreter" *(interpres)* of nature[27] when it penetrates, dissects, and takes possession of it.

(5) Bacon's ambiguous logic was certainly inadequate to solve the problem of "where" humankind should start when desiring to take possession of nature from "outside." Pascal, by referring to humankind's desire for an *assiette ferme*, outlined the solution far more fittingly. Yet he regarded this desire as essentially futile and made correspondingly no attempt to find such an *assiette ferme*.

This attempt was made by Descartes. He wrote at the beginning of his first *Méditation:* "Archimedes sought but one firm and immovable point in order to move the entire earth from one place to another. Just so, great things are also to be hoped for if I succeed in finding just one thing, however slight, that is certain and unshaken.[28] Descartes believed indeed to have found, in the meditative process leading to the *cogito ergo sum,* the "Archimedean point" that could provide the sure and certain foundation both for all human thought and for all human action. This point was the human "*ego*." What Descartes was seeking was not only intellectual but also existential security.[29] The method that had led him to the self-certainty of his *moi* should also help him develop that *philosophie pratique* by means of which humankind could make itself the master and possessor of nature.[30] But while Descartes identified the human *ego* as the "Archimedean point" from which humankind could understand and control the world, he shrank from the attempt to wholly equate the meaning of the real with the self-certainty of the human *ego*. Such an identity would be first postulated by an Enlightenment *philosophe*, namely Rousseau:

26 Bacon, *Novum Organum* (I, III), p. 259.

27 Ibid.

28 René Descartes, *Méditations* (I), in *Oeuvres Philosophiques*, vol. II (1638 – 1642), Paris: Garnier, 1967, p. 414. English translation: *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, p. 63.

29 Cf. *Discours de la Méthode*, pp. 27 – 30.

30 Cf. pp. 60 – 65, as well as the parallel commentary of Etienne Gilson, ibid. pp. 443 – 446.

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> What is so ridiculous about thinking that everything is made for me, if I am the only one who is able to relate everything to himself? It is true, then, that man is the king of the earth he inhabits.[31]

(6) The discovery of the *ego* would be the turning point in the process of the "shift of power" in the relation between humankind and nature. Humankind would now know on what basis it could establish its control of nature: the *assiette ferme* of its self-certain *ego.* And it would also discover in the self-reflection of its *ego* the coordinates by which it could determine its "place" in the world as well as the "spatial" relation of nature to itself. Thus it would assume that its *ego* rests on itself like a circle which would not only surround and encompass all things of nature but would also first make them "actual."[32] Humankind would determine its relation to nature as the relation between model and copy, reality and imitation, the encompassing and the enclosed, the dominant and the dominated. In its attempt to take possession of nature, humankind would now assume that all reality-founding power belongs to it alone, to its self-centered *ego*, and that nature itself is powerless or, as Fichte formulates it, the "servant" of the human *ego:*

> What then, according to my wish, shall be the especial seat and centre of this peculiar inward power of the I? … [I]t must be my thought and will. I would exercise my voluntary power freely, for the accomplishment of aims which I shall have freely adopted; and this will, as its ultimate ground which can be determined by no higher, shall move and mould, first my own body, and through it the surrounding world. My active powers shall be under the control of my will alone, and shall be set in motion by nothing else than by it. … My actions shall be the result of this will, and without it there shall absolutely no action of mine ensue, since there shall be no other power over my actions but this will. Then shall my powers, determined by, and subject to the dominion of, my will, invade the external world. I will be the lord of Nature, and she shall be my servant. I will influence her according to the measure of my capacity, but she shall have no influence on me.[33]

31 Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 336. The phrase about humankind as "roi de la terre" is also found in Buffon, *La Nature*, p. 33.

32 The circle has repeatedly been chosen as a symbol for the representation of the reality of God in cosmological and religious thought. It is the most perfect of all geometrical figures and thus a symbol for the infinite, which has no "beginning" and no "end." (See the entry, "circle," in Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant (eds.), *Dictionnaire des symbols,* Paris: Laffont, 1969, pp. 158–161). In the *ego*-speculation of modern thinkers such as Rousseau, Novalis, and Nietzsche, this symbol is favored but also essentially reinterpreted; the circle is here used as a symbol for the godlike perfection and omnipotence of the human I. Cf. Georges Poulet, *Les métamorphoses du cercle,* Paris: Plon, 1961.

33 Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, p. 28. English translation: *The Vocation of Man*, pp. 28–29 (with modifications).

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(7) A fundamental "power shift" in the relation between humankind and nature would take place after the previous phase. So long as it was still uncertain as to the "place" it could take in its relation to nature, humankind could still be conceived as the "servant" of nature. Now, however, after the human *ego* has been discovered as the Archimedean point from which the world of nature is to be understood and controlled, humankind's "servitude" to nature is abolished. Humankind should now no longer be a "servant" but should rather be the "master" (or "lord") of nature, and nature in turn should now be the "servant" of humankind.

Yet these metaphors of "servant" and "master" are only of limited value in clarifying the "relations of power" that would result from the just described power shift in the relation between humankind and nature. Indeed, once the power shift would be completed, a totally disempowered nature would stand facing an all-powerful humankind, who would henceforth understand and represent its relation to nature as well as its own existence only through the category of power. For, on the one hand, humankind would recognize the omnipotence of its *ego* in its unlimited freedom to determine itself free of all restrictions. The self-certainty of the *ego* vis-à-vis all things in the world would be fully secured only when its status in reality was determined through itself alone instead of through anything "outside" itself. Thus, this disempowerment of nature through humankind would have to be accompanied precisely by humankind's assertion of itself as an "unrestrainable power," in the sense explained by Schelling in his work, *Neue Deduktion des Naturrechts* (1795):

> If you are a being in itself, no opposing power can alter your state, none can restrain your freedom. Hence endeavor to be absolutely free that you may be a being in itself; endeavor to subject every heteronomous power to your autonomy, and through freedom expand your freedom into an absolute, unrestrainable power.[34]

On the other hand, this self-assertion of humankind as a "being in itself" would nonetheless be restricted by the "resistance" which humankind would face in the world when attempting to realize itself as an "unrestrainable power." But to the extent that this "resistance" would be provoked by the expansion of human power, it would be precisely this power of humankind that would manifest itself in it.

34 Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, *Neue Deduktion des Naturrechts* (§ 4), in Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, *Schriften von 1794–1798*, Darmstadt: Wiss. Buchgesellschaft, 1967, p. 128.

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> If my endeavor is to be determinable by no extraneous law whatsoever, everything that is opposed to my endeavor must be inversely determined absolutely by my striving. By announcing myself as a free being, I announce myself as a being that determines every counter-striving thing but is not itself determinable by anything.[35]

The Unrestrainable Power of Humankind

Schelling thus explained very clearly how the relation between humankind and nature would be structured under the assumption of the self-certainty of the human *ego*. On the one hand, this relation would be essentially determined by a considerable difference between the reality status of humankind and that of nature. Whereas humankind would represent a "being in itself," and as such an "unrestrainable power," nature would be nothing more than that "counter-striving" entity of which humankind becomes conscious in the exercise of its power. While humankind would have the status of an *ens realissimum*, nature would be a mere appearance in the process of the actualization of the reality "humankind." This difference in "reality" between humankind and nature would in turn spring from the limitation of their relation to the medium of power. Humankind's self-assertion as a "being in itself" would necessarily actualize itself in an expansion of human power. In the process of its self-determination, as Schelling explains, humankind would become "free" only if it was determined by nothing other than itself. It follows that no other power could manifest itself besides humankind's "unrestrainable power," with the exception of that "counter-striving power" which humankind experiences as "resistance" when exercising its power. However, this "counter-striving power" would restrict humankind's power only in appearance. Its manifestation would depend on the power-will of humankind alone. A "resistance" is after all always created by the power against which the resistance is directed. And likewise the extent and the intensity of this resistance is determined by the extent and intensity of the power that causes it. Over against such a "deactualized" nature, which, as mere "resistance," would still obey the human power-will, humankind, given that the world would have arisen from its power alone, could finally understand itself as the "master of nature" who controls the world in a totally unrestricted manner.

> I control the world of objects; in it, too, no other causality manifests itself than my own. I announce myself as the master of nature and demand that nature be determined only through the law of my will. My freedom constrains every object to the confines of appear-

35 *Neue Deduktion des Naturrechts* (§ 6), p. 128.

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> ance and thereby prescribes to it laws which it may not transgress. Autonomy belongs only to the immutable self, and everything that is not this self – i. e., everything that can become an object – is heteronomous, is for me appearance. The whole world is my moral property.[36]

With this disempowerment of nature and its reduction to an appearance of human power-will, the goal of a power shift in the relation between humankind and nature would have been achieved. The necessity of such a power shift, as explained above, would result from the human project of transforming nature into a "new" nature totally controlled by humankind. But humankind could not undertake such a transformation of nature before it had completely disempowered nature and concentrated in turn all reality-founding power in itself.

Having now described in detail how the process of this power shift would take place, we would need to refer this result back to the more comprehensive process of the transformation of nature by humankind. Presupposing a concentration of the reality-founding power in humankind, we would have to explain the transformation of nature by humankind as a function of the process of human self-determination. Under this presupposition, nature would indeed no longer possess its own status in reality but would be a pure manifestation of human power-will. Its "transformation" would manifest itself in that phase of "resistance" through which humankind necessarily goes when determining itself, i. e., when expanding its power. The "new nature" would thus be that "world of objects" in which humankind experiences only its own causality. The goal of a mastery of humankind over nature would have been indeed achieved here in the "unshakeable" relation between the reality "humankind" and its appearance "nature." As Fichte describes it:

> Nature must gradually be resolved into a condition in which her regular action can be calculated and safely relied upon, and in which her force bears a fixed and definite relation to that power which is destined to govern it, – that of man.[37]

I previously spelled out, in the chapter on the debate concerning the dignity and the misery of the human being, how modern humankind's project of forcing nature under its control was the logical outcome of the theomorphic self-glorification of modern humanity. In the present chapter I have attempted to describe, through a discussion of different representatives of modern thought, how the execution of this project would have to be conceived. Here I have been forced to use

36 *Neue Deduktion des Naturrechts* (§ 7).
37 Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, p. 104. English translation: p. 116 (with modifications).

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the conditional form of speech, because this human control over nature, which was theoretically outlined by Bacon, Descartes, Buffon, Fichte, and Schelling, has not yet become reality, not even in the 5th century of the history of modern humankind's attempt to implement it. The development of "modern" civilization up to the present time has remained undoubtedly far behind the process of the speculative thought by which it was successfully introduced and promoted, and in which its development was also envisioned in its entire course, including the final stage.

Two Kinds of History of Modernity

There are, thus, two kinds of "history of modernity." The first kind – History I – is the "history of modernity" as conceived by the thinkers of modernity. It was supposed to begin with the break with all *antiquitas* and the new foundation of the sciences, and its end – the end goal of the civilizational development intrinsic to its beginning – was supposed to be attained in humankind's unrestricted control of nature, that is to say, in a *regnum hominis*.

The second kind – History II – is the history of modernity as it actually took place. It did arise from the beginning set for it in History I; we live after all in that "age of modernity" which began five hundred years ago with Europe's explicit break with the model of the "ancients." But in its further course, History II has gone through only a few of the phases envisaged in History I. Through the development of the sciences of nature and especially through the application of the technologies derived from them, modern humankind has, to be sure, achieved a partial control over nature. But, in doing so, it has also laid waste to, and partially destroyed, the world of nature, and the "kingdom" it wanted to establish in this world is farther than ever from reality. As things stand at present, humankind has not made the world of nature "anew;" it has merely made it uninhabitable for itself.

History II and History I, therefore, overlap only very partially. The greatest portion of what was once conceived in thought as the history of modernity has not become reality in the actual history of modernity. Instead, there have been developments that run counter to the originally foreseen advancements of the civilization of modernity.

Given this situation, the following conclusions are warranted: (1) Even after five hundred years of "modernity," its most essential events – the apotheosis of the human *ego* and the transformation of nature into the pure appearance of "humankind" as the only remaining reality – are as yet to take place. Modernity is still, as it was at the beginning, essentially a possibility, to which the reality of

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modern civilization as we know it corresponds only to a very limited extent. (2) The reality of modern civilization, on the other hand, is characterized by an all-embracing competition between humankind and nature. To be sure, this phase was foreseen in History I, but it was in no way meant to last five hundred years and most certainly not to lead merely to a devastation and a partial destruction of nature.[38]

38 On this point, cf. Tilo Schabert, "A Wisdom to be rediscovered: The relation of the Parts to the Whole", in *Die Menschen im Krieg, im Frieden mit der Natur – Humans at War, at Peace with Nature*, pp. 9 – 13.

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Chapter 7

The Crisis of Modernity I

To leave the mean is to abandon humanity.
Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*

Towards a Phenomenology of the Modern Consciousness

There are within the debate on modernity not only expressions of discontent about modern culture[1] but also grave doubts concerning the principles of the civilization of modernity.[2] It thus seemed appropriate to begin this study of modernity by elucidating the processes of consciousness that both reflect theoretically the genesis and the end goal of "modern" civilization and also provide the justification for the ideologies and models of behavior which constitute the horizon for everyday modern thinking and acting. We were able in this way to base our discussion of modernity on a phenomenology of modern consciousness. The most important result of this discussion is this: The history of modernity is a process that runs against itself. It is the history of the increasing intensity of a civilizational crisis. Or conversely: the continuity of modernity results from a continuity of a crisis that is itself the principal manifestation of modernity.

Every advance in the development of modernity delays its consummation, because it merely further intensifies the crisis that is the fundamental manifestation of modernity. This is one of the most important causes of the widely dis-

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1 Sigmund Freud's *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* is representative for a still reserved criticism of modernity, which registers with precision negative modern phenomena but does not yet question the civilizational principles of modernity itself. See *Civilization and Its Discontents*, translated by James Strachey, New York: Norton & Company, 1961, pp. 34 f. and 38 f.

2 Cf. Harry Bravermann, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975; Peter L. Berger *et al.*, *Das Unbehagen in der Modernität*, Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 1975; William Leiss, *The Domination of Nature*, New York: George Braziller, 1972; Robert James Forbes, *The Conquest of Nature: Technology and its Consequences,* New York: Praeger Publishers, 1968; Anton Böhm, *Leben im Zwiespalt. Der moderne Mensch zwischen Angst und Hybris*, Freiburg – Munich: Herder, 1974; Theodore Roszak, *Where the Wasteland Ends. Politics and Transcendence in Post-Industrial Society*, Garden City (N.Y.): Doubleday & Company, 1972; Philipp Pattberg, "Conquest, Domination, and Control: Europe's Mastery of Nature in Historic Perspective," in: *Journal of Political Ecology*, vol. 14, 2007, pp. 1–9, online: http://jpe.library.arizona.edu/volume_14/pattberg.pdf (retrieved Jan. 20, 2018).

