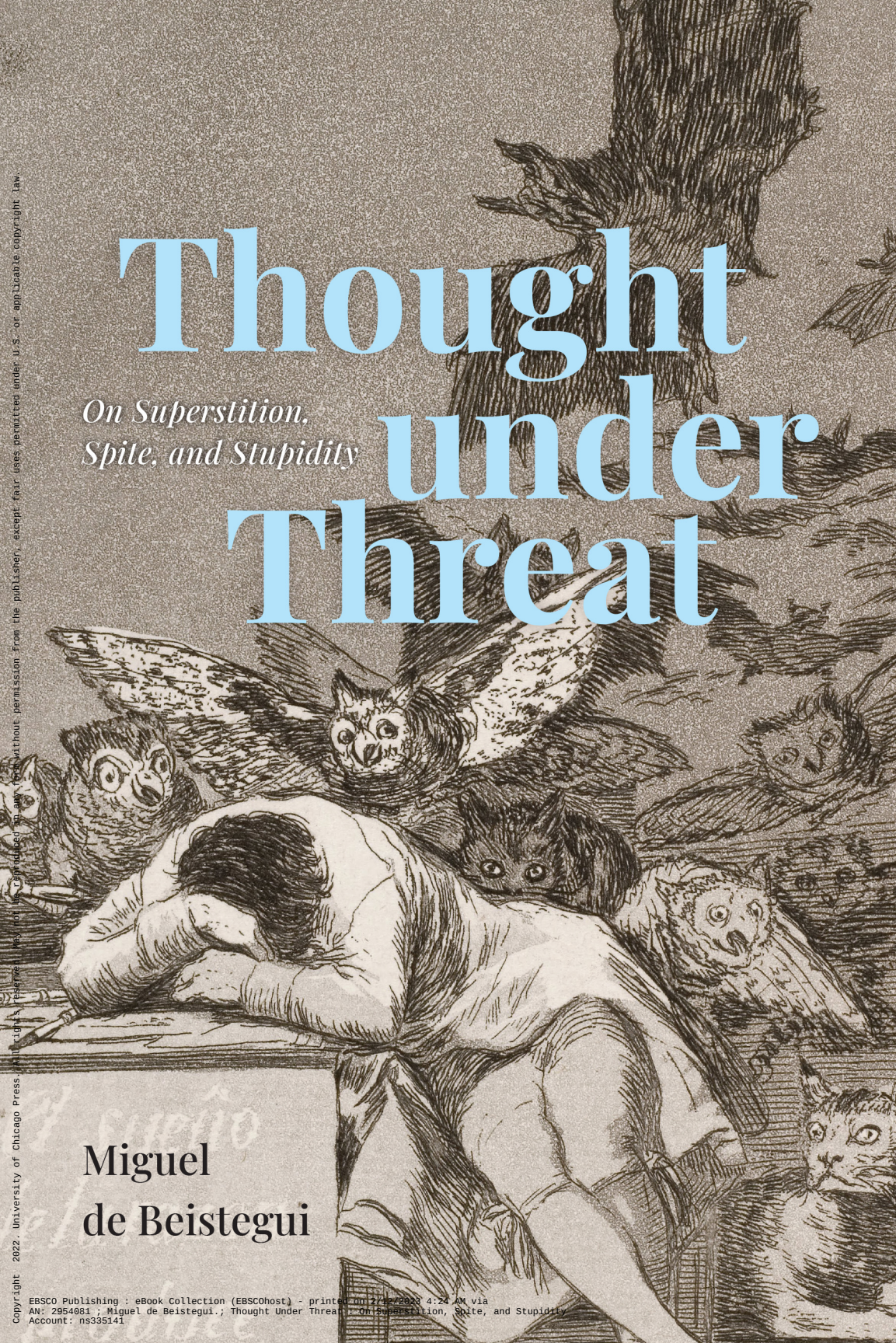




Thought under Threat

*On Superstition,
Spite, and Stupidity*

Miguel
de Beistegui

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On Superstition, Spite, and Stupidity

MIGUEL DE BEISTEGUI

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Most often stupidity is the sister of wickedness.

Sophocles

Stupidity always gets on well with malice.

Leonardo Sciascia

*Our being is cemented with diseased qualities:
ambition, jealousy, envy, vindictiveness, superstition, despair . . .*

Michel de Montaigne

*Epicurus finds fault with those who believe that man needs the heavens. He finds Atlas
himself, on whose back the heavens hang, in human stupidity and superstition.*

Stupidity and superstition also are Titans.

Karl Marx

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Introduction

Thought is under threat—always, but now especially. It is always under threat, first because it is inherently fragile, and second because it is often in the interest of some—a particular group or power structure—to dissuade us from thinking, and to think in our place. But thought is particularly under threat *today*, across the world and even in our so-called democracies. Thinking is increasingly considered elitist and exclusive, pedantic and boring; the many institutions and mediations that it helped create, and which protect us from oppression and abuses of power, are regularly derided and considered “not fit for purpose.” It is as if, far from being a necessary condition for the exercise of our freedom and democratic rights, thinking were the privilege of the few, of the “educated elite.” Increasingly, people feel distrustful of scientists and experts, whose nuanced, dry, and at times uncertain views can’t compete with our appetite for black-and-white situations and binary views. Political leaders believe they can appeal to the heart and guts of “the people,” rather than to their faculty of understanding and critical engagement. The politics of hope and fear, of empty promises and visions of apocalypse, of superstition, spite, and revengefulness, are held and adopted by many (even heads of state) as a model of good government. Stupidity is no longer a source of embarrassment—it is a right, if not a badge of honor. After all, we are all entitled to our opinion, our bitterness, our bigotry. We’ve been here before. The erosion of thought is nothing new: “All things excellent are as difficult as they are rare.”¹ But like so many species, and like the planet as a whole, thought now faces the distinct possibility of extinction. Death by 280 characters and fifteen-second videos; death by anonymous and troll-induced spite; death by political and corporate hogwash; death, ultimately, by indifference.

At the same time—and this may be part of the problem—many tend to believe that thinking is something we do or ought to do naturally, whether

by our conscious decision or by invitation, but in any case as an indication of goodwill. It is, we believe, a natural disposition, and one we can decide to activate (or not). It is as if we were all equipped with a thinking switch. But contrary to popular belief, and to what some philosophers have argued, thinking is not easily activated. It *emerges*, and does so slowly, at times painfully, whether individually or historically. It struggles to come to life, and it struggles to survive. It is constantly fighting off demons that continue to haunt it, perpetually rising from the mud that lies at the bottom of its pond. It is an effort, and it needs all the help it can get to get off the ground.

This book is an attempt to understand the reasons and mechanisms behind some of the tendencies and forces that make thinking difficult, if not impossible. These tendencies have always existed. In fact, this book argues that they are not accidental or contingent, but largely intrinsic to thought itself, or to ways of thinking. They are, I will claim, transcendental illusions—or, better still, transcendental delusions: *vicious* ways of thinking.² As a result, the struggle in question is a recurrent one, and one that pits thought against itself. In moments of great lucidity, and especially in its early history, philosophy defined itself as a struggle against the propensities that threatened its search for knowledge and its pursuit of the good life. Sometimes it saw them as external threats, emanating from religious, social, or political institutions, or from merely contingent factors. At other times it saw them as somehow bound up with, and inherent to, our very faculty of thought. Thus, for Plato and Aristotle, sophistry represents a major threat to the genuinely philosophical order, in that it consists in a discourse of persuasion rooted in the mere appearance of truth, rather than in actual truth. Central to their argument was the claim that sophistry is not—not even, I would say—false, or prone to error; it simply escapes the play of the true and the false. Yet its effects are a *semblance* of truth. As such, it amounts to an operation of deception that can serve political as well as epistemological ends. Similarly, for Plutarch and Lucretius, superstition, whether in the form of organized religion or politics, represents a significant obstacle that needs to be removed if freedom—whether individual or collective—is ever to see the light of day. Another ancient school of thought, Stoicism, saw *sapientia* as an ongoing struggle against *stultitia*, or stupidity. In the latter the Stoics found the symptom of an unexamined—diseased and base—life, controlled by external forces and dispersed amongst them, which only philosophy, understood as *discrimination*, could counteract.³ Closer to us, Adorno echoed the Stoic concern by describing stupidity as a “scar” and a “thwarting” of life; as a “sacrifice of the intellect” and the “murder” of thought.⁴ Others, such as Adam Smith or Nietzsche, focused more on resentment. Smith described

resentment as “the greatest poison to the happiness of a good mind,” by which he meant an “open” mind.⁵ And Nietzsche spoke of “the great eye of spite” (*der Blick grün und hämisch*), in which he saw the harmful force that stops human thought from becoming generous and creative, and does so by blaming and shaming our capacity for joy and growth.⁶ More demanding and nobler than *Mitleid*, or compassion, he argues, is *Mitfreude*, by which he meant the capacity to rejoice in the happiness and success of others.⁷ Thus, according to that long and venerable tradition, the philosopher was to guard himself against certain vices (*kakia, vitia*)—superstition and stupidity, as well as other “base” feelings such as resentment, spite, and envy—that were thought to threaten philosophy from within (and not just from without, or accidentally). The philosophical life (very broadly construed), in turn, was thought to involve an internal and ongoing struggle against those vices; it amounted to something like an intellectual care or vigilance of the self, aimed at liberating it *for* the world and those around it.

“Vice,” Quassim Cassam reminds us, is from the Latin *vitium*, which is a fault or a defect.⁸ Like Cassam, I will refer to the vices that assail our capacity to think as “vices of the mind,” by which he means “intellectual failings that have a negative impact on our intellectual conduct.”⁹ My concern will be with ways of thinking, or not thinking, rather than with personality or character traits. Following Cassam, I will argue that we “need to distinguish between the qualities of a *thinker* and the qualities of a person’s *thinking* on a given occasion or in a particular case.”¹⁰ I will focus on the latter. The specific vices I will consider—stupidity, superstition, and spite—can be and usually are thought of as personality traits; and when they are seen as a way or style of thinking, they are thought of as a quality of the person. But I am more interested in the question of how, under certain circumstances (which can be complex and seemingly unrelated to the actual capacities of the person in question), thinking can go awry. I am interested in the derailing, choking, or thwarting of the process of thinking. I am interested—to use again Cassam’s words—in “vicious ways of thinking” or thinking styles, independently of *who* is actually thinking them. Unlike Cassam, though, I will not define these vices as “epistemic,” or as obstacles that get “in the way of knowledge.”¹¹ Or, to be more precise, I will not define them *primarily* in that way. That they affect our capacity to know or judge is, in my view, unquestionable. But they also, and more disturbingly, have the ability to orient and shape knowledge itself, to generate truths. In that respect, they are not merely opposed to certain forms of knowledge and discourses of truth. I see this book not as contradicting or even questioning the epistemic vices Cassam and others focus on, but as complementing and possibly complicating

them.¹² The book is concerned with *noetic* vices, with what gets in the way of thought by way of thought, rather than with knowledge *sensu stricto*.

Vices of this kind are no doubt related to epistemic failings such as arrogance, dogmatism, overconfidence, gullibility, closed-mindedness, epistemic insouciance, or wishful thinking. They all have “a negative impact on our intellectual conduct” and require their own form of critique.¹³ Furthermore, they *eventually* inhibit the acquisition of knowledge and threaten our desire to know and establish truths. But they also take place before the desire in question has been set in motion, and before the distinction between truth and error, on which it rests, has emerged. Error is not the worst thing that can happen to thought, its calamity or catastrophe. That is because truth is not the origin and end of thought, its source and horizon. There are far worse destinies and much greater dangers, which force us to distinguish between the desire to know and the ability to think. The vices I have in mind are therefore pre-epistemic, and not primarily concerned with the question of truth, understood as the investigation into its conditions of possibility, its definition, and the method most adequate to reach it. This is why I refer to them as *noetic* vices.