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cussed "crisis" in the political legitimacy of "modern" societies.[3] For the past four hundred years, politics in the sphere of Western-modern societies was legitimized from a historical perspective by assuming that their progress was unstoppable. But this ideological assumption has proved to be deceptive. The "crisis" in the political legitimation of modern societies appears to be the result of the fact that, while these historical speculations and theories of civilization have been discredited by the recent historical experience of these societies, political action still takes its orientation, as a matter of survival as it were, from these ideas. This is the reason why, according to Nicola Chiaromonte's judgment, the present age should be called "an age of bad faith," or "an age of useful lies."[4]

Towards a Phenomenology of the Modern Lifeworld

In order to forestall possible misunderstandings, I hasten to add that my only concern here is to understand the crucial correlation of "crisis" and "modernity" in the historical dimension resulting from the growing intensity of crisis phenomena. The phrase "increasing intensity of crisis phenomena" should in no way be understood in the sense of a unitary development in which successive small crises add up gradually, somehow, to a global crisis. There are two reasons why the history of the civilizational development out of which the modern lifeworld grew must be grasped, rather, in the specificity of each realm of this lifeworld:

(1) "Modern" ideas and procedures became dominant in the realm of European architecture, for example, much later than in the realm of European literature, and in the religious realm, in turn, much earlier than in the realm of the economy. (2) On the other hand, the modernity of mental attitudes has made itself felt with a different intensity in these different realms because their respective objects are of a different nature. While, for instance, "old" buildings could simply be torn down and replaced with "modern" ones, all attempts to create a ruleless, imaginative-formless language were doomed to fail given the structures to which the possibilities of human speaking must necessarily conform.

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3 Cf. e. g., Nicola Chiaromonte, *The Paradox of History;* Ulrich Matz, *Politik und Gewalt. Zur Theorie des demokratischen Verfassungsstaates und der Revolution*, Freiburg i. Br. – Munich: Alber, 1975; Ernest Gellner, *Contemporary Thought and Politics,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974; Martin Pawley, *The Private Future. Causes and Consequences of Community Collapse in the West*, New York: Random House, 1974; Wilhelm Hennis, "Legitimität. Zu einer Kategorie der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft," in *Merkur,* issue 1, 30th year., Jan. 1976, pp. 17–36.

4 Nicola Chiaromonte, *The Paradox of History*, pp. 137 ff.

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Due to these two reasons, we would fail to understand the correlation of "crisis" and "modernity" in its historical dimension if we chose as our field of research the global "history of modernity." If we did so, we would be inevitably led to portray the emergence of the modern lifeworld as a steady and homogeneous process, and would thus overlook the crucial fact that the influence and impact of "modern" ideas in each particular realm of the modern lifeworld resulted from very different developments that took place at very different times. We do justice to the diversity of these developments only if we differentiate the fields of investigation according to these diverse developments, and, instead of studying a supposedly homogeneous "history of modernity" we examine, rather, the individual histories of, say, "modern" architecture, "modern" social and economic relations, and "modern" art forms.[5] Only through such separate studies will it be possible to identify the crisis phenomena that appeared in these separate realms with the emergence of the modern lifeworld, and which are for this reason its dominant characteristics.

Religion and Modernity

In light of these considerations, the question would be, for instance in the field of the sociology of religion, to what extent the Reformation marks the start of a specifically "modern" Christianity.[6] Michel de Montaigne, chronologically very close to the Reformation, expressed in his *Essais* the view that the innovations *(nouvelletez)* of the reformers, by making every person his or her own judge in matters of faith, would be tantamount to a new self-understanding of humankind, one expressing no longer Christian humility but arrogance. And this correlation suggests, according to him, that the reformers' *nouvelletez* are more compatible with a belief in an unsurpassable, in a sense godlike, dignity of humankind than with faith in divine revelation.[7] Montaigne formulated these theses not without a polemical intention, and they certainly do not do justice

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5 A model for this type of investigation is Max Weber's *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus (The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism).*

6 On contemporary varieties of a very modern Christianity cf. Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, "Der Christengott im Plural. Zum Gestaltwandel des Christentums in der Gegenwart," in Tilo Schabert, Matthias Riedl (eds.), *Gott oder Götter? – God or Gods?*, Würzburg, Königshausen & Neumann, 2009, pp. 33–49.

7 Michel de Montaigne, *Essais* ("Apologie de Raimond Sebond"), Book 2, chap. 12, in Montaigne, *Oeuvres Complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1962, pp. 416 f., 426. – Cf. also Jean Calvin, *Institution de la religion chrestienne*, edited by Jean-Daniel Benoît, vol. 1, Paris: J. Vrin, 1957, pp. 96–100.

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to the Reformation religiosity of Martin Luther or John Calvin. And yet they do help to understand the Reformation by illuminating it from the perspective of a sociology of religion. The Reformation took place, after all, at the same time as the Pan-European debate on the dignity and misery of humankind, in which a fundamental shift in the self-understanding of humankind was articulated in the new, "modern," anthropology that made the self-deification of humankind the principle of a truly human existence. Thus, for instance, the doctrine of the Reformation according to which each person is self-sufficient in matters of faith and has no need of a priestly mediator, could be interpreted (or, if you wish, "misinterpreted"), not in the sense of the faith of the Reformation, but in the sense of the new anthropology. In the case of a misinterpretation – which is obviously the basis for Montaigne's theses – the positive reception of the *nouvelletez* of the Reformation could be explained to a large extent from the standpoint of the new self-understanding of humankind. Forcefully expressed, Montaigne's point would be that many of his contemporaries were predisposed to embrace these doctrines of the Reformation because they felt themselves confirmed through them in their new self-understanding. Put differently, the modernity of their self-understanding was bolstered by the innovations of the reformers.

Obviously, we cannot decide here if this interpretation of the Reformation, which is implicit in Montaigne's theses, is correct. In any case, this is not the question that must be primarily decided. What we must first ask, rather, is whether the assumption on which Montaigne's theses are built is correct, whether, in other words, there exists a connection, from the standpoint both of the history of the reception of ideas and of the sociology of religion, between the doctrines of the reformers and the modern self-understanding exhibited by Montaigne's contemporaries.[8]

In Montaigne's view, modernity was the decisive element in the connection between modernity and Reformation. In his way of seeing things, a positive reception of the ideas of the Reformation was made possible from the outset by the modernity of the mental attitude of many of his contemporaries. However, the same connection can be interpreted in exactly the reverse way. As is well known, Max Weber offered just such an interpretation, which he developed in

8 Such an investigation could draw on the following studies: Jack H. Hexter, *The Vision of Politics on the Eve of the Reformation: More, Machiavelli, and Seyssel*, New York: Basic Books, 1973; Christopher Hill, *Change and Continuity in Seventeenth Century England*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1974; Steven E. Ozment, *The Reformation in the Cities. The Appeal of Protestantism to Sixteenth Century Germany and Switzerland*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975.

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extensive investigations on the sociology of religion. [9] The Reformation, according to Max Weber, even if it might not actually have set in motion the unfolding of modernity, it certainly gave it a greater impetus. Weber argues that the Reformation brought about a definitive "disenchantment" of the world i.e., of the cosmos, through a long "historical process in the development of religion," and deprived humankind of "all magical means of the search for salvation." The Reformation, according to this interpretation, created the conditions for the emergence of the world of modernity, in which humankind links its "salvation" exclusively to the material gain obtained through the exploitation of nature, which had become mute but also dominated by humankind.[10]

Modernity in the Realm of the Economy

A study of the history of "modern" economy in the general context of the development of modernity would certainly have to begin with the mercantilist economic policies of the European national states of the 17th and 18th centuries.[11] These policies encapsulated exemplarily and in a pure state, as it were, the main traits of the modern modes of thought and action. Modernity may be said to have begun, in the economic realm, with mercantilism. According to mer-

9 Max Weber, *Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism*, translated by Talcott Parsons, London and New York: Routledge, 1992.

10 Ibid. p. 61, 71; 94 f.; Max Weber, *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Religionssoziologie*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1947, pp. 564, 570; also Max Weber, "Religiöse Heilsmethodik," in Max Weber, *Die protestantische Ethik. Eine Aufsatzsammlung*, ed. by Johannes Winckelmann, vol. I, Hamburg: Siebenstern, 1973, p. 340. Cf. as well the parallel argument by Ernst Troeltsch, *Die Bedeutung des Protestantismus für die Entstehung der modernen Welt,* Munich: Oldenbourg, 1911, reprint Aalen: Zeller, 1963, pp 18 f., 21, 66 f.

11 Cf. Eli F. Heckscher, *Der Merkantilismus*, 2 vols., Jena: Fischer, 1932; Charles Woolsey Cole, *Colbert and a Century of French Mercantilism*, 2 vols., New York: Columbia University Press, 1939; Barry E. Supple, *Commercial Crisis and Change in England 1600–1642, A Study in the Instability of a Mercantile Economy*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959; Edwin E. Rich, "Expansion as a Concern of all Europe," in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. I: *The Renaissance*, ed. George Richard Potter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957, pp. 445–469; Charles Henry Wilson, "Trade, Society and the State," in *The Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. IV: *The Economy of Expanding Europe in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Edwin E. Rich, Charles Henry Wilson, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, pp. 487–575. On the connection between mercantilism and the politics of nation states, cf. in particular Max Weber, *Staatssoziologie. Soziologie der rationalen Staatsanstalt und der modernen politischen Parteien und Parlamente,* ed. by Johannes Winckelmann, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1966, pp. 24–26.

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cantilist economics, as elaborated in the early 17th century by Antonio Serra[12] and Thomas Mun,[13] the economy of a nation should be focused on *one* goal: the expansion of national wealth.[14] The amount of national wealth was equated with the amount of money (or the amount of gold plus other precious metals) each nation possessed, and which was stored, as it were, in the national treasure vault. The central thesis of mercantilist economics followed logically from this definition of national wealth. Just as a businessman makes a profit in his private economic relations by selling more than he buys, a nation must also, in its commercial relations with other nations, increase its wealth by spending as little money as possible for imports and earning as much as possible through exports.[15]

Given these goals, however, a mercantilist economy could succeed only within the larger framework of national policies that created the economic conditions for a profitable foreign trade, while also erecting the obstacles necessary for preventing the unwelcome import of foreign goods. Thus, the central role in the mercantilist economic system fell to the national government. On the one hand, only the government could enact the necessary protective laws barring the sale of foreign goods in the country and thus prevent an outflow of money from the national treasury. On the other hand, it was also the responsibility of the government to take the requisite measures to guarantee the economic self-sufficiency of the country, as well as to promote and ensure the earning of even more money for the nation through the export of merchandise produced at home. In the mercantilist economic system, therefore, the state was not only the guarantor of the economic self-sufficiency of the nation but also the most important economic agent. It was from the state that the initiative came for the construction of new factories in those branches of the economy in

12 Cf. Antonio Serra's work, published in 1613, *Breve Trattato delle Cause che possono fa abandonare li Regni d'Oro e d'Argento dove non sono Miniere*, online: http://www.hetwebsite.net/het/texts/serra/serracont.htm (retrieved Jan. 18, 2018). A new English translation was published by Sophus A. Reinert: *A Short Treatise on the Wealth and Poverty of Nations*, London: Anthem Press, 2011.

13 Thomas Mun's most important work is *England's Treasure by Foreign Trade*, published in 1664, online: http://la.utexas.edu/users/hcleaver/368/368MunTreasuretable.pdf (retrieved Jan. 18, 2018).

14 As generally known, it was only in the 18th century that Adam Smith provided a comprehensive critique and theoretical refutation of mercantilism.

15 Cf. Thomas Mun, *England's Treasure by Foreign Trade*, cited by Charles Henry Wilson: "Trade, Society ...," p. 503: "The ordinary means to increase our wealth and treasure is by Forraign Trade, wherein we must ever observe this rule, to sell more to strangers yearly than wee consume of theirs in value."

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which there existed a dependence on foreign supplies.[16] The state would also be in charge of building a national merchant navy so that only one's own nation might profit from the conveyance of imports and exports.[17] The mercantilist state looked after the growth of the population and the acquisition of areas rich in raw materials (colonies) in order that an increase in available natural resources might help expand the national economic potential and put it at the service of the increase of national wealth.

The mercantilist economic system, therefore, could not be expanded without a powerful and cohesive nation state, and the other way around: both the external and the internal power of a nation state were significantly strengthened by the expansion of the mercantilist economic system. This correlation of nation state and mercantilist economic system also accounts for the very favorable reception of mercantilist theories on the part of the European states of the 17th century. It is important to keep in mind that around this time these states practiced a politics of mutual demarcation and of concentration of national power. That is why it was quite logical for each nation state to extend its general state policies to the economic realm through a mercantilist economic policy of "economic nationalism" (Charles Henry Wilson).

What consequences would a policy of economic nationalism have for the relations between individual states? The accumulation of the greatest possible amount of money on the part of a given state must necessarily cause, within the international mercantilist context, a reduction of the national supply of money of other states,[18] which themselves, in turn, pursued the goal of both preserving their national wealth and increasing it as much as possible. In the realm of international relations, therefore, mercantilism had to necessarily bring about the condition of a general struggle for power in which each state competed with every other state with the goal of being the wealthiest of all.

It is obvious that the advocates of mercantilist economics did not give due consideration to this consequence. The economic rivalry among European nation states, which was also a rivalry for political power, and which arose as a consequence of their mercantilist economic policies, could grow – given that the basis of their economic existence was also at stake – from merely protectionist mea-

16 Colbert, for example, saw to it that France creates a silk industry so that it would no longer be dependent on silk imports from Italy.

17 It was also possible to pass laws such as the famous English Navigations Acts of 1651, by which the movement of goods into or out of England was reserved almost exclusively for English shipping.

18 In the mercantilist economic theory both money supply and trade volume were treated as fixed magnitudes.

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sures, such as the establishment of protective duties, to covert trade wars and even to open military conflicts.[19] The same economic policy that allowed a particular nation to increase its national wealth also imperiled this profit, because it necessarily exacerbated in some way or another the economic rivalry among the states and thus the general threat faced by every one of them. Leaving aside the possibility of a general war, which would lead to an economic exhaustion of all states involved, the economic rivalry between states could continue to the point at which one state would acquire absolute wealth and would thus succeed in driving all other states into absolute poverty. But precisely at this point of its apparent fulfillment, the mercantilist economic policy of the state in question would have failed. It would be extremely successful in the short run, but futile, even misguided, in the long run. If all other states were deprived of money, there could be no buyer for this state's goods, the only purpose of producing which had been to acquire a money that its own policies would have made unavailable.[20]

To be sure, during the period in which the European nation states pursued a predominantly mercantilist economic policy, such an extreme hypothetical situation did not come to pass. And in any case, the theories of mercantilism were consistently applied only in England and France, and even Colbert, that most resolute advocate of mercantilism on the continent, did not succeed, in the "war for money" declared by him, to conquer all of Europe for France by transferring all foreign money into the French treasury. However, it is important to ask why a mercantilist economic theory was drawn up and practiced in the first place, despite the fact that the economic policies and the power politics that went along with it gave rise to a latent state of war in which each state involved was necessarily, in some way or another, among the losers. Either all of them would succumb to economic exhaustion (assuming that caution had not already earlier moved them to give up their mercantilist economic policies) or only one of

19 For this reason, Colbert, for instance, used a quite warlike language. As Charles Henry Wilson (op. cit. p. 526) explains, "World trade was essentially a static affair: the amount of bullion, shipping and trade was fixed. France's task was to conduct a 'war of money' with the rest of Europe. Commerce [Colbert wrote] 'is a perpetual and peaceable war of wit and energy among all nations,' and by 1670 he could congratulate himself that France had 'conquered' in this economic warfare every nation except the Dutch, whose resources in the trades to the Baltic, the Far East, and the Atlantic had kept them going."