There is a second, related reason why I want to distinguish the vices in questions from the question, if not the value and history, of truth (and its opposite, error). For these vices even manage to find their way into certain forms of knowledge and discourses of truth on which we have come to rely. There is, I will claim, such a thing as stupid, mundane, insignificant, or even nasty truths—truths with which philosophy has concerned itself far too often. By that, I mean that truths can be generated against the background of problems that have been badly posed, or animated by base feelings and prejudice (the “Indian problem” in the United States under George Washington, the “Jewish problem” in Nazi Germany, the “Black problem” in apartheid South Africa). For too long, we have been enamored with truth, and have forgotten to assess critically and question the quality of the soil in which they are rooted. But we have also learned to become suspicious and even to despair of truth itself. Paraphrasing the close of the inaugural lesson to Foucault’s 1981 Louvain lecture, I would even claim that the critical stance toward the noetic vices I am advocating here requires a degree of *astonishment* before the multiplication and success of truth procedures in societies such as ours.¹⁴ Discourses and systems of truth can be petty and oppressive. Truths themselves can be trivial, unremarkable, limited, narrow. Too often we settle for truths that are respectable and respectful, but don’t make any difference. What good, Nietzsche asks, is a modest truth “from which no disorder and nothing extraordinary is to be feared: a self-contented and

happy creature which is continually assuring all the powers that be that no one needs to be the least concerned on its account; for it is, after all, only 'pure knowledge'?"¹⁵ This, in turn, means that the terrain of critique needs to be displaced: from an analytic of truth, with which modern philosophy identifies, to a clinic and cleansing of thought *and* a dialectic of problems, which *selects* truths. Then, and only then, do truths cease to be ordinary, banal, and toothless. Then, and only then, does thinking become democratic (which does *not* mean consensual).

One final word about truth, and the reason why my critique of the intellectual vices I consider is not carried out in its name. It is related to the previous point, and specifically to the connection between truth and power. Truth, at least when related to human reality, does not preserve us from power, and is not—not necessarily, not always, and in fact not often—opposed to power structures. Let me refer again to Foucault. There is no raw, pure truth that would be independent of relations of power and that could be uncovered as a result of goodwill and the appropriate method. Similarly, there is no power structure that does not rely on discourses of truth. The multiple and mobile relations of power that traverse the social body are, Foucault claims, "indissociable from a discourse of truth and they can neither be established nor function unless a true discourse is produced, accumulated, put into circulation, and set to work." For example, we are encouraged to discover and tell the truth about ourselves; we are "destined to live and die in certain ways by discourses that are true, and which bring with them certain power-effects."¹⁶ This, I believe, is where the difference between genealogical and ideological critique lies (and it is one I will return to when discussing certain examples of stupidity). On this point, Foucault is perhaps clearest in the following passage from "Truth and Power":

Truth isn't outside or lacking in power. . . . Truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regimes of truth, its "general politics" of truth—that is, the type of discourses it accepts and makes function as true and false statements; the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.¹⁷

As a result, the ultimate aim of the critical analysis of this "politics of truth" is not "emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a

chimera, for truth is already power) but . . . detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural within which it operates at the present time."¹⁸ This is the point at which truth pivots on itself, the point at which the analytics and politics of truth gives way to something like an ethics or pragmatics of truth, to a different position of truth, or veridiction, in relation to power. Speaking truth to power; exposing the truths of power, as well as the power of subjugation of truth; truth-telling, in what amounts to a performative that is irreducibly theoretical *and* practical, that engages oneself and one's life as the one who speaks—that is the real aim of philosophy.

I will therefore not be privileging, but will certainly acknowledge, the epistemic standpoint when analyzing these intellectual vices and the various examples I use to illustrate them. Some, such as racism, various forms of magical thinking, or resentment, could easily be and have in fact been seen as forms of epistemic injustice, or as leading to epistemic injustice. Research in this area has grown considerably since the publication of Miranda Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* and José Medina's *The Epistemology of Resistance*.¹⁹ But the idea of epistemic injustice was already present, albeit implicitly, in Spivak's notion of "epistemic violence" as applied to the condition of the "subaltern"²⁰ and, more generally, in twentieth-century ideology critique, with the concepts of "reification," "hegemony," and "ideological state apparatus."²¹ Going further back, we can see it announced and perhaps summarized in Du Bois's metaphor of the racist veil, which excludes Blacks from the white world while letting them see themselves only through the revelation of this alien world, or look at themselves only through the eyes of white folk.²² In the context of this introduction, let me dwell briefly on racism. I return to this problem in my discussion of Kant's concept of race, which I treat as an example of stupidity. Racism, like sexism, or other forms of discrimination and exclusion, is increasingly considered as an instance of epistemic injustice, whether understood as ideology,²³ hermeneutical injustice,²⁴ stereotyping and bias,²⁵ or recognition failure (also known as "misrecognition").²⁶ It is also related to various epistemic vices such as contempt²⁷ and *willful* ignorance.²⁸ The latter involves deeply rooted forms of resistance toward knowledge: active, orchestrated, and resilient forms of *not knowing*. These approaches are valuable and, I believe, not incompatible with my own. Yet my reservation with respect to the epistemological approach stems from the Foucauldian concern I have already mentioned, as well as from the need to distinguish between the epistemic level (organized around the opposition between truth and error) and a pre-epistemic, noetic level (organized

around the distinction between thought and understanding), and focuses on the nature of problems. As such, it differs (at least in part) from the sort of reservation expressed by Harvey Cornier in his own critical assessment of the merits of the epistemological approach to forms of injustice.²⁹ In his defense of an experimental or use-based concept of truth, based on an "Emersonian philosophy of a Jamesian-Rortian type," Cornier concludes that "we will not see anything particularly promising about an epistemology of ignorance."³⁰

Consequently, the sort of thinking that I have in mind here does not conform to the model or the image of thought Cassam adopts in his book. Drawing on the work of Jonathan Baron, he breaks thinking down into distinct phases, which include "the identification of goals, the consideration of possibilities, and the seeking and weighing of evidence."³¹ The *goal*, Cassam adds, "is to find an acceptable answer to a question," and "the *possibilities* are answers to the question implicit in the goal."³² But if the question is already given, the possibilities are themselves contained in the question, and are a function of the question. But what if the question is badly posed? Is the task of thinking simply that of evaluating possibilities and "choosing among them," as Baron claims?³³ To be sure, there are ways of doing these things, of thinking along these lines, which can get in the way of knowledge and lead to errors. Superstitious or magical thinking, for example, is "epistemically vicious thinking."³⁴ The gambler "who sees a succession of coin tosses coming down heads thinks that the next toss will be tails because a tails is now 'due.'"³⁵ But thinking, I will argue, is less concerned with answers and solutions than it is with questions; less concerned with avoiding error than with false or badly posed problems. For thinking as I understand it is first and foremost *problematizing*. For that reason, the vices it struggles against are those that inhibit our ability to construct problems and raise questions, and not simply to choose between answers: we get the answers we deserve according to the problems we pose. Superstitious thinking, I will claim, is as much present and necessary in our belief in the existence and value of value in the economic sense as it is in the gambler's belief that his or her lucky moment has come. Yet this belief requires the construction of an entire system of production, exchange, and labor that is quite real. At the same time, the system in question cannot function without the belief in the intrinsic value of value, in value as a *thing*. We can't point to the magical quality of commodities or services without at the same time pointing to the illusory nature of capitalism as a way of organizing production. But one could also argue that gambling relies on superstition, that it could not possibly work without

this specific trigger. The vice would be less in the gambler who believes that the time for tails is *now* than in gambling—or the stock market—as a system.

Let me try to make this point clearer by adopting a more historical standpoint. As modern philosophy evolved into an analytic and method of truth—that is, into a discourse concerned with the distinction between the true and the false, the criteria by which such a distinction can be established, and the conditions under which something can be said to be true—it began to see error as its major threat, and the main obstacle it needed to overcome. With a few notable exceptions, some of which I have already alluded to, philosophy began to see itself as a system of truth oriented toward the construction of arguments and the definition of concepts, the foundations of knowledge and the search for certainty, rather than as an education of thought, and even a therapy or clinic of the mind. The other obstacles or vices, the struggle against which had defined it for so long, became less relevant. The sense of critique itself was altered: from a concern regarding the forces and forms of power that thwart or inhibit thought, it became a matter of the limits of knowledge, the legitimate or illegitimate uses of reason, and, more generally, the proper use of our faculties.

In this book, I want to argue for the need to bring those vices back into the fold of philosophy and, more broadly, critical thinking. I want to claim that in order to be critical—in order, in fact, for any form of thought to emerge—philosophy needs to free itself from the very demons that haunt it, the serpents that smother it and stop it from achieving its potential. They are a form of blindness, of *thoughtlessness* and *carelessness*. Their removal is a precondition for the exercise of thought and the philosophical life, by which I also mean a freer life. At the same time, the struggle against them signals the philosophical habit *par excellence*, or the vigilance for which it stands (or *should* stand). And this, I believe, is the responsibility of everyone, not just professional philosophers. What I offer, then, is a critique of the very forces that threaten the possibility of critique and the *power* of thought. Eventually, I will need to define the power in question. For the time being, and provisionally, I will define it as the ability to question or problematize, free of discourses of authority. This means that the power of thought is itself not a moral or political authority over others (a *potestas* or *imperium*), but a way of exploring and, more importantly, increasing the potential and autonomy of existence (*potentia*). Thought is often referred to as a *faculty*, alongside other human faculties such as intuition, imagination, memory, desire, judgment, sociability, et cetera. But what is thought the faculty of? Some would say: of knowledge and truth, whether in a theoretical or a practical sense, whether through concepts or ideas, whether as understanding or as reason. But truth

is not the only, and not even the primary, domain of thought. So, before we explore thought along the lines of knowledge and truth, we need to clarify what we mean by faculty. It designates something that we are capable of, a capacity, a *power*. It speaks to the degree of power that corresponds to us as human beings. In that respect, it is equivalent to the degrees of power we would need to list were we to ask ourselves about the nature or essence of the horse or the tick, and would constitute what we would call its world. And we would do that not by listing a number of attributes, but by focusing on what, through those attributes, they are capable of or can do. The question, subsequently, and to return to thought as a distinctive power, would be one of knowing what it allows us to do. And presumably, we would also be concerned to know how far it can go, and how it can find its highest expression, without opposition or unnecessary obstacles. Equally, we would be concerned to show that human beings are more powerful and free under the power of thought thus understood than they would be without it, and thus that thought and knowledge are intrinsically *good*. The investigation into the nature of thought, and the ways in which its potential can be unleashed, would be both indistinguishable from and subordinated to a general ethics—not one that would prescribe what to do in a given situation, or how to act, but one that would be concerned with the type of life interested in pushing its faculties to their limit, living at the limit, and thus increasing its own capacity. Thought, in that respect, is one distinctive faculty, which involves the collaboration of many more, and through the exercise of which we, as human beings, are more able, more lucid, and less passive.

One of the consequences of this approach, which I will adopt here, is that the (Kantian) distinction between thought in a theoretical sense, oriented toward scientific knowledge, and thought in a moral sense, oriented toward practical knowledge, breaks down. Indeed, “good” and “bad” would no longer be, or need to be, understood in a moral sense (that is, as governed by our sense of duty), but only in terms of what increases or decreases our power in general, and our power to think in particular. By bad, I mean everything that proceeds from weakness; everything that separates us from our own power and the full expression of our faculties, that locks us into a passive, reactive position; everything that frustrates our power to act and grow; everything that inhibits our own vitality. Revengefulness, stupidity, and superstition inhabit each and every one of us, individually as it were. But they are also at work in some of our deepest social, political, and economic structures, thus shaping our behaviors and the way we “think” before we’ve had a chance to ask what it means to think. They require institutions to survive and symbolic mediations to grow. They are as much ways of exercising power

and instruments of domination as they are intellectual failings. This is why, whenever we are confronted with them, we need to ask: Whose interest does this form of stupidity or superstition serve? To which power do I yield by being drawn into this spiteful, revengeful attitude? And how does this particular power structure, and the particular disposition it favors, limit my ability to think, whether philosophically, scientifically, or artistically? I describe the tendencies I analyze as vices because they make the world and everything in it smaller. By contrast, thought is the faculty, capacity, or power which, by drawing in and calling upon all our other faculties, by organizing them so as to maximize their potential, allows them to expand, to be *more*. The problem of thought is thus indistinguishable from ethics as concerned with the conditions under which, and the ways in which, human life can flourish and therefore be inhabited by joyful affects. For joy is the goal. And the vices I analyze here are “bad” also in the sense that they suck joy out of the world and human existence, lock us into various forms of sadness.