20 Cf. Henry Robinson, *England's Safety in Trades Increase* (1641), cited by Charles Henry Wilson (*op. cit.* p 511): "It is our benefit that monies be plentifull also in countries where we carrie our commodités to sell ... lest we fare as Alexander the Great who haveing neare conquered the whole world, wept because there was no more left for him to conquer."

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them would win a Pyrrhic victory, having amassed all available money and being thus itself the cause of the loss of its own customers.

Naturally one could say, on the one hand, that the advocates of a mercantilist economy judged it primarily from a national point of view. If the policy of economic nationalism caused any disadvantages to anyone, according to mercantilist logic it would not be one's own nation that would suffer these disadvantages. A mercantilist economic policy was expected to benefit no one except one's own nation by making it as rich as possible through the amassing of money and precious metals.

On the other hand, however, this logic of the mercantilists is evidently the logic of an unbridled nationalism. The same mentality expresses itself in the theory of mercantilism as in the theory of property individualism. According to the latter, we are all selfish and hence focused exclusively on possessing all that which we do not as yet possess. The favored way to explain the goal of a mercantilist economic policy was through an analogical model showing that a state can earn money and thus become richer in the same way that a private businessman can. But here an essential difference between the conditions of trade between individuals in the private sector and trade between states was overlooked. While the commercial relations of a given businessman are regulated to some extent or another by the laws of the state (even in the system of economic *laissez faire*, for instance, murder is ruled out as a means of enrichment), the state's freedom of action in the sphere of economic policies as well as (in the mercantilist age) in the sphere of power politics is potentially free of all restraints. The mentality of greed in private economic transactions is unlikely to develop to its last destructive as well as self-destructive consequences, unless, of course, the state authority were to completely collapse. But greed in the international realm can be practiced without inhibitions, because nothing prevents it from being practiced even in such destructive acts as would annihilate precisely the goods it covets.

Thus, sooner or later the realization must set in that mercantilism, given that it allows for a mentality of greed to completely dominate at the level of the national state and even to become the primary source for the legitimation of state acts in general, must be based, not only on an economic theory, but also on other factors. Now, these other factors will have to be searched in the sphere of "modern" attitudes in thought and action. The mercantilist mentality obviously conformed in essential respects to the mentality of "modern" humankind, and especially to the self-centeredness, the self-isolation, and the yearning to *have* and to *be* ever more that are typical of this mentality. Thus, the hypothesis presses itself forward that both the modernity of individuals and the modernity of states come into being in one and the same way. While the goal for the modern

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human being was to attain an "absolute existence" as an "autonomous individual," the modern state was intent on obtaining "absolute wealth" as a "self-contained national state." Given the encompassing horizon of the modern mentality, the principles of a "modern" anthropology were reformulated as principles of a "modern" economy. As the mercantilists used to say, the "state" must be above all a "businessman."

Modernity of Literature

Among the various realms of the modern lifeworld, the artistic-literary realm is the one in which the modernity of mental attitudes found its most visible expression. In the realm of the arts and literature, humankind is to a large extent an autonomous creator, one who, while bound to the given material – be it colors or sounds or language – can shape this material into works of art whose origin and configuration depend solely on human imagination. This is why the experiences and ideas of "modern" art could be expressed in the artistic realm much more directly and far more thoroughly than in dimensions of existence in which humankind's freedom of creation and action is limited by the basic conditions of its pregiven physical and social reality. Given this special intensity with which the modern mentality can manifest itself in the arts and in literature, the phenomena of "modern art" and "modern literature" are in two respects of significance for a general understanding of modernity. They are not only among the most indisputable (because concretely perceptible) manifestations of modernity but they also represent the Modern as such in an extremely transparent manner.

I would like to elucidate this point by means of some brief remarks on modern literature.[21] It is a fair assumption that the "modernity" of literature has been

21 For what follows, cf. Karl Siegfried Guthke, *Die Mythologie der entgötterten Welt. Ein literarisches Thema von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1971; Volkmar Sander, *Die Faszination des Bösen. Zur Wandlung des Menschenbildes in der modernen Literatur*, Göttingen: Sachse & Pohl, 1968; James Olney, *Metaphors of Self. The Meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973; Eugene Goodheart, *The Cult of the Ego. The Self in Modern Literature*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1968; Marianne Kesting, *Auf der Suche nach der Realität. Kritische Studien zur Literatur der Moderne*, Munich: Piper, 1972; Michael Hamburger, *The Truth of Poetry. Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the Nineteen-Sixties*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969; Hugo Friedrich, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik (*English: *The Structure of Modern Poetry)*; Adrian Marino, "'Modernity' and the Evolution of Literary Consciousness," in *Diogenes*, vol. 20, issue 77, 1972, pp. 110 – 137; Macha Louis Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1967, Irving Howe, "The Culture of Mod-

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a universal phenomenon within European-Western culture starting with Romanticism at the latest.[22] However, this thesis can be sustained only with the qualification that we should not operate with the idea of an epoch-making turn in the history of literature that would have made European literature as a whole and at once "modern." The development of modern literature began already in the 18th century, and the process of its full unfolding extends into the late 19th and the 20th centuries. Furthermore, these developments took place temporally and spatially in a very uneven manner; the impulses for a progressive formation of typically "modern" forms of literature came in different ways from the French, German, English and other national literary scenes. And, finally, the maturation of a modern mentality and the employment of modern literary forms in the realms of particular literary genres led to what is called "modern" poetry, "modern" novel, and "modern" theater at quite different points in time. Nonetheless, despite these necessary qualifications, the fundamental turn of European literature towards modernity can be identified with romanticism, at least in the sense that, though there were signs of "modernity" in preromantic literature, this "modernity" became first manifest in the unfolding "modern" literature with the literary development that starts with romanticism.

How does the "Modern" manifest itself in "modern" literature?

The first thing to note is the characteristic trait of modern literature that points directly to the correlation between "crisis" and "modernity." In modern literature, literary existence is perceived mainly as an uncommitted and threatened existence, and hence modern literature is largely marked by the attempt on the part of modern authors to achieve a self-ascertainment of their own existence in the medium of literature. The prehistory of this modern situation of artistic existence begins probably in the Renaissance. During this period, the Christian idea of immortality was secularized into the idea of "fame," through which the individual stands out of the crowd and his or her name is made eternal in the memory of human beings. As Jacob Burckhardt writes, this "new race of poets-scholars" "made themselves masters… of fame in a double sense, as being themselves the most acknowledged celebrities of Italy and at the same time, as poets and historians, consciously disposing of the reputation of others."[23] Renaissance

ernism," in *Commentary*, 1. November 1967 (online: https://www.commentary magazine.com/articles/the-culture-of-modernism/, retrieved Jan. 16, 2018).

22 Cf. Meyer Howard Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism. Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, New York: Norton, 1973; Edward E. Bostetter, *The Romantic Ventriloquists:* Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Shelley, Byron, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963.

23 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, translated by S. G. C. Middlemore, London and New York: MacMillan, 1928, p. 140

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authors read the doctrine of the supernatural genius of a poet into this extraordinary self-awareness, which was not only cultivated in this form by later generations of authors, but was also eventually linked to the idea of the author as a "divine genius," which 18th-century Enlightenment authors and *philosophes* would claim for themselves.[24] To be sure, this Enlightenment interpretation of the literary existence rendered the author free of all commitments to literary and social norms and conventions. As poet-gods among human beings, authors were the sole standard of their works. But in exchange for such a "divine" freedom, they had fulfilled their Promethean mission to make their presuppositionless poetic existence the presupposition of a poetic cosmos. As the autonomous creators of literary works, authors could ensure their autonomous creator-existence and their status as literary authors only through and in these works.[25]

This explains why the literary works of so many modern authors revolve around the author's own person. Existential self-ascertainment in the medium of literature demands an egocentric posture towards literary creation; the goal for literary work and literary self is to relate to each other as copy and model, reflection and mirror, desire of fulfillment and fulfillment.[26] But this congruence of the private world and the artistic world of a given individual author cannot but exclude him or her, the more perfect his or her work is, from the worlds of other poets and, more generally speaking, from the world of other human beings. The cosmos of his or her work, disposed concentrically around his or her own self, forces him or her into social isolation; self-ascertainment in literary egocentrism runs necessarily parallel to a self-distancing from all other human beings. The autonomy of a modern literary existence thus involves the danger of failing to establish precisely that communication which is an essential goal of the literary work. In this way, literature becomes an existential gamble, which may succeed for some authors, but which may also result in failure in the case of those who are able to authentically experience their own poetic existence only in negation, that is to say, in perseverant reticence or, in the last consequence, in suicide.[27]

The "modernity" of modern literature manifests itself also in another characteristic of this type of literature: the scission between literary language and ev-

24 Cf. Edgar Zilsel, *Die Entstehung des Geniebegriffs*, Tübingen: Mohr, 1926; Pierre Grappin, *La théorie du génie dans le préclassicisme allemand*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1952.
25 Regarding the specific role of the Prometheus myth in the understanding of the poet since the Enlightenment, cf. Raymond Trousson, *Le thème de Prométhée dans la littérature européenne*, Geneva: Éditions Groz, 1964.
26 Classic examples: Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Lord Byron.
27 Cf. on this point Al Alvarez, *The Savage God. A Study of Suicide*, London 1972; Macha Louis Rosenthal, *The New Poets*, pp. 7 ff.

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eryday reality. In contrast to premodern literature, whose focus was the typological depiction of a reality that was assumed to be constant, modern literature is largely marked by an event which has been fittingly described with the formula, "disappearance of God."[28] In the modern world, at the basis of which is found the principle of the permanent variation of all things, literature, if it wants to open itself to the Modern, cannot link to the earlier experience of a unitary, ordered, and constant world.[29] The world of humanity has collapsed in modernity; instead of measuring everything against the one measure symbolized in the name of God, everything is measured against everything, everything is equal to everything, and everything is available at will.

The scission between modern literary language and everyday reality results from this experience of a collapsed world. Words lose their meaning when the reality to which they are supposed to refer has dissolved. Or conversely: given a reality which can no longer be truly grasped, sediments of reality are most likely to be found in the words of language. But this search for reality in language takes place, in turn, only in the form of *linguistic* events, and language becomes thus the foremost object of word combinations, of experiments with literary styles, and even of an intensely cultivated language magic.[30] That is why we should speak in this case, not so much of "language" (i. e., of an order of speech corresponding to an order of reality), as of a "linguistic material" that, having itself no form or structure, lends itself to be used by an autonomous language creator for manufacturing (or, as it has become customary to say since Baudelaire's times, for "making") completely new linguistic configurations.[31] The imagination of the author who "makes" such linguistic configurations is active in an absolute manner. These configurations can originate in a phantasy which produces exclusively forms emptied of reality; but they can also reflect the order-generating faculty of a consciousness that grasps the reality of a collapsed world at

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28 J. Hillis Miller, *The Disappearance of God:* de Quincey, Browning, E. Bronte, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1963.

29 Cf. for instance Elias Canetti, "Der erste Versuch: Die Blendung," in *Das Gewissen der Worte. Essays*, Munich: Hanser, 1975, p. 229: "One day the thought came to me that the world could no longer be described like in earlier novels from the standpoint of *one* writer as it were; the world had *collapsed*, and only when one had the courage to show it in its state of collapse was it possible to give a true representation of it."

30 On the topic of language magic in modern poetry, see Hugo Friedrich, *Die Struktur der modernen Lyrik*, English translation: *The Structure of Modern Poetry*, pp. 31–33, 65,67, 77–78, 101–102, 144–145.

31 Cf. Harald Weinrich, "Linguistische Bemerkungen zur modernen Lyrik," in *Akzente*, 15 (1968) pp. 29–47, e.g., p. 31.

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least through the identification of phenomena of decay.[32] In the former case, the scission between literary language and everyday reality is simply further deepened; in the latter, the scission, while not eliminated, becomes the starting point for a literature that manages to wrestle out of the diffuse chaos of a collapsed world a concrete representation of the Chaotic. Lastly, a further essential characteristic of modern literature should be mentioned: there exists no modern poetics, that is to say, no system of literary norms valid for, and accepted by, modern literature in general. If one wants to understand the literature of the Renaissance, one may not leave Renaissance poetics out of consideration; otherwise one would fail to understand the drive of Renaissance authors to achieve the general poetic ideal of their time. But it would be absurd, on the other hand, to search for a romantic poetics that would be binding for the literature of Romanticism. The reason for this is that a romantic author was after all someone who had shed all literary (as well as social) conventions and norms, had purposely broken them, and tolerate nothing that might curtail the inexhaustible wealth of his or her artistic phantasy. This modern refusal to accept a normative poetics has throughout characterized the type of literature that understands itself as "modern," from the era of Romanticism to our own days.[33] Thus, the historical continuity of the crisis that is the manifestation of modernity can also be observed here. The Modern in the literature of Romanticism manifests itself, from a poetological perspective, in a perceptibly growing multiplicity of quite different, and always individually interpreted, poetic theories, which are meant to come to terms with something they actually themselves promote as a consequence of their privative nature: the crisis of literary consciousness in general.