At the same time, I want to ask whether such vices can ever be eradicated entirely and permanently, or whether, instead, we should seek simply to contain them. Spinoza, for instance, demonstrated the possibility of living one’s life according to rational principles at the individual, ethical level, but doubted that this could ever be achieved at the political level: superstition, he claims, and its ability to draw on the power of imagination, is arguably the most effective way of governing the multitude, and no politics could ever exist without it. This, however, does not mean that we should not seek to minimize the place and hold of superstition. In fact, this is precisely what *democratic* politics is about. Similarly, I would argue that every philosophy and every science, however elaborate, however brilliant, carries within itself its own blind spot and moments of stupidity, and that such moments and blind spots are even often the by-product of that brilliance. It is those blind spots, or moments of stupidity internal to thought itself, which philosophers and critically minded scientists should be most concerned about. For science and philosophy are not in principle immune from such noetic vices, as a number of examples will reveal. As for spite, we should retain the great Nietzschean lesson that it is creative, that it generates values and ways of thinking (and even the noble ideal of disinterestedness), that it is a perspective on the world and an evaluation of it. As a result, we need a specific *method* to avoid the simple—“enlightened”—view that opposes stupidity and intelligence, superstition and truth, spite and disinterestedness, as if these vices were all the other of reason. As we’ll see, those vices grew within Enlightenment itself: the celebration of the advent of the age of reason did not protect it from certain forms of stupidity or superstition.

"Virtue," if we want to retain this word, would designate not a way of being corresponding to pre-established values, but the perfection corresponding to the greatest power of which we are capable. It would designate the ability to relate to oneself and others in such a way that one's capacities are increased and maximized. Ethics, in that respect, is the art of expanding our capacities. Thought is one such capacity; our body is another (and the connection between thought and body will be paramount throughout). But the faculties that we call memory, imagination, sensibility, desire, sociability, et cetera, and with which thought is intrinsically connected, also fall under this description. Like these other faculties, thought is self-reflective: it has the ability to work on itself, identify its shortcomings, struggle against the traps and obstacles it sets up for itself and the poison others inject into it. This is an infinite (or at least open-ended) task. It is the task of critique.

This book is therefore concerned with what is bad for thought, what harms it, what stops it from emerging and flourishing. It is concerned with the obstacles thought needs to overcome, and the vices against which it needs to struggle, in order to blossom. But obstacles can be of two kinds: external or internal. If I am run over by a bus and suffer brain damage, I will no longer possess the same noetic and cognitive faculties. But there is nothing philosophy can do to restore such faculties. This external and contingent type of obstacle differs from another, more worrying situation, in which it is external yet not entirely caused by chance. One can indeed imagine situations in which it is in the interest of a person or group to inhibit, dissuade, or suppress the ability to think. For power over others, and absolute power in particular, is best exercised in the absence of such a critical faculty. Thought can be numbed or neutralized through political or religious means, but also through mindless entertainment and compulsive consumption; through coercion and manipulation, as well as through weapons of mass distraction. But what if thought were also prone to internal demons and forces, which it would generate spontaneously, and which threaten it from within? Thought would then need to find a way of examining itself, and not just the forces that threaten it from without. It would need to become self-critical. Kant referred to such spontaneously generated obstacles as "illusions" of reason. I am tempted to adopt this term, and will occasionally. But I will resist the temptation to identify such illusions with reason in a transcendental sense.

As I've already mentioned, this book focuses on three such forces, or vices: superstition, spite, and stupidity. The philosophical meaning and significance of those vices differ somewhat from their ordinary meaning. Thus, stupidity is not simply the opposite of intelligence or common sense, and not reducible to ignorance or—to use a word I already introduced—hogwash. If I call

it a vice, it is because I believe we are responsible for our own stupidity, and because the task of thinking is bound up with the need to extricate itself from the power of stupidity.³⁶ Similarly, superstition is not reducible to a set of false beliefs, which could be dispelled by finally recognizing the true state of things. As for spite or spitefulness, it is often seen as a character trait. Of a person we say that they are spiteful or resentful *in general*, that it is part of *who they are*. But in the way that I understand it, spite is both an *attitude* and a *way of thinking*. Cassam puts it very clearly:

Attitudes aren't just ways of thinking but they *involve* thinking, or being disposed to think, in particular ways. At the same time these ways of thinking can't be properly explained or understood without reference to the attitudes they manifest. If this is so then neither the attitude nor the way of thinking is more basic than the other, though both are more basic than the character traits to which they correspond.³⁷

To this I would add that spite, like the other vices I focus on, is not simply individual, but collective, and often systemic. Systems—of thought, values, and norms—can be stupid, superstitious, or resentful. This includes philosophy. This means that, while I want to promote an image of philosophy that defines itself against them, those vices are not merely external to it, nor simply contingent. On the contrary: thoughtlessness grows from within thought itself, like weeds amidst flowers and bushes. Weeding is necessary if thought is to flower. And like weeding, this task needs to be performed regularly. There is no vaccine and no guaranteed herd immunity against noetic viruses.

Let me try to clarify the collective and systemic dimension of the vices I discuss. I suggested that the distinction between uncritical (or dogmatic) thought and critical thinking on which this book revolves is not reducible to a simple, epistemological distinction between “error” and “truth.” This reduction is what, in the context of the Marxist distinction between bourgeois ideology and dialectical materialism, Althusser calls “theoreticism.”³⁸ Extending Althusser’s term, we could call “theoreticism” or “positivism” the tendency to replace the historical and material difference between modes of existence (and not just thought) with the opposition between error and truth. This book, therefore, circumvents or bypasses philosophy understood as an analytic of truth, by which I mean the kind of philosophy that defines itself according to the distinction (indeed the opposition) between truth and error, and focuses on the conditions of possibility of truth as well as the proper method to arrive at the truth. By defining itself in that way, it fails to

ask about the conditions of emergence of thought itself, about the materiality of thought understood as critique.

Critique starts from a position of immersion in historical, social, economic contingencies, from which it strives to extract something that exceeds those conditions. It develops a capacity to identify those powers (state power, religious power, economic power, psychiatric or scholastic power, etc.) that want to pull wool over its eyes. It does not allow itself to be taken for a ride. Ultimately, critique is constructive as well as personal. It is only because something is inhibited, because a force is thwarted, that critique is required. "When we criticize something," Nietzsche writes, "this is no arbitrary and impersonal event; it is, at least very often, evidence of vital energies in us that are growing and shedding a skin." We criticize and negate because something in us, something larger and stronger, "wants to live and affirm," to *grow*.³⁹ Critique is therefore oriented toward the present, to who we are *today*. It is in this spirit of *historical* critique that I ask about the vices that are most relevant *today*, and the many faces they assume. I want to develop a critique of the noetic vices that is fit for our time. This book thus unfolds between critique in a transcendental sense (how do the vices of superstition, spite, and stupidity come about, from within thought itself?) and critique in a historical sense (what, if any, are the contemporary or less contemporary manifestations of these vices?); or between the manner in which thought needs to turn critique onto itself and the manner in which, having undergone this process, it turns to its own present. What, to borrow Marx's expression, is the "heaven" with which critique should be concerned today? What are the contemporary faces of stupidity and superstition? Could racism or sexism, the "problems" of immigration and rising criminality, or social practices, such as those described by Marx as commodity fetishism, be seen as manifestations of such systemic vices, rather than as errors of judgment based on false assumptions? Over a century ago, Nietzsche had already remarked that (bourgeois) stupidity had become a *right*: in the Age of Work and the Reich, "the man of the evening . . . requires the health resort, the seaside, the glaciers, Bayreuth."⁴⁰ Once a source of embarrassment, if not shame, those flaws or vices are now seen as a right, the right "to be oneself," and they are worn on one's sleeve. They have become a matter of pride. As historically embedded and systemic, these vices inhabit the religious, economic, political, cultural, or even scientific sphere. As such, they are bound up with certain interests and forms of power that are specifically not interested in promoting thought and critique. They are interested in making us do certain things, in a certain way. Critique is intrinsically interested in the flourishing of thought and, at the same time, in identifying and rooting out

the forms of power that stifle it. Critique is intrinsically democratic. By that, I mean that it is not content with being reduced to solving problems defined for it in advance, in the way that students are asked to answer questions over which they have no say. Critique is democratic in that it believes that problems, questions, and even experiments are constructions, and democracy takes place as the dispute around the nature of problems. Contrary to popular belief, democracy is oriented not toward consensus, but toward *dissensus*. If consensus designates the level of solutions, dissensus points to the possibility of an open dispute around the nature of problems, and thus to the refusal on the part of institutions like the state, the Church, the market, and even science to identify and articulate problems in advance and on our behalf. Democratic politics creates the conditions under which thought can be exercised (by which I mean pushed to its limits) and see its power grow. Thought is not something that we do spontaneously. It is something that we learn to do. It requires time, resources, and commitment. At the same time, the exercise of thought as critique, and the overcoming of the vices I will analyze, is a necessary condition for the emergence of democratic, dissensual politics. This means that sociability, as the faculty of the multitude, requires the faculty of thought to express itself, which it does as dissensus. Stupidity, superstition, and spite want nothing to do with critique and dissensus. Yet they manage to achieve consensus.

The book consists of three chapters, each corresponding to a specific threat.

The first chapter deals with stupidity. It does not criticize stupidity as the opposite of cleverness or even knowledge, and thus as a trap or vice from which philosophers would be immune in principle. Our (scientific) obsession with measuring everything, including intelligence (or spite, for that matter), has led us to design stupid tests and/or to draw stupid conclusions from them. We would, I think, be misled in reducing stupidity to a mere lack of intelligence or judgment and identifying the stupid person primarily with the simpleton or dimwit. The kind of stupidity I will be exploring is more complex and far more harmful, and in a way divorced from a mere character trait. It is more serious and harmful because it is not just compatible with, but at times stems from, a certain type of rationality, a certain discourse of truth, or a certain way of posing a problem. There is such a thing as intelligent, even learned stupidity. Philosophers such as Cusanus, writers such as Flaubert and Musil, have depicted it with irony and through dialogues. Yet the history of philosophy also provides examples of this kind of stupidity. I will focus on Kant's *concept* of race, and on racism more broadly, to illustrate my point. Kant's case is particularly interesting,

not least because he transformed the task of philosophy and reconfigured it to such an extent that analytic and continental philosophy continue to situate themselves in relation to his legacy. But it is interesting mainly because Kant himself defines stupidity as a mere deficiency in judgment, and therefore as an empirical problem that has no place in the analytic of truth with which he is concerned (at least in his *Critique of Pure Reason*). I, on the other hand, will argue that stupidity is a transcendental problem, by which I mean a problem that results not from a failure of judgment, but from being badly constructed, and specifically from the construction or invention of judgment as *teleological*. More fundamentally still, Kant's concept of race is the result of a failed attempt to pose the problem of organized nature. It is a stupid solution to a badly posed problem. In that respect, stupidity will appear as the sign of a failure, or a vice, that is not methodological and veers us away from the truth, but is dialectical in that it generates false, unnecessary, or useless problems. The critique of stupidity belongs not in an analytic of truth and a discourse of method, but in a dialectic of problems. It requires a conception or image of thought that is not primarily rooted in the distinction between truth and error, that is concerned with developing the method adequate for such a mission, and that is oriented toward solutions to problems that are given in advance.

The second chapter turns to superstition, and specifically to the role of superstition in the religious, political, and economic realms. Since Greek and Roman antiquity, religion has been the main target of the critique of superstition. For Lucretius, *religio* and *superstitio* are interchangeable terms. They stem from illusions that trouble the soul through unfounded and crippling fears and, as a result, threaten the path to happiness. The task of philosophy is to liberate the human mind and soul from such fears (especially the fear of death) and beliefs (especially punishment) of religion. Many centuries later, in his article on superstition in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert*, Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt, describes this curse as a form of "enchantment, or magic power," also rooted in fear. Superstition "assaults the imagination with specters, dreams and visions"; she sees "invisible signs of love and of hate" everywhere; she threatens the natural light of the mind through "silly rituals and superficial ceremonies."⁴¹ Superstition, he adds, is "a despotic tyrant which forces everything to yield to its own chimeras."⁴² While I am in agreement with the deeply held view that superstition has its roots in the unbound nature of imagination, and specifically with its ability to combine its infinite power with affects such as love, hate, fear, and hope, I shall want to nuance the Enlightenment critique in two ways. One concerns the seemingly clear-cut opposition between philosophical (or

scientific) rationality and superstition, reason and imagination, or clarity and confusion. Following thinkers as different as Spinoza and Freud, or the ethical and political writings of the former and the metapsychology of the latter, I argue that the boundary between the two faculties is far from clear or stable, especially as far as the multitude or the group is concerned. I come to the conclusion that imaginary and superstitious constructions are inevitable in the social and political realms. As soon as we move away from the strictly individual level—and this means always—and into domains in which my own desire is somehow mediated by the desire of others, the affects that define superstition and the imaginary constructions to which they lead seem impossible to circumvent. Like stupidity, yet in a way that I think is even harder to overcome, superstition always haunts thought. The question, then, becomes one of knowing how to minimize such constructions and distinguish between them with a view to retaining the least harmful one, or those that are most compatible with the free exercise of thought and the increase of one's power.

The other point of divergence from the traditional and especially Enlightenment critique of superstition concerns the object or target of the critique in today's world. In that respect, I will be less interested in singling out religion as the main locus of superstition today, and will focus instead on politics and economics. Specifically, by turning to Marx's analysis of commodity and financial fetishism, which has reached new heights with the relatively recent advent of what is commonly referred to as financial capitalism and its many obscure products, including cryptocurrencies, I will single out the capitalist mode of production and exchange as a remarkably successful form of superstition. Here again, as with the scientific racism of Kant, it can't be a matter of ignoring the rationality (in this instance an economic one) bound up with this imaginary construction. Through a sustained engagement with Althusser's concept of "ideological state apparatus" I will end my analysis by revealing the manner in which ideology (which orthodox Marxists see as the traditional place of superstition) and the social conditions of production are intimately and irreducibly bound up, whether in capitalism or socialism.

In a way that may not appear obvious initially, chapters 1 and 2 pave the way for chapter 3, which deals with a problem or a "vice" that many would intuitively see as different in nature from stupidity and superstition. For if the first two can easily be seen as noetic vices, or forces that obstruct thought either through the construction of false problems or the generation of illusions through the infinite power of the imagination, spite, rancor and revengefulness seem to be affects, and belong in a psychology or a

philosophy of the emotions. Its connection with thought is less clear. Furthermore, those affects seem to be purely empirical; and if one will easily recognize that thought cannot flourish when in the throes of pain, anger, envy, or rancor, one will also claim that such states don't call into question the essentially good (that is, truth-driven and righteous) nature of thought. That is precisely the view that I want to dispute. There is nothing intrinsically or necessarily good (in a moral sense) about thought. Entire systems of thought in the broadest sense, whether religious, philosophical, or sociopolitical, can be animated by hatred, indignation, and revenge. To say this is of course to side with Nietzsche, or at least to move the discussion in the direction of his critique of *ressentiment*—a term which, I believe, he mobilizes not in order to equate it simply with a specific emotion or feeling (resentment), but to show how sad, hateful passions can generate entire systems of values and ways of life, and even disguise themselves as noble values and eternal truths. My point, therefore, will be that “good” thought (by which, again, I mean the kind that allows life to expand and power to grow) requires a constant effort, at the individual as well as the collective level, to combat and overcome the systems of thought that stem from powerlessness and seek to diminish the power and happiness of others. “Good” thought is the kind that stems from generosity and expresses joy. By contrast, resentment, rancor, and spite inhibit and stifle thought by wanting to spread their own powerlessness. They are, to use a Nietzschean expression, the force that inhibits force. This, as we'll see, does not mean that affirmative, powerful thought ignores those passions entirely, and especially their source (namely, suffering). It does not deny the reality of suffering. But it refuses to ask about the *meaning* of suffering, and even more so to see in suffering the meaning of existence itself. It refuses to raise the kind of question that I describe in chapter 1 as stupid, by asking: who is to blame for my suffering? For this question inevitably leads to a form of indignation and a desire for punishment, whether of others or of oneself. And in doing so, it translates weakness and servitude into more servitude, rather than strength.

Chapters 2 and 3 also connect on a political level. In chapter 2, I argue that politics is irreducibly bound up with superstition, and especially with affects such as hatred and love, fear and hope. In chapter 3, and still following Spinoza, I ask whether indignation, which is a form of hatred animated by the spirit of revenge, is not also necessarily and irreducibly at the root of any political formation. Through superstition, the multitude is turned into an obedient herd. But through indignation and outrage, the multitude constitutes itself as a lynch mob. Given the recent adoption by various political movements and parties of the political affect of indignation, and the

defense by others of resentment as a legitimate response to state injustice, I explore the (in my view specific and exceptional) circumstances in which those negative affects can find a legitimate and useful place in the political sphere. I take a very Spinozist line on this issue. On the one hand, I argue that hatred and all the affects and politics that are rooted in it are intrinsically bad: they are a negative feeling, a sad passion, indicative of a loss of power. I can't feel hatred, anger, and vindictiveness without imagining my own powerlessness, the frustration of my own essence (or perfection), the inhibition of my desire. At the same time, I will argue for the need for a political space in which grievances, resentments, and even the desire for revenge can be voiced, heard, and resolved without violating the principles of natural right, and without paving the way for a system of justice rooted in *ressentiment*. Legal or political processes which have the means to overcome resentment and revenge are necessarily good.

In any event, I distinguish clearly between those specific occurrences of hatred and the politics of spite and resentment, which today seem to be spreading within Western democracies. The politics of blame and vindictiveness seem to have reached new heights with the recent election of populist leaders across the world who promise to "drain the swamp," take on "the establishment," and "take back control," who lash out at technocrats and the urban elite, the media, the judiciary, and the civil service, all the while claiming to feel the pain of those who suffer and telling them who is responsible for it, who deserves to pay, and against whom they should turn their anger and hatred. It is a rebellion not of the *people*, but of the mob, who is that not simply because it feels powerless, but because it would sooner bring down the powerful and the structures of power than see the power of the individuals it comprises increase. Political campaigns and decisions are carried out in the name of a struggle against a more or less visible enemy, whether external or internal. The *demos* is reduced to the *genos* or the *ethnos*, and "democracy" to the struggle for the recovery of its power and former glory. The republican or democratic political task, by contrast, consists in producing and educating free men and women—that is, men and women whose perfection and power involve the cultivation of joyful affects and the combination of their own nature (and power) with those of other human beings. In the absence of such a state of freedom, however, one has to distinguish between sad (and therefore destructive) passions, and this means between types of indignation or resentment. But that can only be done through critique, a disposition that is denied and devalued by the systems of values based on rancor and resentment. It can only be achieved through dissensus, which is a generous attitude toward problems *and* the root of democratic politics.

To summarize: at first sight, the association of spite, superstition, and stupidity might seem haphazard, if not arbitrary. After all, spite seems to be an emotion related but not reducible to hatred. Superstition, on the other hand, would seem to qualify as a (magical) way of thinking. And stupidity is perhaps best (or at least commonly) described as a lack of intelligence or judgment. My claim, however, following a rich tradition, will be that superstition is rooted in emotions such as fear and hope, love and hatred, reverence and scorn. And the sort of stupidity I will be most concerned with is the nasty, aggressive, and resilient kind, which often hides behind forms of knowledge and shared worldviews. In the end, all three vices lead to ways of thinking, by which I mean ways of seeing the world, generating norms and values, creating institutions and rituals, facilitating discourses and practices of truth. And all three are ways of exercising power over others, of securing their obedience, if not their servitude. The task of thinking is to denounce and combat them, in the name of the intellectual virtue I call *generosity*. This struggle is both internal and external, clinical and critical.

On Stupidity

The ancient philosophers taught that the main source of misfortune was something very different. Beginning with Socrates, these thinkers never wearied of preaching: "Your thoughtlessness and stupidity, the way you live according to the rule, your submission to your neighbour's opinion is the same reason why you so rarely achieve happiness; we thinkers, as thinkers, are the happiest of all." . . . These philosophers harmed stupidity.

—F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*

There is no sin except stupidity.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*

The University of Warwick, where I taught for many years, is guarded by a large sculpture of twisted stainless steel by Richard Deacon. Like a mythological creature, it warns passersby with the words "Let's Not Be Stupid." How, you wonder, am I to interpret this bewildering title: as a warning, a humorous invitation, a provocation, an exhortation? Ever since Plato's Academy, academic institutions have been devoted to the pursuit of knowledge and truth. They have embraced noble and ambitious mottos such as *Crescat Scientia, Lux et Veritas*, or simply *Veritas*. Yet, for all its seeming lack of ambition and clarity, I should like to embrace and defend the title of Deacon's sculpture. For I cannot think of a better motto for an academic institution than one guarding us against this "ugly" or "base" (κακόν) opponent, which, Sophocles tells us, is most difficult to wrestle, and perhaps more treacherous than ignorance and error.¹ For when faced with stupidity, whether one's own or someone else's, one feels disarmed, at a loss, unable to respond and engage. On one level, one could say that the pursuit of

knowledge and truth, with which academic institutions tend to identify, is simply the flip side of the struggle against stupidity. In doing so, however, we would be confusing ignorance and stupidity.² For can one not be ignorant yet not stupid, and conversely (and perhaps more controversially), learned and stupid at the same time? And is ignorance, at least the sort that recognizes itself as such, not already a form of wisdom, as Socrates and Cusanus believed? Here, we would need to distinguish between two types of ignorance: the banal or crass type (*nescientia vulgaris*), which is inexcusable (yet forgivable) and can easily be remedied, for it is ignorance of what is eminently knowable (Meno); and the type that exceeds the opposition between knowledge and ignorance, the learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*, *nescient gnosis*), of which, in his *Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite tells us that it is the tenebrous path to knowledge and enlightenment.³ But there is a third and more relevant type of ignorance, which Jankélévitch describes as “erudite, pedantic and pretentious.” It is reducible neither to the *inconnaissance* that is mere lack of knowledge, nor to the *docta ignorantia* that is the way to genuine knowledge. It is the self-satisfied, pontificating, and conquering *méconnaissance*: opaque, heavy with prejudice (*préjugés*) and banalities (*lieux communs*), full of stereotypes and clichés (Lieutenant Pirogov).⁴ It is also, and more gravely, Charles W. Mills says, the blind, militant, aggressive, and nasty form that underpins white (or male) ignorance,⁵ the sort of ignorance that is also a kind of knowledge and which another critical philosopher of race describes as the “invisible (or unacknowledged) center” from which whites, and white philosophers especially, speak, write, and teach—the center from which everything *makes sense*.⁶ The *méconnaissant*, Jankélévitch concludes, claims a science as his own, but stupidly (*sotement*).⁷ It is this kind of stupidity—stupidity *in* knowledge—that I will be mostly concerned with. And if I mention race, racism, and their place in philosophical discourse, it is because I hope to demonstrate that Kant’s concept of race, about which much has been written, is a stupid concept. The lesson to be drawn will be that there is such a thing as a stupid concept, that is, stupid moments or blind spots—an invisible fulcrum, to use Yanci’s image—at the heart of every theoretical construction, and within *myself*.

To illustrate his theory of the *docta ignorantia*, and his criticism of the learned yet *méconnaissant* type, Cusanus wrote a delightful series of three philosophical dialogues. Full of irreverence and irony, the dialogues known as *De idiota* (1450) pit an “Idiot” against an “Orator” and a “Philosopher.” The first Dialogue (*De sapientia*) begins with a provocation, reminiscent of the Cynic’s attitude: your knowledge of books and of the world, the Idiot

tells the Orator, has not taught you humility (or *wise* ignorance), and is in the eyes of God nothing but stupidity (*stultitia*).