Modernity in the Realm of Architecture

At the beginning of the present chapter on the phenomenology of the modern lifeworld, I stressed that the influence and force of modern ideas in their different realms was the result of developments that had taken place at quite different points in time. This is particularly noticeable in the realm of architecture. In contrast to the economic and religious realms, for example, modernity in the realm

32 In the line of thought mentioned above in footnote 28, Canetti, for example, goes on to say: "... the world had *collapsed*. ... But this did not mean that one had to get down to write a book in which nothing was intelligible any longer but, rather, one had to invent with utmost consistency extreme individuals, such as those of whom the world was actually composed, and place these individuals side by side in their extreme separateness."
33 Cf. Adrian Marino, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

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of architecture did not start (as with these) already in the 16th and 17th centuries, but first in the turn from the 18th to the 19th century.[34]

But, on the other hand, the modern mentality came to the fore unmistakably and in a truly exemplary (because physically concrete) manner in the creations of modern architecture, that is to say, in all the modern buildings and modern city complexes that were everywhere created according to the principles of "modern" architecture in the late 19th century and especially in the 20th century. And yet we would fail to understand the phenomenon of modern architecture in all its dimensions if we considered it only from the perspective of the connection between modern architectonic principles and modern architectonic creations. Architecture in general has also a political as well as a social dimension. To begin with, architectonic principles are formulated in the context of specific cosmological, political, philosophical, and ideological conceptions. Having been erected according to certain architectonic principles, buildings and cities constructed by human beings are meant to not only serve the practical purposes of dwelling, working, and public life; they are also architectonic symbolic creations that express the religious and secular worldviews, the political culture, and the modes of social life of the human beings who created them.[35]

Architecture, in turn, is an essential element in the shaping of social and political life within a given society. Depending, for instance, on how a city is laid out and structured, the social cohesion of its citizenry will be either strengthened or weakened by the corresponding type of city architecture. Or, to give another example, the historical past of a nation will remain present in the consciousness of its citizens to a considerable extent through the presence of historical buildings and monuments in which the history of the nation has been preserved in architectonic form.

On the basis of its twofold nature as a symbolic manifestation of human existence in society and as an essential element in the concrete enactment of this existence, architecture is closely related to politics. A complete understanding of a particular architecture, such as the modern one, must encompass, therefore, not merely a two-dimensional but a three-dimensional field, a field constituted by the trilateral configuration of architectonic principles, architectonic creations, and the political implications of the relevant architecture.

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34 Cf. Tilo Schabert, *Die Architektur der Welt. Eine kosmologische Lektüre architektonischer Formen*, Munich: Fink, 1997, pp. 82–97.

35 Cf. the relevant detailed exposition I provide in *Die Architektur der Welt*.

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These connections were paradigmatically formulated in the Renaissance theory of architecture.[36] Renaissance architects such as Leon Battista Alberti, Francesco di Giorgio, and Andrea Palladio pondered in their theoretical writings the principles of an architecture that would make possible to shape the architectonic environment of humankind in the best manner, i.e., in the manner best befitting human life.[37] Their answer, and the theory of architecture that went along with it, formed until the 18th century the foundation for the architectonic creations of Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo. This theory of architecture, however, was shattered in the turn from the 18th to the 19th century, when modern ideas encroached on the realm of architecture, and was eventually replaced by a specifically modern understanding of the art of building. This decisive break in the history of architectonic theory and praxis is to be elucidated here through a renewed consideration of the paradigm of Renaissance architecture.

The theory of architecture developed by Renaissance architects and applied by them in their own constructions is essentially a theory of mathematical proportions. In the third book of his ten-volume work, *De architectura* (after 27 BCE), Vitruvius, an architecture theorist of the first century BCE, showed that the human body with outstretched limbs, understood as a geometric figure, can be inscribed in the geometric figure both of a square and of a circle. With his examples of the *homo ad quadratum* and *homo ad circulum*, Vitruvius wanted to demonstrate the proportional harmony between the geometric measures of the human body and the geometric measures of the world. Vitruvius inferred from

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36 Cf. for what follows Léon Palustre, *L'Architecture de la Renaissance*, Paris: Librairies-Imprimeries réunies, ancienne maison Quantin, 1892; Gustavo Giovannoni, *Saggi sulla architettura del Rinascimento*, Milan: Treves, 1931; Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, London: The Warburg Institute, 1949; Klaus von Beyme, "Architekturtheorie der italienischen Renaissance als Theorie der Politik," in *Sprache und Politik. Festgabe f. D. Sternberger*, edited by Carl-Joachim Friedrich, Benno Reifenberg, Heidelberg: L. Schneider, 1968, pp. 209–232; Gerda Sörgel, *Untersuchungen über den theoretischen Architekturentwurf von 1450 bis 1550 in Italien*, Ph.D. thesis, Cologne, 1958; Paul-Henri Michel, *Un idéal humain au XVe siècle. La pensée de L. B. Alberti*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1930; Giovanni Santinello, *Leon Battista Alberti: una visione estetica del mondo e della vita*, Florence: Sansoni, 1962; Erik Forssman, *Palladios Lehrgebäude. Studien über den Zusammenhang von Architektur und Architekturtheorie*, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1965.

37 Cf. Leon Battista Alberti, *De re aedificatoria*, Florenz 1485, English translation: *De re aedificatoria. On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, translated by Joseph Rykwert, Robert Tavernor and Neil Leach, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1988; Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *Trattato d'architettura civile e militare*, 1482 (Turin: Tip. Chirio e Mina, 1969); Andrea Palladio, *Quattro libri dell'architettura*, 1570, online: https://archive.org/details/iquattrolibridel01pall (retrieved Jan. 20, 2018).

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this harmony that the proportions of architectonic creations should agree with the proportions of the human body (and thus with the proportions of the world).

Vitruvius' theory of proportion was adopted by Renaissance architects, who made it the foundation of their own theory of architecture.[38] On the basis of an exact study of the proportions of the human body, Alberti, Giorgio, Palladio, and Leonardo da Vinci undertook the creation of an "anthropometric" architecture,[39] an art of building according to human measures. In their view, the "rationality of architecture" (Giorgio), i.e., its human or anthropomorphic quality, rests on four principles:

(1) The proportions of the human body must be grasped objectively in mathematical-numeric relations.

(2) These numeric relations must be repeated in the measurement of buildings; architects are in no way free to apply arbitrarily chosen measures to the buildings they create.

(3) Architectonic creations have a perfect and beautiful form only if the geometric order of their parts corresponds to the proportions of the human body. In other words: their perfection, which is to be geometrically measured, resembles the perfection of the human body, which is also to be geometrically measured, and which is in turn inscribable, as a geometric figure, in the two most perfect of geometric figures, the square and the circle.[40]

(4) Given that this one perfection obtaining in these various forms must be grasped in a fixed system of mathematical-numeric relations, there is an objective, that is to say, a geometric-mathematical definition of perfect beauty. According to Alberti, the beauty of a building derives from its proportions, on the basis of which all its parts relate to each other in such a perfect manner that nothing can be added or taken away without destroying the harmony of the whole.[41]

As already mentioned, the Renaissance theory of architecture is specially characterized by the fact that it encompasses architecture in all its dimensions, including the political one. In the view of Renaissance architects, cities too

38 Cf. regarding the reception of Vitruvius in the 16th century cf. Vassili (V. P.) Zoubov, "Vitruve et ses commenteurs du XVIe siècle" in *La science au XVIe siècle*, Colloque international de Royaumont, Paris: Hermann, 1960.

39 On the concept of "anthropometrische Architektur," cf. Rudolf Wittkower, "The Arts in Western Europe: Italy," in *The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. I: *The Renaissance*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957, p. 129 f.

40 It is important to remember that the circle was thought in Renaissance cosmology to be the geometric symbol of God's infinity and perfection.

41 Leon Battista Alberti, *L'Architettura*, Book VI, chap. 2: "… ut sit pulchritudo quidem certa cum ratione concinnitas universarum partium in eo cuius sint: ita ut addi, aut diminui, aut immutari possit nihil, quam improbabilius reddat."

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should be laid out according to the principles of their architectonic theory.[42] Indeed, they showed a marked preference for illustrating their idea of anthropomorphic architecture with the example of a city understood as an architectonic configuration. They conceived the city as the space to be shaped architectonically for a community of citizens whose everyday life – work activity, commerce, social interaction, and not least the formation of a political will – takes place within this space. They were thus able, from this perspective, to equate the art of the architect with the art of the politician. Just as the politician is able to unite the citizens with a view to common action, so too the architect is able to shape in a highly concrete fashion the community of citizens through the architectonic disposition of their city as well as through a network of relations encompassing streets, open spaces, courtyards, and gardens.

It is for this reason that there is in the architectural theory of the Renaissance an "ideal city," namely the polis shaped according to human measures. In this city, too, the citizens must go about their work and their businesses and care for the common good. But they can move here in the ideal space of a city that is suited to them, i.e., configured in such a way that the geometry of its disposition corresponds to the natural spaces of action and the life rhythms of humankind.[43]

Renaissance architects had thus found a fundamental answer to their question of how humankind's architectonic environment may be best configured: the measures of humankind should also be the measures of architecture or, put the other way around: the proportions of architectonic creations should agree with the proportions of the human figure. This answer was connected in their mind with the certainty of having provided an objective, i.e., a mathematical basis for the art of building. The proportions of the human body could be expressed in the form of mathematical-numeric relations, which in the opinion of Renaissance architects were the same as those that can be discovered in the cosmic

42 Cf. on this point Alessandro Scafi, "Filarete's Ideal City of Sforzinda: Architecture between Nature and Society," in Matthias Riedl, Tilo Schabert (eds.), *Die Stadt: Achse und Zentrum der Welt – The City: Axis and Centre of the World*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2011, pp. 15–33.

43 Leon Battista Alberti, *L'Architettura (De Re Aedificatoria)*, Latin-Italian, translated by Giovanni Orlandi, ed. by Paolo Portoghesi, Milan: Edizioni Il polifilo, 1966, vol. 1, pp. 13–14, 265, 269, 273. On the idea of the "ideal city," cf. Eugenio Garin, *Scienza e vita civile nel Rinascimento italiano*, Bari: Laterza, 1965, chap. 2 (Città ideale); as well as Corrado Maltese, "II pensiero architettonico e urbanistico di Leonardo," in *Leonardo, saggi e ricerche per le onoranze di Leonardo da Vinci nel quinto anniversario della morte (1452–1952)*, ed. by Achille Marazza, Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1954.

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order of the world and in musical harmonies.[44] Thus an anthropometric architecture could create an architectonic environment for human beings that suited them like no other. This architecture reproduced the cosmos of the world in a cosmos of architecture.

I have presented here the Renaissance theory of architecture in some detail in order to shed some light, from this perspective, on the profound break caused towards the end of the 18th century by the influence of modern ideas in the realm of architecture.[45] Obviously it is not possible here to go into the whole history of the development of modern architecture. It should suffice to discuss the two perhaps most important factors in this development:

(1) On the one hand, a revolution took place in the 18th century in aesthetic theory. The classical theory of objective standards for aesthetic judgments was radically rejected by the theorists of "taste formation," by Hume, for example, and especially by Kant, and this theory was replaced by a new theory according to which, as Kant put it, "the judgement of taste is not a cognitive judgement, hence not logical but aesthetic, by which we understand that whose ground of determination *cannot* be *other than subjective*."[46]

(2) On the other hand, around the same time – namely in the time of emancipatory Enlightenment – the idea began to prevail that only the individual will-to-form of each architect should be the criterion for the form of architectonic creations.[47] An architecture that was measured according to non-architectonic criteria, as hitherto practiced, should be replaced by an "autonomous" architecture defined exclusively by its own form possibilities.[48]

The first of these two factors exerted its influence within the realm of architecture chiefly in the form of an opposition against the hitherto still valid proportion theory of Renaissance architects. According to the new aesthetics, there could be, as a matter of principle, no objective, i.e., no universally valid defini-

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44 Cf. Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, pp. 16, 22ff., 32, 101.
45 For what follows, cf. Emil Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier. Ursprung und Entwicklung der autonomen Architektur*, Vienna: Verlag Dr. Rolf Passer, 1933; Emil Kaufmann: *Architecture in the Age of Reason. Baroque and Post-Baroque in England, Italy, and France*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1955; Robert Rosenblum, *Transformations in Late Eighteenth Century Art*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1967.
46 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, translated by Paul Guyer, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, First Part, First Section, p. 89. Cf. also pp. 99–101, 164ff. and 122.
47 Emil Kaufmann too refers in his discussion of Ledoux' "modern" architecture to Kant. See Emil Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, pp. 11f.
48 On the concept of "autonomous architecture," cf. Emil Kaufmann, *Von Ledoux bis Le Corbusier*, pp. 14ff., 42ff.

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tion of beauty and hence no theory of architectonic proportions that would be the standard for all architectonic creations. Consequently, the proportion theory of Renaissance architects was not retained in the modern understanding of architecture, although it survived as an isolated remnant of a tradition in the history of architecture whose meaning was increasingly forgotten. The creations of the unfolding modern architecture were produced instead merely according to their functionality ("form follows function"), or according to the form-feeling of each individual architect, or otherwise according to principles more or less arbitrarily laid down. Only in the 20th century was the theory of architectonic proportions revived by Le Corbusier, but without reaching the level of insight or the degree of discrimination of Renaissance architects.[49]

The second of the two factors in the history of modern architecture mentioned above caused a distortion in the configuration of architectonic principles, architectonic creations, and in their social as well as political implications. On the one hand, any arbitrary architectonic principle could be correlated with an "autonomous" architecture, in such a way that the architectonic creations produced according to them were not necessarily in accord with the human beings for which they were actually created. On the other hand, this autonomous, i.e., modern, architecture transformed and redesigned humankind's architectonic environment, even though these architectonic creations of this were (half-consciously rather than deliberately) produced with the purpose of adapting humankind's architectonic environment to humankind.

The new developments have obviously had very profound and varied consequences for the architectonic configuration of the modern lifeworld. One of these consequences should be further elucidated by reason of its fundamental significance: To the extent that humankind's architectonic environment was transformed by modern architecture, it was "dehumanized" and consequently deprived also of its "political" quality of being an essential element in the formation of human society.

This process of a dehumanization of architecture can be illustrated by the architectural projects of the French architects Claude-Nicolas Ledoux, Étienne-Louis Boullée and Jean-Jacques Lequeu, who, towards the end of the 18th century, promoted an architecture of pure stereometric forms.[50] The buildings which

49 Cf. Sigrid Braunfels, "Vom Mikrokosmos zum Meter," in Georg Glowatzki *et al.* (eds.), *Der Mensch. Anthropometrie in Kunst und Wissenschaft*, Munich: Heinz Moos, 1973, pp. 71–73.
50 Cf. Emil Kaufmann, "Three Revolutionary Architects, Boullée, Ledoux, and Lequeu," in *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia XLII, Part 3, Oct. 1952; as well as the other works by Emil Kaufmann already mentioned; see also Adolf Max Vogt, *Russische*

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these architects designed and occasionally also constructed, may have the form of a sphere, a cylinder, or a cube, or they may also be configured through either the nesting or the piling of several such forms. The impression produced by these buildings – they appear uninviting, unapproachable, lifeless, and cold – is certainly not in contradiction with their purpose. They are almost exclusively tombs, prisons, monuments, museums, or fortifications. This architecture of stereometric forms was apparently able to develop only as an architecture without human beings.