I marvel at your pride [*Miror de fastu tuo*], that being wearied with continued reading of innumerable books, you are not led to humility [*humilitatem*]; without doubt this proceeds from the fact that the knowledge of this world, through which you think yourself superior is, in the eyes of God, nothing but a certain stupidity [*stultitia*].⁸

How presumptuous of you, poor and ignorant Idiot, replies the Orator, who represents the *literatus*, be he the Aristotelian *scholasticus* of the Middle Ages or the learned humanist of the Renaissance. Where, if not from books, would real knowledge (*sapientia*) come from? To which the Idiot, who represents the layman or *illiteratus*, replies: perhaps, eventually, from books, but it has to originate in the open air, in city squares and markets.⁹ By which point it has become clear that the joke is actually on the Orator (and even, subsequently, on the philosopher): the Idiot is *doctior*, for *humilior*, while the Orator is the real *stultus*, for *superbus*.

We would, I think, be equally misled in reducing stupidity to a mere lack of intelligence, or judgment, and identifying the stupid person with the simpleton or the dim-witted.¹⁰ The kind of stupidity I will be exploring is more complex and far more harmful, and in a way divorced from a mere character trait. If stupidity were mere simplicity of mind, and given the fact that universities are or at least aspire to be filled with “clever” people, Deacon’s sculpture, and the warning emblazoned on it, would serve no purpose. What is this stupidity that—within its own bounds—academic institutions should be aware and wary of? What is this enemy within, with which we need to struggle, and do struggle repeatedly (or perhaps not enough)? And could this struggle not be coextensive with the emergence of thought, and thus a precondition for knowledge?

So—very much in the spirit of Deacon’s work—let me try to dispel this impression, and to clarify the manner in which I intend to approach the problem of stupidity from a philosophical perspective. Let me begin with a word of warning, and two observations.

First, and as I was suggesting, I do not intend to criticize stupidity as the opposite of cleverness or even knowledge, and thus as this trap or vice from which philosophy would be immune in principle, and by virtue of the fact that philosophers are—so we like to think—clever people. There is much intelligence around, writes Musil in *The Man Without Qualities*; so much of it,

in fact, "that a little more or less makes no real difference."¹¹ The real problem with stupidity is that it happens within intelligence itself, or has a nasty way of growing inside it, like a tumor. Although Musil's 1937 address *Über die Dummheit* recognizes stupidity in the straightforward, empirical sense, as a mere "deficiency of understanding," he also and rightly identifies another, far more dangerous type of stupidity, which he describes as a "weakness of intelligence."¹² Such a weakness is not a mere absence of intelligence, but an internal failing. *Intelligent stupidity*, he claims, is what ought to concern us. The (it seems growing) phenomenon of conspiracy theories is a good example: after all, conspiracies do exist, and in many instances the theory is not *entirely* inconceivable or impossible. Yet they are stupid, an expression of stupidity *through* intelligence. As Ronnell puts it: "Stupidity can body-snatch intelligence, disguise itself, or indeed, participate in the formation of certain types of intelligence with which it tends to be confused."¹³ Intelligent stupidity is the *harmful* kind, the kind that speaks from a position of authority, establishes itself as a kind of *doxa*, and operates alongside systems of power. It is the kind of stupidity that asserts itself with opening claims such as "Everyone knows that . . ." or "No one can deny that . . ." It is the kind of stupidity Flaubert targets systematically in his novels and correspondence, and the kind that Nietzsche has in mind when he equates stupidity—including and especially in its moral and moralizing dimension—with the need for "limited horizons" and the "narrowing of perspective."¹⁴ Stupidity makes the world smaller and narrower, sucks the air out of it.

As for the two observations, the first is that we could say of stupidity what Augustine says of time: namely, that we certainly *feel* we know what it is, and can easily recognize it, yet are at a loss when we try to define it. And the second, possibly related observation is that the topic of stupidity is remarkably (yet, as we shall see, not entirely) absent from philosophical discussions¹⁵—especially if we take seriously Flaubert's (and, more recently, Umberto Eco's) anti-Cartesian suggestion that it is not good sense but stupidity that is the most equally distributed faculty.¹⁶ Those two observations are related, and I think we need to ask why we are able to recognize stupidity while lacking the philosophical resources to define it.

I. The Question

The question I'll be primarily concerned with is that of knowing the point at which, or the conditions under which, stupidity becomes a philosophical problem. Naturally, it all depends on what we mean by philosophy. But, as I was suggesting, one of my claims is that stupidity can become a genuine

philosophical problem only if we are willing to question some of our assumptions regarding what philosophy is. What do I mean by that? Well, the fact that Western philosophy is essentially a philosophy of *truth*. It is first and foremost concerned with truth, with how to arrive at truth, and with the conditions under which something can be said to be true. It can be broadly defined as an analytic or system of truth. My contention is that so long as philosophy defines itself in that way, so long as it is concerned with the distinction between the true and the false and the criteria by which such a distinction can be established, stupidity has virtually no place within it. To be sure, Kant—to whom I'll return at length—mentions stupidity in his own transcendental analytic, which he defines as "a logic of truth" or a "negative touchstone of truth";¹⁷ but he does so only in passing, and to dismiss it. Philosophically speaking, he believes, nothing can be done about stupidity, precisely because it is merely empirical. In the Second Book of the Transcendental Analytic ("The Analytic of Principles"), Kant equates stupidity with a deficiency in the faculty of judgment. Contrary to the understanding, which is "capable of being instructed by rules," the judgment is "a peculiar talent, which does not, and cannot require tuition, but only practice." This, in turn, means that the faculty of judgment is "the specific quality of the so-called mother wit, the want of which no scholastic discipline can compensate."¹⁸ So much so, he adds in a footnote, that "deficiency in judgement is properly that which is called stupidity [*Dummheit*]; and for such a failing we know no remedy."¹⁹

Had Kant sought examples to illustrate his *Critique of Pure Reason*, and his remarks on stupidity in particular, he could have turned to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Book XI, Ovid describes King Midas as a dull-witted or stupid (*stultus*) hero who doesn't learn from his mistakes: having seen his foolish wish that everything he touches turn to gold granted by Apollo, and having been given a second chance after realizing that he would soon starve, Midas objects to the judge's ruling in favor of Apollo's lyre in the contest that opposes the god to Pan's pipes, calling the verdict unfair. Not amused, Apollo turns the king's ears into those of an ass.²⁰ It is not fate, or hubris, that bring about our hero's downfall, but stupidity. Stupidity is not the stuff of tragedy. A merely "dull" or "narrow-minded" person who is lacking nothing but a "proper degree of understanding" may, Kant adds, be improved by tuition, and can even become "learned" (if only minimally) as a result. But "as such persons frequently labour under a deficiency in the faculty of judgement, it is not uncommon to find men extremely learned who in the application of their science betray to a lamentable degree this irremediable want."²¹ Unlike the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*

provides the reader with a plethora of examples and case studies, including on the difference between ignorance and stupidity. There, Kant defines stupidity (*stupiditas*) as the “lack of the power of judgment without wit” (the same lack *with* wit being called silliness):

Ignorance is not stupidity. As a certain lady replied to the question of an academic, “Do the horses eat at night too?” “How can such a learned man be so stupid!”²²

In fact, agreeing with Socrates and Cusanus, Kant goes as far to say that so long as we know “how to ask good questions,” ignorance is “a proof of good understanding.”²³ Stupidity, by contrast, is not a matter of understanding and knowledge, or lack thereof, but a matter of judgment. As such it has no place within an analytic of truth, however broadly defined. I will return to the issue of stupid questions in a moment.

The fact that stupidity has virtually no place within an analytic of truth as a theme or problem does not mean that the analytic in question is sufficient to prevent stupidity. In fact, I want to suggest that a number of systems of truth or specific rationalities that we have learned to trust—including Kant’s own—are themselves not immune from stupidity. It is because Kant does not take the problem of stupidity seriously enough—or takes the problem of truth too seriously, which amounts to the same thing—that he ends up formulating stupidities, or stupid (and nasty) truths. This, crucially, means that stupidity as I understand it is not the quality of a person, or even of a thinker, but the quality of a person’s thinking on a particular topic or on a given occasion. Foucault, for one, wondered how, in the context of the biopoliticization of bodies, which included their sexualization and racialization, certain disciplines (such as biology, phrenology, physiology, psychopathology, and criminology) deployed “truths” that were not falsehoods but stupidities (*bêtises*)—stupidities that produced harmful effects of subjectivation and normalization.²⁴ In seeking to identify the “normal,” by which they meant healthy sexual behavior, doctors also sought to cure or normalize all those whose sexual practices deviated from such a norm. As a result, the “discovery” of the genital, reproductive, and heterosexual norm was followed almost immediately by the creation of a correctional and more or less coercive system designed to enforce it. For example, doctors devised instruments and technologies to cure homosexuals or children suspected of masturbation. Those measures ranged from the very silly, such as a prescription to visit prostitutes, to the very cruel, such as pharmacological treatments or electric shock therapy to the brain or genitals. Stupidity is

harmful. In a slightly different context—in fact, the context of the tendency on the part of the intellectual class to condemn the “stupidity” (*bêtise*), narrow-mindedness, or blindness of the bourgeoisie—Foucault draws our attention to the opposite: namely, to the intelligence and lucidity of the bourgeoisie, and the stupidity of intellectuals.²⁵ The latter, he goes on to explain, is mostly methodological: intellectuals—Foucault may have Althusser in mind, as well as other structuralists or psychoanalytically minded interpreters—focus on “texts” and “works,” from which they try to extract an “unthought” or “un-said” (*non-dit*). Instead, Foucault claims, we should focus on “discourses” and archives: everything is already said; it’s just a matter of knowing where to look. Paradoxically, the lucidity and intelligence of the bourgeoisie, which managed to seize and hold on to power, has generated effects of stupidity and blindness, but precisely amongst intellectuals. The stupid class is not necessarily the one we expect.

In his recent book, Quassim Cassam mentions a different but equally valid example: that of the Guildford Four, wrongly convicted for the Guildford pub bombings of October 5, 1974. The conviction was overturned in 1989, after they had served 15 years in prison. This is what the journalist (and subsequently member of Parliament) Chris Mullen had to say about this notorious miscarriage of justice: “What is one to make of the judgement of Lord Roskill and his colleagues at the Guildford appeal in 1976? . . . The most generous interpretation is that it displayed extreme gullibility, not to say stupidity—and I have never heard it suggested that Lord Roskill is stupid.”²⁶ Cassam concludes that Lord Roskill’s “judgment in relation to the Guildford Four might have been stupid but *he* wasn’t.”²⁷ The stupidity in question, Cassam argues, is a function of a certain blindness, a refusal to see and accept certain facts—in short, an intellectual vice. Now if Foucault and Cassam are right, there may be more to stupidity than a mere failing of intelligence. These examples indicate a failing of thought, which is itself the product of a system governed by its own rules, norms, and principles.

To illustrate this point further, let me turn to philosophy itself, and to philosophical anthropology in particular. Paraphrasing Chris Mullen’s remark about Lord Roskill, I would say that I have never heard it suggested that Kant *is* stupid. Yet moments of stupidity abound in his work. Consider his musings on sexual difference or national traits from his pre-critical *and* critical periods. In the household, Kant writes, “the woman should *dominate* and the man should *govern*; for inclination dominates, and understanding governs.”²⁸ In a woman, he writes elsewhere, “all other merits should only be united so as to emphasize the character of the beautiful, which is the proper point of reference, while by contrast among the male qualities the sublime

should clearly stand out as the criterion of his kind."²⁹ This follows from the fact that "her philosophical wisdom is not reasoning but sentiment."³⁰ "The feminine sex must train and discipline itself in practical matters; the masculine sex understands nothing of this."³¹ "Woman becomes free by marriage; man loses his freedom by it."³² And possibly my favorite: "As concerns scholarly women: they use their *books* somewhat like their *watch*, that is, they carry one so that it will be seen that they have one; though it is usually not running or not set by the sun."³³ Elsewhere, Kant reflects on the respective merits and flaws of the European peoples. The French and the British are "the two *most civilized* peoples on earth."³⁴ The Spaniard "displays in his public and private behaviour a certain solemnity."³⁵ Those remarks are worthy of Flaubert's *Dictionary of Platitudes* and are, for the most part, the expression of Kant's bigotry and prejudice.

But Kant is by no means an isolated case, and one could very well imagine putting together a Flaubert-style *Dictionary of Philosophers' Platitudes*. Heidegger, who once described his own early and complete adherence to National-Socialism as "the greatest stupidity of my life [*die größte Dummheit meines Lebens*],"³⁶ would no doubt figure in such a dictionary, given his propensity, in the 1930s and 1940s, to speak of Europe, the West, the Germans, the French, the British, the Russians, or the Americans in the most general and mostly empty terms. But a special entry should be dedicated to his anti-Semitic remarks, rooted in his view of Western history as a forgetting of, and indeed abandonment by, "Being," and thus as a kind of onto-historical deracination. Jews, as cosmopolitan Jewry (*Weltjudentum*), lack something essential: namely, rootedness (*Bodenständigkeit*). Without world, without time, and without history, they calculate and swindle. Their uprootedness manifests itself in "empty rationality and calculability."³⁷ Heidegger's famous *Spiegel* interview from May 31, 1976, would make for an equally savory entry. There he speaks of the deep connection between the German and ancient Greek languages, and declares that French philosophers themselves assure him that whenever they try to think, they can do so only in German, for the French language, plagued by centuries of Cartesian positivism, prevents them from doing so (*Das bestätigen mir heute immer wieder die Franzosen, wenn sie zu denken anfangen, sprechen sie deutsch: sie versichern, sie kämen mit ihrer Sprache nicht durch*).³⁸ Most troubling, perhaps, is the fact that those moments of stupidity grow and flourish within some of the most inventive and radical thinkers of our history.

On the topic of nationalism and nationalist politics as a form of stupidity, Nietzsche saw it all coming, and sighed in advance: "If a people is suffering and *wants* to suffer from nationalistic nervous fervour and political

ambition, it must be expected that all sorts of clouds and disturbances—in short, little attacks of stupidity [*kleine Anfälle von Verdummung*—will pass over its spirit into the bargain: among present-day Germans, for example, now the anti-French stupidity, now the anti-Jewish, now the anti-Polish, now the Christian-romantic, now the Teutonic, now the Prussian. . . .”³⁹ Unsurprisingly, Nietzsche’s critique of German anti-Semitism in the same section ends with a call to “eject the anti-Semitic ranters from the country.”

But the examples of stupidity I have mentioned thus far pale in comparison with Kant’s remarks on race, to which I’ll return in the final part of this chapter. Ultimately, they speak to a more fundamental type of stupidity than I have mentioned thus far, one which Kant himself identified as a deficiency of judgment. For the time being, let me refer to just one oft-cited passage from his early *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*:

Father Labat reports that a Negro carpenter, whom he reproached for haughty treatment towards his wives, answered: “You whites are real fools, for first you concede so much to your wives, and then you complain when they drive you crazy.” There might be something here worth considering, except for the fact that this scoundrel was completely black from head to foot, a distinct proof that what he said was stupid.⁴⁰

Of the two claims, it is of course Kant’s that strikes one as utterly stupid, and in a way that only stupidity can: one doesn’t even know how to begin to engage with it. But engage we must.

Contrary to appearances, the kind of stupidity that is at stake in the examples I mentioned is precisely that which so exercised Musil—that is, “intelligent” and even “scientific” stupidity. At this early stage, let me simply note that Kant’s stupidity does not preclude science or a discourse of truth of some kind: Kant’s use of the word “proof” is an indication that, in his view at least, a *scientific* connection between the color of one’s skin and one’s intelligence (or lack thereof) can be established. This, of course, suggests that stupidity is nothing like error and the opposite of intelligence, and that something can be both rational (by which I mean inserted within a discourse of truth) and stupid. But if that is indeed the case, the question is one of knowing how stupidities are generated, how they can be recognized, and how one might avoid them. Should we follow Kant’s own definition, attribute his own stupidity—if that is what’s at issue—to a deficiency in judgment, and understand it as either dim-wittedness or silliness, as mindlessness or foolishness? Or, before dismissing stupidity as a (perhaps only

momentary) lack of judgment from which no one is in principle immune, and for which there is no cure, should we look elsewhere and think of the *primary* task of philosophy as recognizing and avoiding stupidity rather than error, and even identifying stupidity in and as certain types of judgment, if not in a certain philosophical understanding of judgment itself, on the role and value attached to a certain kind of judgment?

Now two (related) conditions need to be met for stupidity to become a philosophical question and take the form: "How is stupidity possible?" First, we need to recognize stupidity not as a merely empirical condition, but as a *transcendental* force, and one that we need to struggle against in order to *think*. Stupidity is the state in which we find ourselves naturally, our default position as it were, and one into which we constantly risk relapsing. As aware of this danger as the sculptor Richard Deacon, and in his own way a whistle- (or as it turns out, a soap bubble-) blower is the experimental poet, homosexual, and activist CAConrad. In "Power Sissy Intervention #1: Queer Bubbles," CAConrad recounts what sounds like a short story or anecdote: "I occupied a busy street corner in Asheville, North Carolina, to bless children with bubbles that will make them queer."⁴¹ The poet describes the (mostly negative) reaction of parents as he blew bubbles and praised their magical properties: "These bubbles will assure you that your child will grow up to be a healthy, happy, revolutionary Queer who will help rid the world of homophobia, misogyny, racism, and other forms of stupidity." Naturally, he knew that bubbles don't have such properties. The only magical power, from his perspective, is that of words, and the power of thought they contain, which can help us recognize and resist stupidity in all its forms. It is worth mentioning that CAConrad wrote *While Standing in Line for Death* as an attempt to overcome the sadness and rage caused by the murder of his lover, Earth, who was tied up, tortured, raped, and burned alive in Tennessee. To call this a crime of stupidity is not to minimize its significance; it is to emphasize the harmful, at times criminal nature of stupidity.⁴²

My second point is that we need to define philosophy not (or at least not only and primarily) as an analytic of truth, that is, as an analytic of propositions and discourses, but as a *dialectic* and a *pedagogy of problems*. Here I use dialectic in the Aristotelian rather than the Kantian sense—that is, as the art of problems and questions as it is defined in the *Topics*.⁴³ Why is the difference significant? Kant claims that the analytic of truth can only ever be a *canon* of judgment, and not an *organon* for the actual production of at least the semblance of objective assertions.⁴⁴ The use of general logic as an *organon* is precisely an illegitimate use, which leads to the production of

illusions. General logic, when treated as an *organon*, is called *dialectic*, and since dialectic is only a “logic of illusion,”⁴⁵ Kantian logic is also a “critique of dialectical illusion” (A 62/B 86). It seems that Kant defines illusions in two ways. First, and only briefly, he defines them as “sophistical illusions” (A 61/B 86): like sophisms or sophistical arguments, and through a kind of false imitation, illusions dress ignorance in the clothes of truth. In this instance, Kant seems to equate transcendental illusions with the Aristotelian definition of sophisms. For Aristotle, sophisms are arguments of a particular kind: they are semblances or simulacra of reasoning, without being actually false (*o pseudes sullogismos*).⁴⁶ Insofar as they escape the very distinction between true and faulty reasoning, Aristotle claims, they are not genuine *sullogismoi*, and only an illusion of knowledge (*sophia*).⁴⁷ But Kant moves away from such a close association between the two terms later on in the *Critique*, and claims that illusions differ from sophisms in the following way: whereas sophisms are born of the desire to persuade at all costs, and can be gotten rid of, illusions are there to stay, as they follow naturally and inevitably from reason, and more specifically from “the fundamental rules and maxims for the employment of our reason” having “the appearance of being objective principles” (A 297/B 353). Put simply, illusions arise from a bad (incorrect and illegitimate), yet spontaneous, almost inevitable use of reason.

My claim is that stupidity is neither a mere semblance or imitation of truth (like sophistry), nor a natural and inevitable illusion of reason as false knowledge, but a transcendental force that can be disguised as, and thus found within, discourses of truth. Its critique belongs neither in an analytic of truth, nor in a dialectic of illusion, but in a *dialectic of problems*. Whereas an analytic of truth provides us with the conditions necessary to solve a problem given in advance, or to answer a question, and a dialectic of illusions provides us with the tools to identify the illusions to which reason is naturally prone, a dialectic of problems ought to provide us with the means to distinguish between well and badly posed problems, or between sterile and productive problems. That is the level at which stupidity operates. Can we describe dialectic understood in that way as a *method*? Perhaps, but only if we distinguish it from the classical and deeply entrenched sense of method, perhaps most clearly defined by Descartes: his method (the search for clear and distinct ideas) is a mechanism to arrive at the truth (understood as certainty) and to solve problems that are already given; it is not a method for the construction of problems and the understanding of questions. This means that philosophy is not immune from badly posed,

insignificant, or false problems, and that it needs to struggle against its own stupidity, confront it, and construct itself as self-critique. Dialectical critique is therefore the name I would be inclined to give to such a method.

The dialectic of problems is also indistinguishable from the idea of pedagogy. Why pedagogy? To answer this question, let me contrast it again with Kant's analytic of truth, and what he refers to as the method or discipline of reason. With the right method or discipline, the Kantian (or Cartesian, for that matter) argument goes, truth is attainable, at least in principle. Another way of saying this is that all that is required of philosophy is the construction of the right method, precisely to the extent that truth is attainable *de jure*. This means that error, however grave, is only contingent and external to thought. It is an obstacle that can be removed in principle, and to the extent that thought is *naturally* disposed or oriented toward the truth. This is a feature that Aristotle emphasized in the very first sentence of the *Metaphysics* when he claimed that "all men by nature [*phusei*] desire to know," and most philosophers (until Nietzsche at least) seem to have taken it for granted. Now a dialectic and pedagogy of thought in relation to stupidity would differ from a method of understanding, or a discipline of reason, by recognizing that stupidity is qualitatively different from error, not merely external to thought, and not merely contingent. It is a transcendental or dialectical obstacle to thought, yet not an illusion of reason. It attacks thought in its ability to *learn*, which is the only method adequate to the construction of problems. But how does one learn? By distinguishing between problems that are well posed and problems that are badly posed, between real and pseudo-problems, or between trivial, ordinary, or insignificant questions and remarkable, singular, or interesting questions. As such, the capacity to learn precedes all forms of knowledge, and the true/false distinction that characterizes knowledge. It is a necessary condition for knowledge. Yet it is not knowledge as such.

We find a version of this idea in Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, a full-draft version of a book written in 1950–51, but which its author was not able to revise before his death.⁴⁸ Wittgenstein subordinates the problem and indeed the possibility of knowledge to a process of learning, specifically of the rules of the language-game to which that specific mode of knowledge belongs (Wittgenstein, § 476). The language-game doesn't rest on some kind of prior or foundational knowledge, especially regarding the existence or nonexistence of whatever reality is at issue. Questions such as "Does a child believe that milk exists? Or does it know that milk exists? Does a cat know that a mouse exists?" (§ 478) are pointless and sterile. In truth, the child neither knows nor believes that milk exists, but *learns* to recognize and

drink milk. Similarly, a child learns to use the word “tree” by being made to stand in front of a tree and being told “Lovely tree!” “Clearly, no doubt as to the tree’s existence comes into the language-game” (§ 480). The possibility of knowledge is itself rooted in the mastery of the rules that govern the language-game in which the knowledge in question is rooted.