A different example of dehumanized architecture is the "functional" architecture promoted in the 20th century by Bruno Taut, Walter Gropius, Auguste Perret, Tony Garnier, F. L. Wright, and Le Corbusier.[51] In this architecture, too, the central architectonic concern, the shaping of an environment for human beings, was made to rest on an unsuitable ideology of building. Given that we live in the time of the machine, the creations of architecture were supposed to correspond to the model of the machine, instead of to humankind. The form of these machine-like buildings had to be determined solely by their respective function. The commandment of inhumanity served as it were as the first principle of the new architectonic ideology. If human beings lived already in a modern world dominated by machines, then architecture should not trail behind but should collaborate in making the constraints of this existence *sub specie machinae*[52] even more constraining.

Consciousness of Modernity and Modernity of Society

There is a fundamental correlation between a "modernity" of mental attitudes and practical actions, on the one hand, and a state of mental and social crisis, on the other. This finding follows from the investigations of the preceding chap-

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und französische Revolutionsarchitektur 1917/1789. Zur Einwirkung des Marxismus und des Newtonismus auf die Bauweise, Cologne: Du Mont, 1974.

51 Cf. Bruno Taut, *Bauen. Der neue Wohnbau*, Leipzig: Klinkhardt & Biermann, 1927; Bruno Taut, *Die moderne Baukunst in Europa und Amerika*, Stuttgart: Hoffmann, 1929; Walter Gropius, *Idee und Aufbau des staatlichen Bauhauses Weimar*, Munich: Bauhausverlag, 1923; Walter Gropius, *Scope of Total Architecture*, London: Allen & Unwin, 1956; Frank Lloyd Wright & Baker Brownell, *Architecture and Modern Life*, New York: Harper, 2015; Frank Llyod Wright, *An Organic Architecture. The Architecture of Democracy*, London: Lund Humphries, 2017; Frank Llyod Wright, *The Future of Architecture*, New York: Horizon Press, 1953.

52 I am borrowing this concept from Arno Baruzzi, *Mensch und Maschine. Das Denken sub specie machinae,* Munich: Fink, 1973. Cf. also Frank Lloyd Wright, *The Future of Architecture*, New York, reprint: Horizon Press, 1970, pp. 85, 195.

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ters; it consequently dictated the topic of the reflections offered in the present chapter. The fundamental correlation of "crisis" and "modernity" was meant to be elucidated, to the extent that this was possible, also in its historical dimension. Having discussed in previous chapters the intellectual-historical process of the rise and development of typically modern forms of consciousness, and having analyzed this process in an attempt to provide a phenomenology of modern consciousness, we were able in the present chapter to examine the principles of a historical-genetic phenomenology of the modern lifeworld. Characteristic features of "modernity" were noted in various realms of this lifeworld, namely in the religious, economic, literary, and architectonic realms. Such characteristic features included:

- the pursuit of autonomy
- the pursuit of as many possessions as possible
- the experience that the world has collapsed, and that the existence of mankind is threatened
- the substitution of a multiplicity of isolated ways of seeing and of unconnected parts for the unity of correlated perceptions and interconnected things
- the loss of the capacity to communicate with others
- the disappearance of generally accepted norms and the hollowing out of traditions
- lastly, tendencies towards a dehumanization of the human world

The attempt to schematically demonstrate the presence of such characteristic features of "modernity" also in our present lifeworld, in which human societies exist as *modern* societies, was meant to link the modernity of these societies back to the consciousness of modernity which manifests itself in them. We have demonstrated this parallelism of "modernity" in the mental and the social realms only piecemeal up to now; and the reason was that it was necessary to call attention to the manifestations of "modernity" in the intellectual and the social realms first separately.

But we have now reached the point at which the parallels between these two realms – insofar as they exhibit the character of "modernity" – can be explicated. In order to achieve the greatest possible clarity, I have chosen for this explication the form of a table, in which the column "field of consciousness" lists the characteristics of a *consciousness* of modernity, and the column "social field" the corresponding characteristics of the modernity of *society*.

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Field of consciousness:	*Social field:*
General thought schema: *moderni – antiqui*	General emancipation from history and tradition
Dogmas:	
• Fundamental superiority of the "moderns" over the "ancients" • *veritas filia temporis* • truth differential between "present" and "past"	Change of mode of existence according to changes in "novelties" and "fashions" Politics legitimized by "progress" Interest in history only to the extent that it is the pre-history of the present Neglect and loss of traditional bodies of knowledge Identification of the truth with the *Zeitgeist*
Eristic style of thought and speech	Habitual revolt, habitual protest Acts of contradiction = acts of self-confirmation Meaning loss and decomposition of language (consequence: verbal facades, *verbiage)*
Primacy of the imagination	Elemental difference of perception: Fancy versus reality Chaotic action: escalation of expectations, on the one hand; on the other: blindness for the limits of human knowledge and human power Susceptibility to falling for the promises of imaginary politics
Aseity	Contraction of the person to the *ego (I, moi, self)* Egocentric existence: *amor sui* and *libido dominandi:* society as a medium for egoism Existence in despair, "to want to be oneself in despair"
Autonomy	Claim to universal satisfaction of desires Striving for individuality as striving for perfection Tendencies towards a dissolution of society into private spheres of individual interest A world "smashed into individuals"
Self-determination	Searching for a meaning of individual existence in the absence of a meaningfulness of existence: multiplicity of "interests" Dialectic of self-referentiality and loss of communication
Self-representation	Hypertrophy of forms

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Originality	Gesture of permanent failure Cult of eccentricity, of the outlandish, of the abnormal Exhibitionism, voyeurism Confusion of forms with fragments, of creativity with destruction, of pathos with brutality, of suffering with cruelty
Interest	Symptoms of irrational activism
Curiosity	Absorption in a multiplicity of activities *(polypragmosyne)*
amour de la nouvelleté	*divertissement*
General understanding of reality: Cosmos → nature	Imperious attitude towards nature "work" and "industry" as forms of a competition with nature Depersonalization of work: economic alienation Separation of work-world and life-world Disenchantment of the world: Existential boredom (*ennui)* Confrontation with a world of uninteresting, empty spaces Existential anxiety *(angoisse)*
One-dimensionality of the apperception of reality (only physical, not symbolic dimension of reality)	The natural sciences in the role of paradigms of human modes of experience and knowledge Partial loss of reality (Repression of the experiences of non-physical realms of reality) Neutralization of traditional symbolisms such as rites, liturgy, and sacred buildings through their reduction to "art," or such as myth through its reduction to "fairy tales" and "legends of heroes" The paradoxical consequence of a scientistic civilization: the increasing influence of spiritualist, sect-like subcultures

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Chapter 8

The Crisis of Modernity II

Je casse, donc je suis (I smash, therefore I am)
Graffiti on a Paris house wall, June 2016

The characteristics of the consciousness of modernity are characteristics of a spiritual crisis, in the same way that the characteristics of a modern society are characteristics of a social crisis. However, what makes a modern society *modern* is not identical to the ways in which the crisis of modernity manifests itself in the social realm. What is it, then, that makes a modern society modern?

It is phenomena of violence. In other words, it is expressions, measures, and actions that are meant to satisfy the individual as well as the collective need for violence. In this chapter, I shall examine the connections between the modernity of society and the need for violence. The point of the question, however, is not to investigate isolated motives for actions of violence. Our theme is rather the total web of motives that constitutes the horizon for the explanation of the phenomena of violence peculiar to the world of modern societies.

Existence in Chaos

At the end of an essay entitled, *A Reflection on Violence. On Murder, Politics, and the Contemporary Sense of Doom*, the British-American historian Walter Laqueur draw this conclusion: "the deeper causes of the weakness, the fatigue, the scepticism, are connected with the spiritual crisis of our time: the loss of faith (be it religious or ideological), the depreciation of traditional values which have resulted in pessimism, emptiness, boredom, and in various curious near-suicidal manifestations. I am, of course, aware that the situation in the developing countries is different; but in the developed industrial societies of the West this seems to me the core of the problem. The key is not in the GNP, nor in the level of material expectations, but in the minds of men."[1]

If we take the concept of "mind" in the more precise sense of "modern mentality," it will be possible to circumscribe more clearly the problem raised by Laqueur. His suggestion is to interpret the ubiquitous phenomena of violence in

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1 Walter Laqueur, "A Reflection on Violence. On Murder, Politics, and the Contemporary Sense of Doom," in *Encounter*, April 1972, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 4, p. 10.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110671735-009

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contemporary societies as connected with the modernity of mental attitudes, which, by spurring a crisis of the mind, are also the ferment for a crisis of civilization. Without mentioning it explicitly, Laqueur incorporates the concept of modernity into his interpretation. As I have proposed in the second and third chapters above, what makes human existence "modern" is its being an existence in chaos. The modern mentality is incompatible with things like rules, traditions, order, and permanence. It expresses itself in the violation of rules and the "devaluation of traditional values," in the dissolution of structures of order and the embracing of fragmentation. The forms of modern behavior that correspond to this mentality yield an unending sequence of crises, in which the only justification of human existence is the self-assertion in the crisis. Some may be able to sustain themselves in such an existence in chaos, but what happens when the field of influence of this modern mentality encompasses not just the intellect of some individuals but the mental world of a whole civilization?

In Laqueur's interpretation, the result would be an erosion of this civilization, which would manifest itself, among other things, in phenomena of violence. Why phenomena of violence? Surely because *a mentality set on bringing about chaos negates every order of civilization, in such a way that violence, being the most congruous way of dissolving order, becomes also the most authentic form of the actualization of this mentality.*

The logic of this modern negation of the order of civilization creates also a crisis of the political legitimization of this order. A thought that experiences its true form in chaos will not be able to establish the legitimacy of political rule except, at best, in the securing of physical survival and the self-assertion of the individual and the collective. But such a limited legitimacy of political rule breaks down in the logic of modernity. Since violence is the only possible instrument for a self-assertion that is sought for its own sake, such self-assertion can only exacerbate an urgent need for violence.

The Difference Between "History I" and "History II"

According to the theoretical blueprint of the civilization of modernity presented in chapters 5 and 6, this civilization was supposed to be consummated in a "kingdom of humankind on earth" in which nature as a whole is just a manifestation of human power. The reality of the so-called modern civilization, however, deviates significantly from this blueprint. The Modern still appears in the mode of endless crises rather than in the mode of the consummation of modern civilization.

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Given this difference between the conception and the actuality of the history of modernity – "history I" and "history II" – two reactions are open for the contemporaries of modernity who are interested in its future. Some will be inclined to be generally skeptical regarding the consummation of modernity, or they might conclude that this consummation is no longer possible or perhaps was in fact never possible. Others will perceive this difference as an incentive for doing everything possible to secure the modernity of modern civilization. The logic of this reaction brings about, when all other means fail, a yearning for violence. If modernity is always its own crisis, a future in which modernity has been consummated is unattainable. All attempts to bring it closer to the present, which are themselves manifestations of modernity in the mode of crisis, will bring about, not the consummation of modernity, but rather only more intense crises. And the motives for these attempts become only more numerous in the course of time. For those who fall into the circle of this logic, the last alternative, short of admitting the failure of modernity, will be violence.

Their reasoning might be that the possibility of the consummation of modernity, i. e., of a world of the radically New, can only be created through a radical modernity, that is to say, through a radical destruction of the existing world. In view of the unbridgeable difference between the theoretical blueprint of modern civilization and its present reality, modern consciousness logically actualizes itself in a revolutionary consciousness that may adopt a variety of modes: apocalyptic, messianic, purely terrorist, or a mixture thereof.[2]

The Divergence Between Culture and Civilization

In an article entitled *Tensions et distorsions dans l'humanisme contemporain*, the French literary and cultural critic, Jean Onimus, makes the following remarks regarding the problem of violence in the contemporary world:

> "Happy, i. e., harmonic civilizations have always possessed a culture capable of prolonging and celebrating them. Thus, there have been in the history of humanity whole and complete harmonies. In them, violence – which, to be sure, has always existed – was smothered as it were or, in any case, overcome by a superior accord. There was something – be it reason, order, nature, grace, providence, or saintliness – to which everything was referred. There

2 Cf. for this point the chapters, "Das existentielle Extrem: Das revolutionäre Bewusstsein", "Endzeit und Exodus," und "Zeit der Propheten" in my book, *Modernität und Geschichte. Das Experiment der modernen Zivilisation*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990, and my article "Revolutionary Consciousness" (English version of "Das revolutionäre Bewusstsein") in *Philosophical Studies*, Vol. XXVII, The National University of Ireland, 1980, pp. 129 – 142.

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was a model of order within which even the worst forms of violence were intelligible. The individual actualized himself in the culture of his time without any rift with it: there was an osmosis between culture and civilization.

Thus, in the time of the harmony between culture and civilization, there was a proportion between these two life forces. City, tool, work, dwelling – all reflected the image of art, of feelings, of religion, of the imaginary world. And in turn it was not necessary to change the vision of reality in order to go from the world of culture to the world of civilization.

But what is happening to us in the West? It is here, most noticeably, there grows a violence that stems from what we could call the angle of inclination between culture and civilization. These are now two forces in opposition: we are exposed to a test of endurance caused by a force which somehow acts from the inside out and which makes us unexpectedly sick and infirm.[3]"

In light of these remarks, we must wonder why culture and civilization are, in the world of modernity, "two forces in opposition," instead of being in accord, as they used to be in earlier social orders. And, if culture and civilization diverge, and the "angle of inclination" between them grows larger, why is it that this growing divergence is a source of violence?

A world of modernity is a paradox. This is precisely what Jean Onimus points out. This world carries in itself its own contradiction. On the one hand, there is at its basis, inasmuch as it is modern, a fundamental tendency towards the dissolution of orders. On the other hand, the members of this world do maintain an "order," namely an order of elementary regulation of needs or, put more precisely, an order of survival. Modernity, to the extent that it can be exacerbated to the extreme of an arbitrariness subject to no rule, is constantly refuted in the realm of "civilization" by the rules that necessarily lie at the basis of the civilized coexistence of human beings. The divergence between culture and civilization stems from this fundamentally inextirpable difference in the degree of their modernization. The former is always more modern than the latter. Or conversely: the constrains of civilization cause the failure of cultural plans. Civilization not only checks the impact of culture but also throws culture back to its origin, to the revolt against all order. But an order of merely coercive character cannot avoid con-

3 Jean Onimus, "Tensions et distortions dans l'humanisme contemporain", in Michel Amiot et al. (eds.), *La violence dans le monde actuel*, Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1968, p. 14 f. In the same volume, Lucien Mugnier-Pollet wrote in his article, "Violence et Morale": "The justification that was possible to give to violence in the Middle Ages was purely negative. Violence aims at the uprooting of violence, the repression of evil; it did not claim any positive function. On the other hand, the justifications of violence in today's world have a new character. For new authors, violence seems to beget something positive, and the Good itself only to be actualized, and Being to attain its full positivity, when <they> are accompanied by violence." (p. 27 f.)

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fronting a revolt which will only become only more intense in the face of this order. And nonetheless these forms of life – the form of a coercive order and the form of an intensifying revolt – belong both, and to the same degree, to the world of modernity, because they both dissolve the paradox of this world by transforming it into the potential for violence which they generate.