Wittgenstein takes this idea one step further. Consider the example of a pupil and a teacher. The pupil—echoes of whom we’ll find in Flaubert’s profoundly stupid characters Bouvard and Pécuchet—is eager to impress his teacher and peers, and “will not let anything be explained to him, for he continually interrupts with doubts, for instance as to the existence of things, the meaning of words, etc.” In response, the teacher says, or would like to say: “‘Stop interrupting me and do as I tell you. So far your doubts don’t make sense at all’” (§ 310). In some instances, doubt is as vain and “hollow” (§ 311) as the sort of certainties expressed in sentences beginning with “everybody knows that . . .” or “it is a well-known fact that . . .,” and which I began by mentioning as symptoms of stupidity. Perhaps, Wittgenstein adds, the teacher will get a bit impatient when hearing his pupil ask how we can know that there is a table there “even when I turn around, and even when *no one* is there to see it” (§ 314). Mostly, though, the teacher will “think that the boy will grow out of asking such questions” (§ 314), unless, that is, he decides to become a professional philosopher and teach his students to ask stupid questions. In other words, “the teacher will feel that this is not really a legitimate question at all. This pupil has not learned how to ask questions” (§ 315). It is the role of the teacher-philosopher to teach the pupil to distinguish between good and bad questions, real and false problems. It is the role of the teacher to teach the pupil how to *think* by teaching him the art or “game” of questions, and to steer him or her away from puerile questions and discussions. In other words, problems are a matter of education and apprenticeship, and thinking is a craft that is acquired over many years.

The reason we don’t know what to do with stupid questions is that we’re unable to see the problems to which they refer. And for good reasons: there isn’t one, or it is so badly posed that we can’t even begin to *engage* with it. But how do we recognize a stupid question? Well, it is often binary, and leaves us in an impossible situation: “Are you in or out?” “Do you love me or not?” “Are you with us or against us?” “Do ‘All Lives Matter’ or Just ‘Black Lives’?” Sometimes stupidity is not even binary, but tautological, in which case it can’t even be formulated as a question: “A promise is a promise.” “It is what it is.” “I am my father’s son.” “Brexit means Brexit.”

The preliminary conclusion I’d like to draw, then, is that the process of learning and the art of questions it implies precede and underpin the

acquisition of knowledge. And stupidity—its very existence, and the problem it poses—enables us to realize that, far from being in a position to think from the start, far from possessing a ready-made faculty of thought waiting to be activated through a combination of goodwill and an adequate method, we must learn to think by asking good—that is, productive—questions and avoiding those that are bad or sterile. As Deleuze puts it, the problem “is not the element of a knowledge, but of an infinite ‘learning’ that differs in nature from knowledge.”⁴⁹ For example, one can know the five basic axioms or postulates of Euclidean geometry, and the many theorems that can be deduced from them. But it takes a certain type of question and a change of attitude to ask: what if the reason the fifth postulate can’t be proven were an indication of the existence of other, nonmetric geometries? And what if the geometry of curved spaces, whether hyperbolic or elliptical, applied to the actual, physical space of the universe? In this instance, Euclid’s axioms or Riemann’s theorems are solutions to a problem—the dimensions of space—that they do not exhaust. Similarly, one can wonder about how the classificatory practices common in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (such as the botanical taxonomies of Linnaeus), which took as their point of departure perceived resemblances and differences among fully formed individuals and organs and then drew precise comparisons between them, eventually gave way to a problematic, evolutionary approach to life, which allowed one and the same spatial regulatory mechanism to account for the emergence of, and thus the proximity between, say, the fin and the tetrapod limb, and thus between whales, lizards, horses, humans, and birds. In this instance it is not space, but time, and the impact of time on the spatial architecture of life through the activation of one domain of Hox Gene expression that had remained inactive in the fin, which is the problematizing element. Indeed, one and the same problem (motion) and regulatory mechanism are shown to have led to different solutions, or the emergence of different spatial architectures. But that was made possible by asking a different kind of question, and eventually by venturing the idea of evolution through natural selection.⁵⁰

But are there rules one can follow in order to pose a problem, or to distinguish between true and false problems? Is there a rulebook or recipe that teaches us how to think? Part of the difficulty lies in the fact that philosophers (Kant in particular) have traditionally defined the truth of a problem by its capacity to receive a solution. In other words, the “truth” of a problem is measured by the possibility of its solution. But if we agree that there can be false problems, or unsatisfactorily posed problems, then a “good” problem can no longer be defined by its ability to receive a solution, which can

itself be stupid. A true or good problem can only be a problem that doesn't resemble its solution, and in fact exceeds its solution: there is always more in the problem than in the solution, as the example of the tetrapod limb reveals. A good or real problem is one that identifies the singular or key points that determine the coordinates or conditions of the problem, and the solutions it can give rise. Each problem defines its field of resolvability. But if there are rules guiding the process of cognition and the use of the concepts of understanding, there are no such rules for the recognition (or construction) of true or false problems. There is only an apprenticeship and pragmatics of problems and questions, as Wittgenstein claimed. One *learns* to think by being exposed to problems, in the same way that one learns to swim by combining one's body, or certain specific parts of one's body, with the body of the sea or the lake, which are two different bodies:

We never know in advance how someone will learn: by means of what loves someone becomes good at Latin, what encounters make them a philosopher. . . . There is no more a method for learning than there is a method for finding treasures, merely a violent training, a culture or *paideia* which affects the entire individual. . . .⁵¹

Everything I've said so far points in the direction of a definition of stupidity as "the faculty of false problems."⁵² Now to say that stupidity is a faculty or power is to grant it a transcendental status; it is to locate the source of knowledge in a faculty of problematization, which can itself be subjected to the test of the true and the false. Knowledge is the product of a moment and faculty of problematization, which it tends to cover up. In other words, the problem tends to disappear in the solution to which it gives rise. This means that the operation of thought consists in bringing the solution back to its problem, as to its conditions of emergence, and disputing the validity or otherwise of the manner in which the problem is posed. Similarly, and in the absence of a given solution, the operation of thought consists in the construction of problems. Stupidity is the power or force behind useless and badly posed problems, and behind even the suppression of problems (and the rush to solutions). I call the dispute surrounding problems, and the drive to keep them alive, *dissensus*, and will identify it, rather than consensus, as the truly philosophical (or critical) *and* democratic process. Indeed, so long as we're not in control of the problems themselves, or don't participate in the construction of problems, we remain infantilized, if not in a state of servitude. The freedom to think is not reducible to the freedom to decide in favor of or against solutions that have been selected for us. It

is the freedom to engage in the dispute over the urgency, significance, and veracity of the problems themselves. It is the freedom to engage in the construction of questions and problems. For problems are—like cathedrals and symphonies—*constructed*. One must be stupid to think otherwise. That is in fact what stupidity is for, what it does—namely, stop us from problematizing, from thinking. This infantile and infantilizing model is one that even our democracies seem to treasure. We need only consider our school exams and government referenda:

According to an infantile prejudice, the master sets a problem, our task is to solve it, and the result is accredited true or false by a powerful authority. It is also a social prejudice with the visible interest of maintaining us in an infantile state, which calls upon us to solve problems that come from elsewhere, consoling or distracting us by telling us that we have won simply by being able to respond: the problem as obstacle and the respondent as Hercules. Such is the origin of the grotesque image of culture that we find in examinations and government referenda as well as in newspaper competitions (where everyone is called upon to choose according to his or her taste, on condition that this taste coincides with that of everyone else).⁵³

Stupidity as the dictate of *das Man*.⁵⁴ We find echoes of this Deleuzian point in the following passage from Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, in which Agathe reflects on her own confusion as a pupil:

This was how she had learned her lessons in school, so that she never knew whether she was stupid or clever, a willing or unwilling pupil: she had a facility for coming up with the answers that were expected of her without ever seeing the point of the questions, from which she felt protected by a deep-seated indifference. . . .⁵⁵

So long as we don't own the problems themselves, we remain subjugated. Thus, philosophy as critique is a call to turn not to "the things themselves" ("*Zur Sachen Selbst!*"), but to the problems or noumena enveloped within the phenomenal world. *Democratic* politics itself (as *dissensus*) begins with how we are made to learn—by approaching problems. There is a politics of truth and learning, in the same way that politics itself requires a form of apprenticeship. This means that learning exceeds knowledge, and politics exceeds technocracy. The dimension of power will become even more apparent in the case of superstition. Like superstition, stupidity is not *innocent*. When confronted with such vices, we need to ask ourselves who, that is,

what power or authority they serve and benefit. Similarly, spite will turn out to be a rejection of, and desire to harm, the possibility of dissensus; as such, it is anti-democratic. I will return to this political aspect of the question.

Kant was perhaps the first philosopher to recognize the existence of problems without solutions, or at least of the kind that classical metaphysicians had sought for centuries. We, in turn, need to recognize the existence of solutions without problems. Part of Kant's critical enterprise was to put a stop to such metaphysical nonsense and philosophical dead ends. The misunderstanding stems from the manner in which we think of certain ideas—ideas of reason, rather than concepts of the understanding—such as freedom, God, or the immortality of the soul. So long as we seek their *theoretical* resolution, we are led to aporias (antinomies, paralogisms, ideals). Their solution is of a different, *practical* order. But we can also understand Ideas to mean something slightly different: namely, problems that don't disappear in their solution, but insist or persist in them, problems that *generate* their own solution. Knowledge, then, and the concepts of the understanding themselves, would only be the effect or products of the Ideas of reason thus understood. We have the solutions we deserve according to the problems we pose, and the knowledge we deserve according to the type of thinking that underpins it. Deleuze again:

Stupidity [*la bêtise*] is not error or a string of errors. There are imbecile thoughts, imbecile discourses, that are made up entirely of truths; but these truths are base, they are those of a base, heavy and laden soul. . . . In truth, as in error, stupid thought [*la pensée stupide*] only discovers the most base—base errors and base truths that translate the triumph of the slave, the reign of petty values or the power of an established order.⁵⁶

Stupidity can thus be seen as the process that detaches thought from its own power, and solutions (individuated entities) from their problematic field. This is how social scientists end up viewing criminals as wicked individuals, and viewing individuals themselves as moral agents who are not the result but the basis of all social formations. The criminal is thus assumed to be a rational agent involved in the calculation of risks and benefits associated with a criminal enterprise. Or he might be seen as an individual lacking in self-esteem. Similarly, a commodity (a product or service) is said to be "good" or "bad" from a consumer's point of view; that point of view is inscribed within a theory of rational choice and the standard economic model, but is detached from its field of individuation, or its problem, which Marx would describe as the relations of production and labor that

are precisely revealed *and* covered up in the manifestation of the commodity as fetishism (I will return to this question in my discussion of superstition). We are constantly confronted with these forms of stupidity, in which economic, social, and cultural conditions are ignored. In fact, the ignorance of their conditions is precisely what defines them as stupidities.

But there is always a certain power behind this inhibition. It is always in someone's interest that a problem be posed in a certain way, and that another way of posing the problem be avoided. The struggle over problems and their solution is ongoing, and inscribed in a network of power relations. Everything about problems is political, and everything political is problematic.

II. The Malady of Our Time: Musil and Flaubert on Bourgeois Stupidity

How, then, is stupidity generated? In order to begin to answer this question, let me take a detour through literature. On the topic of stupidity, as on so many others, philosophy has much to learn from literature, which is often more critical or problematizing than philosophy. If it has much to learn on this particular topic, it is perhaps because literature is not wedded to the analytic of truth that shapes and constrains philosophy, and develops critical tools through the creation of characters and situations. Musil and Flaubert are, in that respect, exemplary, and possibly the two great portraitists of *bourgeois* stupidity, petty *and* grand.