The Loss of Common Convictions or The Decline of the Human World

The French political scientist, Raymond Aron, once asked, “What is the foundation of societies deprived of common convictions?” According to him, “all known civilizations have existed in the unity of a religion. They possessed a bond in their collective faith. But the Western modern civilization has lost the common ground of religion.” Aron adds that, in this vacuum, something else spreads: “a kind of cult of violence.”[4]

Few will doubt the correctness of Aron’s assertion that modern societies are not based on a “collective faith,” as earlier societies were. The modernity of these modern societies, however, does not stem solely from the collapse of an erstwhile religious or ideological common ground. In a way, the opposite is also true: the modernity of society is the ground for the lack of common convictions. Put in aphoristic form: a modern society is always a society without common convictions. The logic of the principles of modern anthropology inexorably gives rise to a human world fragmented into single, mutually disconnected, individuals. In a fully developed modern world, the striving for the greatest possible individuality would be the same as the striving for perfection. This on the one hand. On the other, the number of possibilities of individuality would have to be reckoned as infinite, because every human being would be able to freely choose his or her nature as the result of his or her self-determination. A modern society existing in its purity would thus be a society lacking a common intellectual and spiritual substance. It would be only the system of rules for coping with the physical needs of its members; it would not be the space and the medium for the political action of human beings acting as a community and in conformity with common convictions perceived as the foundation for the order of their society.

Assuming that such a modern society is to be created, the result must be a contradictory situation. The members of this society would be required both to accept the given social order as a *factum brutum* but also to establish the social

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4 Raymond Aron, *La révolution introuvable*, Paris: Fayard, 1968, pp. 44–47.

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condition of their existence solely by themselves, as a private intellectual enterprise, as it were. In actual reality, however, this contradiction is covered up by the model of legitimation assigned to the existing social order by tradition or imposed on it through the influence of ruling elites. And in some circumstances, especially in the condition of economic prosperity, this might indeed be sufficient.

But, of course, this would not eliminate the contradiction between social existence and private creation of meaning. And the political situation will surely turn virulent when the social institutions are shattered by events that deprive them of their only legitimation, i.e., of their functionality. In such a situation, the merely superficially covered-up fragmentation of the social world into purely individual (or at most micro-collective) zones of meaning-creation will give rise to a desire for violence. Any of these zones of individual meaning-creation could in principle become the common zone by integrating all the others into itself. Of course, this outcome can take place only through violence. To be sure, it might also be possible to reestablish the order of society through a commonality of convictions. But this would require the abandonment of modernity as a principle, because this principle is not compatible with a meaningfulness of the social world above and beyond the private self-determination of particular individuals.

The Crisis of the Ego

The French writer, Jean-Paul Sartre, speaks in *L'Être et le néant* of a human being's "passion" to become the ground of his or her own existence:

> Every human reality is a passion in that it projects losing itself so as to found being and by the same stroke to constitute the In-itself which escapes contingency by being its own foundation, the *ens causa sui,* which religions call God. Thus the passion of man is the reverse of that of Christ, for man loses himself as man in order that God may be born. But the idea of God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion.[5]

The reader cannot help being taken aback by Sartre's words. He describes humankind as a future God, but he identifies the human deification with a catastrophe of human existence. Why? Sartre's disconcerting interpretation of the human passion to be God has, to be sure, more than one explanation, but

5 Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'être et le néant* (1934), English: *Being and Nothingness. An Essay of Phenomenological Ontology*, translated by Hazel E. Barnes, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956, p. 615.

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here I will focus only on one reason, which is connected with the topic of the following reflections on the theme of "the crisis of the ego."

By identifying humankind's existential project to be a self with the process of becoming God, Sartre aligns himself with the modern tradition of anthropological thought that goes back to the Renaissance debate on the dignity and misery of humankind (see Chapter V above). Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, too, drew up a program of human self-deification but without in the least implying that such a self-deification of humankind might be "useless." He stressed on the contrary his enthusiasm for the *magnum miraculum* of humankind, who is called to become God.

To be sure, when Sartre speaks, like Pico, of humankind's becoming God, he is addressing thematically only the classical topic of a modern anthropology. But, from an exegetical point of view, he makes this classical topic into a controversial one by calling the "passion" for a divine existence, which for him characterizes human existence throughout, "useless." He restates the modern understanding of humankind, but shows no enthusiasm for it, and this is because he links it to the experience of the absurd.

The reason for this difference is found in the history of the modern ego. The modern idea of humankind as a god in the process of becoming, was increasingly symbolized, starting in the 17th century, in the concepts of the *Moi, Ego, Ich,* and *Self,* and, in this form, the idea was developed into a comprehensive theory of *modern* human existence. According to a well-known *Pensée* of Pascal's, the ego *(moi)* wants to make itself the "center of everything" *(centre de tout).*[6] And, according to Pascal, the *Moi* will do anything to prevent a loss of its power and to destroy anything that might oppose resistance to it. One could unpack Pascal's point regarding the problem of humankind's deification by stating that someone who wishes to become a god must first take possession of the world whose god he or she wants to become.

Thus, when the ego is chosen by human beings as the form of their existence, the result is evidently a fundamental conflict of power. Every human being, in his or her quality as an "ego," makes claim to being the "center of everything." But the problem is that only one of them can be this center. We could put it this way from the angle of social praxis: It is normal for each of these human beings to make claim to a total satisfaction of his or her needs, even though this claim can be fulfilled only for some of them.

This explains why the ego as the form of human existence inexorably runs into a crisis. The ego exists at first only in the mode of all the claims that orig-

6 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, fg. 100, Édition Brunschvicq, Paris: Garnier, 1960, pp. 101f.

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inate in it and which have not been satisfied. On the other hand, the ego is prevented from really actualizing itself because its claims clash with the claims of others, and the resistance into which it runs grows in the same degree that it provokes it by its expansion. Thus, the ego can only become actual in the crisis, i.e., in the state of the continuous peril it creates for itself, in the form of resistance, by pursuing a potentially unlimited expansion. But yielding to this resistance – which would entail an only partial fulfillment of its claims – would be tantamount to renouncing the goal of being a full ego; and, as a consequence, the ego is naturally tempted to react to the threat of failure through an even greater aggressivity. The result can only be an escalation of the expansion, on the one hand, and of the resistance, on the other. And this twofold escalation leads in the end to a convergence of the will to be an ego with aggressivity (the desire for violence). Only a single point in time is granted to it in which it can impose its rule over that which otherwise escapes its claim for power, and that is the moment in which it destroys it.

When human beings seek to actualize their existence in the form of the ego, they not only face on all sides the problem of the fight for power, which results from the fact that only one man or one woman, if at all, can logically attain the status of a godlike ego; they also must deal with the problem of grasping what a human being is when he or she is an ego. On the one hand, one could say: *The ego is power.* But when someone is in possession of all available power, this does not yet explain the essence of his or her existence. Indeed, it is not clear *who* is it that here exercises power? On the other hand, one could say: *The ego is God.* But the idea of God in the mode of human self-deification, according to Sartre, is "contradictory," all the more so since this God is still in the process of becoming and must first obliterate himself or herself as a human being "in order to ground Being and at the same time constitute the In-itself that escapes contingency by being its own ground." A truly contradictory idea! Here is a "god" who is nothing, and from whom nothing comes, but who is nonetheless supposed to be the coming-into-being of itself as well as of all reality.

So, what is the ego? Even though the answer to this question is lacking, one can still say: The I is that towards which the self-deifying human being projects himself or herself. (Or in Pico's words: "We are born under the condition that we are what we want to be"). And thus one could add, somewhat reassured, that humankind in the process of this autonomous self-projection is, it is true, not yet a god, but acts nonetheless already as one. But then the problem has simply switched onto a different plane, on which it is actually exacerbated. Human freedom to project oneself autonomously is the freedom of human phantasy. The possibilities of the human imagination to project images of human existence, however, are potentially infinite. To be sure, the ego is the result of an autono-

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mous self-projection of humankind, but where is the ego to be found in the midst of the countless images within the infinite spaces of the human imagination? The idea of God as deified humankind is absurd. Someone who tries to actualize his or her existence in the form of an ego that is the product of his or her own imagination will make the experience of the absurd, i.e., the experience of projecting himself or herself onto something that escapes into the infinity of its possible forms. The desire for violence will yet again arise out of this experience, namely when violence will be apprehended as the experience of a quite useless passion that brings about, not a godhead, but only the despair of not being able to be what one wants to be: a divine ego.

Illimitation and Imagination

In the last chapter of his study, *L'homme revolté*, dedicated to the "astonishing history," that is the "history of European pride,"[7] Albert Camus writes:

> The men of Europe, abandoned to the shadows, have turned their backs upon the fixed and radiant point of the present. They forget the present for the future, the fate of humanity for the delusion of power, the misery of the slums for the mirage of the eternal city, ordinary justice for an empty promised land. They despair of personal freedom and dream of a strange freedom of the species; reject solitary death and give the name of immortality to a vast collective agony. They no longer believe in the things that exist in the world and in living man; the secret of Europe is that it no longer loves life. Its blind men entertain the puerile belief that to love one single day of life amounts to justifying whole centuries of oppression. That is why they wanted to efface joy from the world and to postpone it until a much later date. Impatience with limits, the rejection of their double life, despair at being a man, have finally driven them to inhuman excesses. Denying the real grandeur of life, they have had to stake all on their own excellence. For want of something better to do, they deified themselves and their misfortunes began; these gods have had their eyes put out.[8]

In these few words Camus explains why he calls the history of modern Europe the "history of European pride." Camus had come to understand that European humankind, by setting out towards imaginary goals, had overstepped the limits set to human beings and had become blind to the measure of life and of things.

7 Albert Camus, *The Rebel. An Essay on Man in Revolt*, translation by Anthony Bower, New York: Vintage Books, 1956, p. 11.
8 Ibid. p. 305.

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Let us dwell on the concept of "limit," which Camus uses as the crucial concept of his analysis. It is a key concept for understanding modernity. As I have shown in Chapter Six, the early modern ideas on the rule of humankind over nature were explicitly developed with the aim of expanding as much as possible human power over the things of the world. The plan to remove the limits of human power went hand in hand with the drive to also remove the limits of the *conditio humana* through the process of an entirely presuppositionless self-projection of humankind. In both cases the result of the removal of limits was anticipated in the imagination, first in the idea of a world that is the possession of humankind and is entirely subject to it (the *regnum hominis)*, and then in the idea that humankind has a unique excellence that makes it equal to God.

But what was achieved with this obliteration of limits was not a transgression of the limit between present and future, from a world pregiven to humankind to a world pliable to humankind, but only a transgression of the limit between the perception of reality and the unreality of the imagination. The limits were removed only in the imagination. The situation of humankind was still encompassed, i.e., limited, by the reality of this world and the reality of life. Human beings who indulge their "impatience with limits" are inevitably "driven ... to inhuman excesses," and this takes place in the conflict between their imagination and reality. Their activity still takes place within reality, which imposes limits to their activity, but they act as though these limits had been lifted. They act with "their eyes put out," because, blinded to reality by their imagination, they no longer perceive the limits inherent to reality, the structures between things or their measures. They act without mode or measure, i.e., without orientation, which means that they act with the immoderation of a blind rage. And this immoderation is directed against reality, within which, however, they still find themselves. They thus come up against limits that are still there for every human being. But a conflict *with* reality *in* reality cannot be settled except through violence, that is to say, through acts directed at the annihilation of that reality that is the limit for the action of the human imagination.

The Intellectual Creation of a Climate of Violence

In his work, *Manifestes du surréalisme* (1924, 1930), the French poet, André Breton, elucidates, in his capacity as the foremost theorist of surrealism, what surrealism is, how it is produced, and what its purpose is. He begins by spelling out the fundamental principle of modernity: the freedom of humankind to think

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whatever comes to mind and to do whatever it sees fit is identical with the freedom of the imagination, which is itself absolute.[9] Breton understands surrealism, therefore, as an *automatisme psychique pur*, through which the "actual activity of thought" *(fonctionnement réel de la pensée)* is liberated from every possible rational control as well as from every possible aesthetic or moral inhibition.[10] On the basis of this conceptual definition, Breton conceives of surrealism as an epoch-making phenomenon in the history of human thought. Surrealism's concern is to make it possible for the human imagination to take revenge on all things; the order of the day is to liberate the human imagination once for all, after the human spirit had been domesticated and held in a condition of foolish devotion for hundreds of years.[11]

In accord with this program, Breton interprets surrealism as a provocation. He states that, from an intellectual and moral perspective, the aim of surrealism is above all to bring about a "crisis of consciousness" *(crise de conscience)* of the most universal and radical kind.[12] This statement of intent is cogent, because a liberation of the human imagination from all constraints, i.e., from the allegiance to a rationally controllable perception of reality, can happen only when human consciousness has been shattered and suspended in its critical function. Once the limits between unreality and reality, imagination and perception have become blurred in human consciousness, surrealism can become a *disposition de l'esprit,*[13] i.e., a disinterested play of thought under the unbounded power of dream.[14]

But the liberation of the human imagination would not be completed if it were to go only as far as to impose the rule of dream in human consciousness. As long as the unbounded power of dream were limited to the sphere of consciousness, without extending into reality itself, the imagination would not be truly liberated. That is why Breton sets his hopes on a future "resolution" of dream and reality in a "kind of absolute reality," i.e., in a *surréalité*, as he calls it.[15] In doing so, however, he explicitly identifies the "real" with the "fan-

9 André Breton, *Manifestes du surréalisme, Manifeste du surréalisme (1924)*, Paris: Gallimard, 1972, pp. 12ff.
10 Ibid. p. 37.
11 Ibid. p. 135.
12 Ibid. p. 76.
13 Ibid. p. 79.
14 Ibid. p. 37f.
15 Ibid. p. 23f.

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tastic." He writes: "What is admirable in the fantastic is that there is nothing fantastic here any longer: there is only the real."[16]

But how are dream and reality resolved in *surréalité?* Surely not by pure acts of imaginary thought, because, taken just as a power of producing images, the imagination is merely pushed back into itself and consequently not liberated. Thus, the acts of dreaming would need to become acts within reality; real actions would have to take place through which, by forcing reality open, the imagination would be set free.

Breton did certainly not intend to expound surrealism as a theory of violence in the M*anifestes du surréalisme*. His primary concern was the liberation of the human imagination. But his exegesis of surrealism, which for him was the mode of this liberation, made clear that the most cogent form of expression of surrealism (as conceived of by Breton) was violence, i.e., any action that liberates the imagination by forcing reality open. And as a representative of the "disinterested play of thought," Breton did not shy away from formulating his famous description of surrealism:

> Surrealism is not afraid of making itself into a dogma of absolute revolt, of total insubordination, of regular sabotage, and no longer expects anything save from violence. The simplest surrealist act consists in descending on the street, revolver in hand, and shooting at random into the crowd as fast as the finger can pull the trigger.[17]

The implication of Breton's exegesis is that surrealism, or more precisely, surrealism's sphere of influence, creates an intellectual climate of violence. We would overlook the decisive point of the example of "the simplest surrealist ac," if we insisted in taking it literally as an invitation to descend on the streets and shoot at random into the crowd. Breton himself did no such thing, although it is abundantly clear that he considered himself a surrealist. Of much greater weight is the general statement about surrealism which Breton means to illustrate with his example: a specific type of behavior is elicited by the surrealist liberation of the imagination, and this behavior consists in applied violence.

Under the assumption of an equivalence between liberation of the imagination and praxis of violence, violence would become the ethos for those who equate the freedom of their imagination with the freedom of their existence. Violence acquires here an anthropological quality: Its purpose is the actualization of human freedom.

16 Ibid. p. 25.
17 Ibid. p. 78.

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Of course, it would be incorrect to conclude from this that only a violent criminal can experience the freedom of the imagination. One can make the same experience by, say, forcing open ossified forms of language and art, or by subverting social tabus, or, in the course of a violent street demonstration, by writing on a wall the words, "je casse, donc je suis" – "I smash, therefore I am."[18] But what happens when – as suggested by this motto – one reads the equivalence between liberation of the imagination and praxis of violence backwards, such that any praxis of violence could be interpreted as bringing about the liberation of the imagination and thus the freedom of human existence?

Once the equivalence in question is posited, there can be no cogent argument against reading it backwards. On the contrary: in the intellectual climate of violence, which arises from equating the liberation of the imagination with the praxis of violence, it seems equally legitimate to understand it either as a statement about the practiced violence or as a statement about the self-liberating imagination. If we set down the principle that the freedom of the imagination and the freedom of one's own existence are brought into being through the praxis of violence, who can decide, with regard to a particular act of violence, whether this act serves the liberation of the imagination and not a totally different goal, such as the satisfaction of the hunger for power or the relief of frustrations? And who can refute the claim that the person who carries out this act of violence aims only at the liberation of his or her imagination and thus at his or her freedom as a human being?

The consequences of a climate of violence should thus have become clear. Wherever violence is rife, the criteria through which it would be possible to identify violence as violence are suspended. In this climate, any act of violence can potentially be regarded as "human," as an act by which human freedom is produced and exercised. Thus, in order to oppose the claim to the right of violence, it would be necessary to reject the claim to the right of freedom. Put differently, in a climate of violence, it is no longer possible to distinguish between a praxis of violence and a praxis of humanity.

18 In the afternoon of June 14th, 2016, a demonstration along the Boulevard Montparnasse in Paris led to violent excesses, in the course of which someone spray-painted this motto on the wall of a recently renovated building. An acquaintance of the author documented it photographically that same day. Three days later it had been painted over.

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Chapter 9

Gestalt in Modernity: The Constitutional Regime

There is no liberty without an organization of liberty
François Mitterrand, Interview, *Libération*

If the programmatic content of modern consciousness were expressed in a few slogans, we would get something like this: "We can do whatever we can think of; we bring about whatever we undertake to bring about; we carry out whatever we are excited about carrying out. Nothing is farther from us than a limit to the expansion of our power to attain what we want to attain, to take possession of what we want to possess, to enjoy what we feel like enjoying. Everything is at our disposal, nothing is immune to our power."

"And if anyone speaks of limit or limits, we refuse to listen or reject it. Limits do not belong in our civilization, the modern civilization."

Such slogans reflect the modern consciousness in the form of an ideology. The preceding chapters have dealt with the intellectual development and the social consolidation of this ideology; in addition, we have discussed the skepticism against which modernity comes up of itself in our days as well as the continuous crisis intrinsic to its existence. The theme of the "limit" or "limits" came up in this discussion in different ways, and naturally so, given that this theme is an inextricable aspect of the essence of modernity. A discussion of modernity cannot circumvent this topic; it will be staying with us – us, the interrogating companions of the modern age. Anyone who, simply driven by empirical observations, reflects on such civilizational components as have survived the impact of modernity or perhaps point beyond it (and, if we pay attention, we find that there is no dearth of such reflections), must get to grips with the theme, "limit."

The experience of modernity gives rise to the question of whether there exist *Gestalten* of human existence which have survived in the midst of the irregularity of modernity and which do not have a share in this irregularity.

We have dealt with this question elsewhere, mainly when discussing aspects of the modern civilization that represent alternatives to modernity, either as ways of steering clear of modernity, or as attempts to thwart it, or even as proposals for an entirely divergent political paradigm.[1] In the present chapter, which closes

1 Cf. Tilo Schabert, *Modernität und Geschichte. Das Experiment der modernen Zivilisation*, Würz-

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our investigation, we would like to examine a peculiarity of the civilizational enterprise of modernity which is, from the perspective of the ideology of modernity, quite astounding.

We may begin by stating that, as everyone is aware, modernity has given birth to an extremely significant achievement of political civilization. In German it is called *Verfassungsstaat*, in English "constitutional government," in French *régime constitutionnel*, in Italian *governo costituzionale*, and in Spanish *gobierno constitucional*. Its *leitmotiv* is an original demarcation of political power and, on the basis of this demarcation, an incessant control over the exercise of political power. The government must be bound to a pregiven *Gestalt* (the constitution) as well as to the laws emanating from the implementation of the constitution. The rulers must be fundamentally and constantly fenced in in their governing by the *limits* set to the exercise of political power by the constitution and the laws.

Limits? Yes, limits. This is really the way it is. There exists a complex of limits in the midst of modernity, in the midst of that civilizational enterprise which is supposed to be beyond all limit. It is the *Gestalt* of the constitutional regime. We are familiar with it, as already mentioned. But are we not be also astonished by its presence in the midst of modernity? Limits, where there are supposed to be no limits? Limits drawn in the political realm deliberately? Limits of a *Gestalt* of political civilization that has its purpose in these very limits? The question is this: How does modernity show itself here, in an achievement which has certainly been brought about by modernity itself but which is quite different from its other effects?

A Humankind to be Hedged In

A constitutional regime is a manifestation of human self-control. It presupposes an anthropology according to which human beings must be hedged in in their behavior. This hedging-in happens through the political *Gestalten* of their existence. They are led to a specific form of behavior through and within these *Gestalten*. From the perspective of political power, this hedging-in may be regarded as an act of self-limitation.

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burg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1990, esp. chap. VI-VIII; *Die Architektur der Welt. Eine kosmologische Lektüre architektonischer Formen; Die zweite Geburt des Menschen. Von den politischen Anfängen menschlicher Existenz*, Freiburg-Munich: Alber, 2009 (English: *The Second Birth. On the Political Beginnings of Human Existence*, translated by Javier Ibáñez-Noé, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015).

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The constitutional regime was created for modern human beings. These modern human beings are not different from human beings of other ages as far as their general human nature is concerned. Nor are they the creatures of universal visions of human life, such as the platonic or the Taoist visions. There is hardly a theory of human nature which does not address the unrestrained nature of the human constitution and which does not lead, in its ethical application, to the imperative of self-control.

So, what is different about modern humans? Our answer is: What is different about them is their self-interpretation as well as their comportment in the world in accordance to it. Modern humankind holds itself, as we saw, as a ruler through and through with regard to both itself and the world. It believes to be released from anything that might be prescribed to it. What could refrain modern humankind here when it catches sight of that which lures it into trying to impose its dominion? Whatever lures it in such a way seems to this humankind to come to the fore only so that humankind may reach for it. It does not check humankind. On the contrary: It confirms what humankind sees in its environment: a world designed through the lifting of all checks.

It was with such human beings in mind that the conception and the theory of the constitutional regime were developed. When Baruch Spinoza, in his *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), sketched a "society whose government is in the hands of all and where laws are made by common consent," and in which, thus, "the people still remain just as free, since they are not acting under the authority of another but by their own proper consent," he prefaced his sketch with an anthropological remark stressing the lack of restraint in human beings and the corresponding need to bring it under control through political means:

> Now if human beings were so constituted by nature that they desired nothing but what true reason points them to, society would surely need no laws; men would only need to learn true moral doctrine, in order to do what is truly useful of their own accord with upright and free mind. But they are not so constituted, far from it. All men do indeed seek their own interest, but it is not from the dictate of sound reason; for the most part they pursue things and judge them to be in their interest merely because they are carried away by sensual desire and by their passions (which have no regard for the future and for other things).This is why no society can subsist without government and compulsion, and hence laws, which moderate and restrain desires.[2]

The *Federalist Papers* (1787–1788), the classical text for the establishment of a constitutional regime in America, is based on exactly these principles. "The pas-

2 Benedict of Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, translated by Michael Silverthorne and Jonathan Israel, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007, chapter V, pp. 72f.

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sions [of human beings] ought to be controlled and regulated by the government," James Madison states in Federalist No. 49.[3] They are no "angels," he says in a striking *locus classicus* of Federalist No. 51. The very need for governments reveals all there is to know about human nature. Madison writes: "But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself."[4] And Alexander Hamilton writes in Federalist No. 15: "Why has government been instituted at all? Because the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint."[5]

The constitutional regime is a programming of human self-control. This program, however, is successful only if it is in turn an act of self-limitation. The hedging-in of humankind must also hedge those in by whom the hedging-in takes place. Humankind cannot be trusted just as it is. As Montesquieu wrote in *The Spirit of the* Laws, "it has eternally been observed that any man who has power is led to abuse it; he continues until he finds limits."[6]

Human Beings Are Encompassed and Determined by Their Bodies

Prior to any unfolding of an anthropology, human beings have an awareness, first and foremost, of the political implications of their bodily existence. They are in relation to each other from the onset of their appearance in a world formed by bodies.[7] They each demand space for their bodies in this world, and all the others do so, too. Thus, they must find a spatial arrangement, body in relation

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3 Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers*, edited by J. R. Pole, Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2005, p. 276. This anthropological-political observation agrees with the observation made by Alexander Hamilton in Federalist No. 72: "The desire of reward is one of the strongest incentives of human conduct; or that the best security for the fidelity of mankind is to make their interests coincide with their duty." *Op. cit.* p. 387. According to Madison (Federalist No. 49), power is of an "encroaching nature." *Op. cit.* p. 268.

4 Ibid. p. 281.

5 Ibid. p. 79.

6 Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, translated by Anne M. Cohler et. al., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, Book XI, chap. IV, p. 155.

7 See on this point the more detailed account in the chapter, "In Body," in *The Second Birth*, pp. 15 – 31.

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to body. Their bodies have taught them to do so. They are needful; they require food, clothing, shelter. They must, therefore, take care of their needs, and, again, it is their bodies that instruct them: they can best take care of their needs if this care is undertaken communally. They are exposed with their bodies, each of them, to other bodies; they can be troubled, wounded, taken prisoner, and killed in their bodies with their bodies. They must thus protect themselves to ensure that their bodily existence remains intact. Their bodies teach them that their bodies are a good that can exist only when free of restraints. This good – the intactness of the bodily existence – defines an absolute limit.

The constitutional regime serves this limit. It is constructed with the limit in mind. The good in the center of the construction is liberty. Liberty is the political interpretation of the limit – the absolute limit grounded in our bodily existence – that unites all human beings in response to the teachings of their bodies. And this is so regardless of whether they understand themselves as modern human beings. In the construction of the constitutional regime, modernity created a *Gestalt* that is entirely its own and which nonetheless has always been in existence: the *Gestalt* of human beings who, for the sake of the good signified in each body, freely limit, in their bodies, the demand that emanates from these bodies.

The Sovereign Existence, i.e., Liberty, in the Figuration of the Many

All human beings are sovereign in and with their bodies. If they are going to be able to exist, they must be constituted into a bodily intactness, and each one of them is alone responsible for this constitution. They are, every one of them, the sovereigns of their individual existence. Each man, each woman, belongs only to himself or herself. This is the constitutional freedom originally given to human beings. They are constituted for a freedom in the enactment of their existence. From a numerical standpoint, this means that every human being and all human beings are constituted for this freedom.

All of them. And this means: many. Thus, freedom comes up against freedom within a life circle within which all move. An individual's sovereignty does not extend to a sovereignty over others, and, conversely, others do not hold sway over the individual's sovereignty. And yet each of them is constituted for the free enactment of his or her existence within the figuration of the many. How is it that they are, on the one hand, a part of the many and stand, on the other, everyone for himself or herself as individuals? A limit arises for all out of their multiplicity, a limit that compartmentalizes the space of their sovereignty. Our question can be answered by reflecting on this limit. We may say that individual sovereignty is, on the one hand, indivisible; this sovereignty extends it-

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self without exception up to the limit of multiplicity. No human being is the sovereign of another human being. Each and every one is sovereign entirely for himself or herself.

Yet we see, on the other hand, that beyond the limit of multiplicity, i.e., in the figuration of the many, the freedom of all to enact their existence is a matter of number. Freedom is constituted for a formation in the Numeric. It is from this numeric constitution that the constitutional regime takes its inception. And this happens in order to establish, beyond the limit of multiplicity (which obviously does not go away) a liberty in number. John Locke described this process in the second of his *Two Treatises of Government* (1689): "Men being, as has been said, by nature all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty, and puts on the bonds of civil society, is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community."[8]

One in Multiplicity – and Limits in the Subject Matter

Many become one, i.e., they build *one* body out of their bodily existence, namely the *body politic*, as it is aptly called in the Anglo-Saxon political language and used as a basic concept in political theory. The formation of this body, as already mentioned, aims at producing liberty in number. The freedom that is restricted to the individual for the enactment of his or her existence must be expanded into a liberty exercised in the context of many as a capacity of the many, but now in the form of a *collective* capacity. They obtain, as Locke put it, "a power to act as *one* body."[9]

In the process of the numeric constitution of the constitutional regime, the limit of multiplicity is surpassed for the sake of this regime. Other limits come immediately into existence, however. They are part of the subject matter, meaning: of the thing that now matters, i.e., the one body created out of many bodies and the power contained in it for the many acting as a unity. Rightly seen, it is two modes of power that emerge. One mode appears *in* the numeric constitution of the constitutional regime. This is a power that demonstrates itself through itself. It is the power of office-holding. The other mode appears *after* the constitu-

8 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government (Second Treatise, Chap. VIII)*, edited by Peter Laslett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970, pp. 348 f.
9 Ibid. p. 349 (emphasis added).

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tion of the constitutional regime. The body politic is formed and with it power is exercised. This is a power that shows itself in action. It is the power of procedure.

The office-holding power and the procedural power appear separately; one is actualized in the power of appointment, the other in the exercise of power. As Walter Bagehot writes in *The English Constitution* (1867), "every constitution must first gain authority, and then use authority."[10] These two modes of power appear not only in the creation of a constitutional regime but also whenever any body politic is formed. Each is delimited by the limit that separates one from the other: the holder of the appointing power, i. e., the totality formed in number and usually called the "people" (many brought into a unity), on the one hand, and the executioners of the power thus created, in other words, the "government" (the many in a *Gestalt* that allows them to act in a unitary manner).

The limit described is, as just explained, a characteristic of the constitutional regime as of any political regime in general. What is peculiar to the constitutional regime, however, is that this limit, and with it other limits, are basic components of its construction. It is a political form drawn from limits.[11] The purpose of this political form lies in the efficacy of these limits; it was for their sake that it was created. And this purpose is attained when it is these limits that govern, in other words, wherever it may be said, "this is a constitutional regime."[12]

Every conception of the constitutional regime defines the power of the "people" as indivisible. Only the many, brought together in the unity of a body politic, hold that power which demonstrates itself through itself, and which grants the capacity to act in one for many. As James Madison declares in Federalist No. 49: "the people are the only legitimate fountain of [political] power."[13] Walter Bagehot states similarly in *The English Constitution:* "The principle of popular government is that the supreme power … resides in the people."[14]

Consequently, the power of the government – i. e., the power appointed by the people for the exercise of people's indwelling power – is sharply distinguished from the power of the people. Whereas the original power is to be understood

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10 Walter Bagehot, *The English Constitution*, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1963, p. 61. What Bagehot calls here "constitution" corresponds to what we are referring to as "constitutional regime."
11 The separation of "majority" and "minority," so important for political praxis, is part of this same complex. See on this point Locke's foundational work, *Two Treatises of Government (Second Treatise, Chap. VIII*), p. 350.
12 In the *Federalist Papers t*here are 111 instances of the words "limits," "limitation," "limiting," "limited." The number of such instances found in the John Locke's *Two Treatises* is 181.
13 *The Federalist Papers*, p. 273.
14 *The English Constitution*, p. 78.

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as everlasting, the governing power (in the organs of the "parliament" and the "executive") stands under the requirement of a temporal limit of its existence. As John Stuart Mill formulated it in *On Liberty* (1859), "the ruling power emanate[s] from the periodical choice of the ruled."[15] The power thereby granted is only on loan. The temporary possession of the governing power must be periodically renewed through elections, in which it is decided who will hold this power until the next elections. Elections – held regularly, at certain intervals, through a competition among several candidates, free, secret, universal, and regulated in every detail by law – are a protection against the hardening of the governing power that is built into the construction of the constitutional regime, in order that it may remain an "elective and responsible government" (John Stuart Mill)[16] and may not distance itself from the original power by making itself into the only power. Elections are the most effective means of preserving the good for which the constitutional regime is constructed, namely liberty.

Laws Rule, Not Human Beings

Liberty can be organized. The means for doing so are constitutions and laws. It is not a coincidence that Madison, in Federalist No. 47, took up the well-known image Montesquieu used for the English constitution. Madison says, in his version of this image, that this constitution is a "mirror of political liberty."[17] The English, according to Montesquieu, had formed for themselves, with their laws, a constitution constructed in such a way as to hold all political power divided and in mutual check and to thus create a lawful expanse for liberty.[18] The liberty which the English enjoyed was effected by laws.[19] As Montesquieu wrote in a fragment on political liberty: "A free people is not the one who has this or that form of government but the one who enjoys *that* form of government which is established by law."[20]

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15 John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* (Chap. 1), edited by Gertrude Himmelfarb, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1974, p. 61.
16 Ibid. p. 62.
17 *The Federalist Papers*, p. 262. Montesquieu speaks of the image of the mirror in *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book XI, Chap. V.
18 Cf. ibid. Book XI, Chap. VI ("De la constitution d'Angleterre").
19 Ibid.
20 *Pensées et fragments inédits de Montesquieu*, ed. by Gaston de Montesquieu, Bordeaux: G. Gounouilhou, 1899, p. 415 (online: http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k6213190n/f459.item.-r=peuple%20libre, retrieved March 16, 2018. (Emphasis added).

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Laws are the matter of the constitutional regime. The "basic law," the constitution, creates and fixes this regime. (The German word, *Grundgesetz* – basic law – is indeed an apt word for the constitution of the German Federal Republic). The laws set down how this "basic law" is implemented, and they also determine the relevant procedures. The laws are the basic law's work. The laws guide the human beings who belong to it. They are all equal before the law. The law is the authority responsible for keeping the peace among them.

However, they are still laws for human beings and applied by them. And, according to the anthropology at the basis of the construction of the constitutional regime, human beings are driven by the desire for a possession of power that is never enough for them, because they are familiar with how unbounded the appropriation of power can be. One cannot count on the law's being for them "reason without desire."[21] In the organizing of liberty, human beings must be placed into a work of government that makes the power of the laws immune to, and thus decisively limits, their power.[22]

John Adams, one of the founding fathers and the second president of the United States, provided in a note penned in 1779 the classical formulation according to which the constitutional regime can emerge only from a structure of political power which is "a government of laws and not of men."[23]

The Mechanics of Government

But how can human beings, as holders of political power, be led to exercise their power in such a way that it is not they but the laws that rule? The general answer to this question is that it is necessary to introduce into the regime a dynamic of

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21 The definition of law as "reason without desire" is found in Aristotle (*Politics*, 1287a25 – 30).
22 Montesquieu wrote: "occasionally or always a judge is needed who makes the nobles [meaning in context: the ruling class of the nobles] shake." (*De l'esprit des lois*, book V, chap. VIII)
23 Adams used this formulation in a draft he wrote in 1779 for the "Commonwealth of Massachusetts" *(The Report of a Constitution, or Form of Government for the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, chapter II: The Frame of Government). For the text of the draft see https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06 – 08 – 02 – 0161 – 0002 (retrieved March 18, 2018) or *Papers of John Adams*, vol. 8, ed. by Gregg L. Lint et al., Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989 (online: https://www.masshist.org/publications/apde2/view?id=ADMS-06 – 08 – 02 – 0161 – 0002, retrieved March 18, 2018). In the constitution of Massachusetts promulgated in 1780 the formulation appears in Part 1, Article XXX. The text of the constitution can be found at https://malegislature.gov/Laws/Constitution (retrieved March 18, 2018). Prior to Adams, James Harrington had used the formula "empire of laws and not of men" in his book, *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656).

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power into which the rulers are inescapably entangled, such that, in the exercise of their power, this power is always opposed by the power of others. Such a dynamic – in Bagehot's description, "the inner moving essence, the vitality of the Constitution"[24] – is produced by two causes, an institutional cause and a cause rooted in humankind (according to the anthropology sketched above and to be developed in what follows).

The institutional cause was discussed by Montesquieu in the context of the creation of political liberty: "liberty is formed by a certain distribution of the three powers [legislative, executive, and judicial]."[25] Liberty, therefore, results from a separation of powers; a constitutional regime can only be conceived as having this sequence of limits built into its construction. For John Adams, the rule of law (and therefore of liberty) which he postulated could only be obtained by bringing "the legislative, executive, and judicial powers" into "separate branches."[26] When theoretically envisioning the institutional disposition of this sequence, James Madison referred explicitly to Montesquieu and his "science of politics,"[27] and spoke in this context of a "particular structure"[28] and "the interior structure of the government."[29] This structure of the government must be so contrived that "its several constituent parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places,"[30] and this with the constant aim of dividing and arranging the several offices such that each may be a check on the other.[31]

Woodrow Wilson described the institutional impulses for the dynamic of power inside a constitutional regime in his treatise, *Constitutional Government in the United States* (1908). He wrote:

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24 *The English Constitution*, p. 60.
25 *The Spirit of the Laws*, Book XII, Chap. I, p. 187.
26 See his Draft for a Constitution of the "Commonwealth of Massachusetts," Chap. II: The Frame of Government.
27 *The Federalist Papers*, Federalist No. 47, p. 262.
28 Ibid. p. 261
29 Ibid. The Federalist No. 51, p. 280.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid. p. 281. In his discussion of the separation of powers, Madison envisioned naturally a more extensive fragmentation of political power by partitioning it into geographical portions within a federal order such as the one in existence in the United States. In this case there is competition both among the particular states as well as among the local institutions of government within each state. (See *The Federalist Papers*, Federalist No. 51, p. 282f.

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> The makers of our federal Constitution followed the scheme as they found it expounded in Montesquieu, followed it with genuine scientific enthusiasm. The admirable expositions of the Federalist [the *Federalist Papers*] read like thoughtful applications of Montesquieu to the political needs and circumstances of America. They are full of the theory of checks and balances. The President is balanced off against Congress, Congress against the President, and each against the courts. Our statesmen of the earlier generations quoted no one so often as Montesquieu, and they quoted him always as a scientific standard in the field of politics. Politics is turned into mechanics under his touch. The theory of gravitation is supreme.[32]

The "scientific enthusiasm" of which Wilson speaks here is best understood by paying close attention to what he says in the last two sentences. The theory of "check and balances," he says, may be compared to the modern scientific theory of the world. There is a play of forces in the case of the constitutional regime and there is a force system in the universe, and the one correlates with the other. This is the reason why he brings up Newton in this context. He writes that this way of "balanc[ing] executive, legislature, and judiciary off against one another by a series of checks and counterpoises … Newton might readily have recognized as suggestive of the mechanism of the heavens.[33]

What might have motivated Wilson, who was referring after all to an already worked-out theory of checks and balances, to draw this comparison? What is it in this theory that suggested to him the comparison in question?

The answer is: The human factor in the construct of checks and balances, i. e., the human ambition for supremacy. As James Madison declared, the holders of power in a constitutional regime must be allowed, within the mutual limitation of power, not only to utilize their constitutional means but also to act out of their "personal motives." The logic of this thought is that, in this way, the play of forces becomes existential, such that, at some point, the limit of one human being will no longer let itself be encroached upon by another human being.[34] James Madison described this mechanism as follows:

> But the great security against a gradual concentration of the several powers in the same department, consists in giving to those who administer each department, the necessary

32 Woodrow Wilson, *Constitutional Government in the United States*, in: *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*, edited by Arthur Stanley Link, vol. 18 (1908 – 1909), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974, p. 106.
33 Ibid.
34 Theoretically a possible exception would occur if the other human being, the "opposite power," were removed from the play of forces; the institutional and legal possibility of such a thing happening, however, is decisively curtailed by the fact that strong barriers are built against it in a constitutional regime.

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> constitutional means, and personal motives, to resist encroachments of the others. The provision for defence must in this, as in all other cases, be made commensurate to the danger of attack. Ambition must be made to counteract ambition. The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place.[35]

The constitutional system of the separation of powers does not work on its own. It works when the human drive for power is exploited for the benefit of the system. A human trait of character that otherwise arouses displeasure is here put to use decisively in bringing about something good, namely the establishment and preservation of liberty.[36] Madison knew that it was no compliment to humankind to say that this is the method necessary for preventing the rulers from abusing their power.[37] It is at this juncture that he made the already cited point on human nature to the effect that human beings are not angels. Montesquieu had demanded that, in order to prevent an abuse of power, things be arranged in a constitutional regime in such way that "power must check power" (*le pouvoir arrête le pouvoir).*[38] Madison's formula, on the other hand – the desire for power opposes the desire for power – seems to get the point across in a more precise manner. This formula clearly goes beyond institutional arrangements into a deeper layer of human characteristics. After all, institutions exist only to the extent that they are formed by human beings.[39] As Madison argued, it would not be enough to fix on parchment the constitutional limits of particular departments. This would not be a sufficient protection against the encroachments that might lead to a tyrannical concentration of all governing power into one hand.[40]

Rather: the protection are human beings through themselves. They bring the constitutional system of the separation of powers into a dynamic through which the desire for power can be quenched only with restrictions, and this happens because many have been allowed to strive to quench their desire for power in such a way that they become adversaries. They do, in other words, what the sys-

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35 *The Federalist*, Federalist No. 51, p. 281.

36 In a dense description of the separation of powers, Bagehot spoke of "the evil tendencies" of each power against the other power, through which tendencies a "good whole" is constructed. (*The English Constitution*, p. 60).

37 Cf. ibid.

38 *The Spirit of the Laws,* Book XI, Chap. IV, p. 155.

39 See on this point the studies contained in the volume edited by John von Heyking, Thomas Heilke, *The Primacy of Persons in Politics. Empiricism and Political Philosophy*, Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2013.

40 *The Federalist* Papers, Federalist No. 49, p. 273.

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tem wants them to do. To quote Wilson's pronouncement with a slight alteration: Governing is transformed into a mechanics.

This mechanics, which is driven by the constant force of the human instinct for power, works as by itself. On the one hand, it is a very modern product. Its material is humankind as modernity conceives of it: an owner of power. The plan of this mechanics is quite scientific, it in fact emerged from a "science of politics" that understood itself as one of the disciplines of the natural sciences. The implementation of this plan in this or that constitution may be modified in a variety of possible ways, and it fits in perfectly with a culture of steady improvement. But, on the other hand, this mechanics is an artifact that deviates from modernity. Its goal is moderation, a virtue from the times of old wisdom. It gets applied on the basis of a certain skepticism; in an age of promises, the tradition of primarily trusting well-tried experiences is continued.[41] The implementation of the mechanics of the constitutional regime proves to be a symbol of prudence.

Limit and modernity contradict each other. And nonetheless a limit runs through modernity. This limit is visible in the *Gestalt* of the constitutional regime.[42]

41 "Custom," Bagehot wrote, is the first check on tyranny." (*The English Constitution*, p. 243)
42 The separation of powers, however efficient it is supposed to be for the sake of liberty, brings about a problem. How can a government that is efficient and actually in a position to unfold the necessary power to govern exist in this setting? This is why we have spoken at different places of a paradox of freedom or a paradox of power, and why we have tried to show how governments, especially their heads (federal chancellor, the president, the prime minister, etc.), react with great political art to the constitutionally willed deprivation of power by means of particular strategies and organizational arrangements for the accumulation of power. See my texts, "Das Paradox der Macht. Anmerkungen zur Regierungspraxis in Washington, Paris und Bonn," in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Nr. 188, 17/18. August 1985, p. 81; *Boston Politics. The Creativity of Power*, Berlin-New York: De Gruyter, 1989, esp. chap. 1, 2, and 4; "A Classical Prince: The Style of François Mitterrand," in: Charles R. Embry, Barry Cooper, *Philosophy, Literature, and Politics*. Essays Honoring Ellis Sandoz, Columbia-London: University of Missouri Press, 2005, pp. 234 – 257; "The True Form of Governments: The Constitutional Movements of Power," in John von Heyking, Thomas Heilke (eds.), *The Primacy of Persons in Politics*, pp. 3 – 22; the chapter "In der Freiheit," in: *Die zweite Geburt des Menschen*, pp. 144 – 154 (*The Second Birth*, the chapter "In Freedom"). Cf. also Félix Blanc, "Le concours des pouvoirs aux origines du régime constitutionnel en France et aux États-Unis" in *Jus Politicum*, No. 18, July 2017, pp. 219 – 245.

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