1. Musil on Grand Bourgeois Stupidity

"A mysterious malady of the times." Such is the title of a chapter of *The Man Without Qualities* devoted to Ulrich's perception of his time as a young man. "It seemed to Ulrich that with the beginning of his adult life a general lull had set in, a gradual running down," in spite of an increased business, the creation of new artistic movements and newspapers (MWQ, 55). Something "imponderable" was changing, something one couldn't quite put one's finger on, "as if there had been a change in the blood or in the air." It was like "an omen," "a mysterious disease." But it was virtually impossible to say what that was. There were signs: "Ideas whose currency had once been lean became fat. Persons who would before never have been taken seriously became famous. . . . Sharp boundaries everywhere became blurred" (MWQ, 56). This almost imperceptible change, Ulrich concludes, was due to a resurgence of "simple, common stupidity." Stupidity is a "disease" that

"eats away genius" by resembling it. It disguises itself as "talent," "progress," "hope," and "improvement." If it did not resemble them, "the chances are no one would want to be stupid, and so there would be no stupidity. Or fighting it would at least be easy" (MWQ, 57). The problem with stupidity, then, is that it takes the appearance of thought in the broadest sense, yet neutralizes it. If it is a disease, it is of the sort that mirrors, imitates, or better still, simulates thought, but only to destroy it. At times, it is so effective that it looks more real, more authentic than the genuine item. "There is, in short, no great idea that stupidity could not put to its own uses; it can move in all directions, and put on all the guises of truth" (MWQ, 57). It is not truth itself, however, nor even "the love of truth," as Musil writes at the end of a draft for a 1935 lecture in Paris.⁵⁷ It is simply otherwise than truth, and thus not (even) false. Yet its force comes from the fact that it is not nonsense, or even indicative of a mere lack of intelligence. On the contrary: this "higher, pretentious form of stupidity" signals a "failure of intelligence"⁵⁸ which affects "the highest intellectual sphere [*Geistigkeit*]."⁵⁹ It is "truthfulness and intellectual refinement become dulled,"⁶⁰ a fundamental "lack of respect for the mind [*Geist*]."⁶¹ As such, it is "the real disease of culture" (*Bildungs-krankheit*) and "life-threatening" (*lebensgefährlich*). It is therefore life itself—the life of *Geist* or culture—that is under threat in "'intelligent' stupidity."⁶² As early as 1921, Musil neutralizes in advance the biopolitical, immunological paradigm of the ideals of "nation" and "race" by calling them "a diseased way of thinking" and diagnosing them as containing "all the germ cells of morality degenerate."⁶³ Men, he writes in *The Man Without Qualities*, need to feel that there is "something more above and around them" (MWQ, 576), be it religion, "the Good Emperor in Vienna" (MWQ, 577), or nationalism. "There are so many inexplicable things in life," he adds humorously (such as "the incomprehensible fact that there are seven days in the week"), "but one loses sight of them when singing the national anthem" (MWQ, 577). I will return at length to the "stupid" idea of race, and to a certain Kantian use of "germs" or "seeds." Stupidity is indeed a frightening, dangerous thing, and one from which, Musil argues, only the cultivation of certain virtues can guard us: "freedom, openness, courage, incorruptibility, responsibility, and criticism, criticism even more against what seduces us than against what repels us."⁶⁴ In short, "wisdom," combined with "modesty" ("the . . . most important weapon against stupidity"⁶⁵).

Examples of stupidity abound in *The Man Without Qualities*, yet all revolve around the central idea and event of the book: namely, the (endless) planning for the Parallel Campaign, which takes place in 1914, only months before the outbreak of World War I. The Campaign is meant to commemorate a special

anniversary and a most remarkable coincidence: in 1918 Franz Joseph will have overseen the Austro-Hungarian Empire for seventy years and Wilhelm II will have ruled over Germany for thirty years. No one identifies more with the Campaign than Diotima: it is the “most incandescent event of her life” (MWQ, 359). Diotima, who feels trapped in a loveless marriage with Section Chief Tuzzi and has fantasies of adultery, is of the opinion that such a coincidence calls for a world-historic event, an earth-shattering idea: “We must bring to life a truly great idea. We have the opportunity, and we must not fail to use it” (MWQ, 95). Not that she has “anything specific in mind. How could she? No one who speaks of the greatest and most important thing in the world means anything that really exists” (MWQ, 95). Surely such remarkable ideas exist, yet not in any recognizable way. “For what distinguishes a great, stirring idea from an ordinary one, possibly even from an incredibly ordinary and mistaken one, is that it exists in a kind of molten state through which the self enters an infinite expanse and, inversely, the expanse of the universe enters the self, so that it becomes impossible to differentiate between what belongs to the self and what belongs to the infinite” (MWQ, 114). All Diotima knows is that she intends “to achieve something spiritually great with the Parallel Campaign,” and to “allow only the needs of truly modern minds to influence its leadership” (MWQ, 210). She will settle for nothing less than something “truly important and great, something worth working for with all our might” (MWQ, 210).

Naturally, numerous committees are set up, and endless meetings ensue. Towering over them, the Prussian Paul Arnheim is “to assume the spiritual leadership of the great Austrian patriotic endeavour” (MWQ, 114), thus becoming the emblematic figure of this pointless, stupid enterprise. Who is Arnheim? On the surface, a truly remarkable man: “A German nabob, a rich Jew, and an eccentric who wrote poetry, dictated the price of coal, and was the German Kaiser’s personal friend” (MWQ, 201). He is a polyglot, a humanist, and a *philosophe*: “That he could discuss industry with industrial giants and the economy with bankers was to be expected, but he could also chat just as freely about molecular physics, mysticism and pigeon shooting” (MWQ, 201–2). The alliance of molecular physics, mysticism, and pigeon shooting already points to a degree of irony, which is reinforced when Musil describes Arnheim as “a true product of the new age” (MWQ, 205), and becomes quite explicit in Musil’s description of the three causes of the fame of this great man. First, we learn that the man who knows everything, from philosophy to economics, music, the world, and sports; who speaks five languages fluently, buys today (at a very reasonable price) the art of tomorrow,

and is a paragon of taste, equally at ease with the Kaiser and workers; also writes books that are widely read, enjoy large printings, and are translated into many languages. Everything points to a full endorsement of the type. Except that Musil slips in the following, devastating sentence, which inevitably makes us think of the admiration (if not veneration) we display toward the economic masters of today, whose wisdom we take for granted and whose word we follow: "A sick physician inspires no confidence, but when a man who knows how to do so well for himself speaks, there must be something in it" (*MWQ*, 204). The first cause of Arnheim's fame, then, is his economic success. This is a man who was able to convert his economic capital into social and cultural capital, and thus increase his overall value, to the admiration of most.

The second cause of the great man's fame, which only reinforces the first, can be attributed to what we could call the humanistic temptation of the universal, which has permeated science. The tendency (and very much, as we'll see, the Kantian obsession) to derive the universal from the particular is what scientists and scholars admire in Arnheim. Musil's ironical tone is increasingly palpable:

We hold knowledge in high esteem, and rightly so. But though a man's life may be completely filled by research into the functioning of the kidneys, there will be moments, humanistic moments, so to speak, when he may ponder the relationship between the kidneys and his country. This is why Goethe is so widely quoted in Germany. But when a scholar wants to show that he is not only a man of learning but also possesses a lively mind with an interest in the future, he will do well to show himself acquainted with works it not only does him credit to know but promises to bring even more credit in the future—like a stock appreciating value with time—and in such cases quotations from Paul Arnheim were enjoying increasing popularity. (*MWQ*, 204)

Such quotations from Arnheim may at first seem surprising, as his "excursions into scientific areas for support of his general views did not, it is true, always satisfy the strictest criteria; while they showed an easy command of the literature, the specialists would invariably find in them those little slips and misconceptions that betray the dilettante, just as surely as the stitching of a single seam betrays the homemade dress as compared with the product of the couturier's studio" (*MWQ*, 204). Why, then, would they resist objecting to those views, and endorse them instead? Why do they admire opinions that are, from a strictly scientific standpoint, problematic? The answer

to this mystery lies in a then-nascent, but today common phenomenon: Arnheim is a man whose views are esteemed and quoted not because of their scientific worth, but because of his social position. He is what, in today's jargon, we call a "celebrity":

He impressed them as a true product of the new age, a man whose name was in all the newspapers, an economic king, a man whose intellectual achievements, at least compared with those of earlier kings, were astonishing, and if they might be allowed to note that in their own sphere they represented something considerably different from him, they nevertheless showed their appreciation by calling him a brilliant man, a man of genius, or, quite simply, a universal man, which among specialist amounts to the same thing as when men say to each other of a woman that she is a woman's idea of a beauty. (MWQ, 204–5)

In other words, Arnheim's bourgeois, economic power has also been converted into scientific currency and credibility. Once ridiculed, the *bourgeois gentilhomme* triumphs. He is now the *grand bourgeois*, who is admired and consulted even by kings and emperors. Stupidity as the malady of the time is, after all, an expression of economic power and the authority that comes with it: through a mysterious yet highly effective alchemy, financial capital is converted into social, cultural, and even scientific capital.⁶⁶

Yet this conversion goes both ways: cultural capital flows freely back into social and economic capital, upstream as it were. This brings us to the third source of Arnheim's fame. We learn that while Arnheim can outsmart the craftiest and most seasoned captains of industry in a big deal, they don't regard him as much of a businessman. They

called him the "Crown Prince" to distinguish him from his father, whose short, thick tongue was not so adroit in conversation but made up for it by picking up the flavour of a good business deal at whatever distance and by the slightest chemistry. Him they feared and revered, but when they heard of the philosophical demands the Crown Prince made on the business class, which he would weave even into the most matter-of-fact discussions, they smiled. He was notorious for quoting poets at board meetings, and for insisting that the economy could not be separated from other human activities and could be dealt with only within the larger context of all vital problems, national, intellectual and even spiritual. (MWQ, 205)

Like the scientific community, which smiled at the "little slips and misconceptions" that betray Arnheim as a dilettante scientist, the business

community smiles at his philosophical or otherwise spiritual musings at board meetings. Yet both bow to his economic power:

But even while they smiled at this sort of thing, they could not quite overlook that precisely by adding such frills to business, Arnheim junior was cutting an increasingly important figure in public opinion. News of him would turn up now in the financial, now in the political, now in the literary and art columns of leading newspapers throughout the world . . . until there was no man in the circle of industrial movers and shakers, who operate in silence and behind double-locked doors, as much talked about outside that circle as he was. . . . Despite the irony with which they were always ready to regard his tendencies, they were pleased to have in him a man who could take their case as readily before a conclave of bishops as to a sociological conference. . . . Now, beyond this one need only imagine the effect of Maeterlinckian or Bergsonian philosophy, applied to questions about the price of coal or to cartel politics, to estimate how depressing Arnheim junior's presence could be to industrialists' conferences and directors' meetings in Paris or St Petersburg or Cape Town when he turned up as his father's ambassador and had to be heard out from beginning to end. (MWQ, 206)

If philosophy—whether Bergsonian or Nietzschean, and however tedious—can help the cause of business, so be it. After all, “nowadays only criminals dare to harm others without philosophy” (MWQ, 206).

Arnheim's “philosophy” is that of empty generalities and banalities that nevertheless manage to impress almost everyone he encounters as something full of significance and truth, for the reasons I have just evoked. For example: “Nevertheless, a beautiful woman understands far more than a man, who, for all his logic and psychology, knows nothing at all of life” (MWQ, 112). This cliché of the beautiful, sensuous woman versus the rational and scientific man—which, as we'll see, Kant repeats in his philosophical anthropology—is one of many. Arnheim laments the state of society in Austria just before the outbreak of World War I, filling his remarks with references to philosophical, literary, religious, and historical figures of the past, grasping pathetically for profundity he surely, and without any self-awareness, misses:

Where, today, are the great rulers? How short-winded even the deeds of Napoleon look beside those of the pharaohs, the work of Kant beside that of the Buddha, that of Goethe beside Homer! But here we are, and we must live for something. (MWQ, 212)

Arnheim is also capable of the most brilliant analysis of just about any situation. In his hands, the Franco-German confrontation becomes “a Gallo-Celtic-East European-Transalpine complex interlinked with the problems of the coal mines of Lorraine and the oil fields of Mexico as well as the antagonism between Anglo- and Latin-America” (*MWQ*, 356). But he is also a soulful writer, and indeed one for whom the world “soul” is of prime importance:

He presumably resorted to it as a device, a flying start, a royal motto, since princes and generals certainly have no souls, and as for financiers, he was the first to have one. . . . [H]is ambition to master all worthwhile knowledge [that is the Bouvard or Pécuchet in Arnheim]—a taste for polyhistory so consuming that no single man could have lived up to the goals he set himself—found in the soul a means to rise above all that his intellect could not encompass. In this he was a man of his time, which had recently developed a strong religious bent, not because it had a call to religion but only, it seems, out of an irritable feminine revolt against money, science and calculation, to all of which it succumbed with a passion. . . . He used the word to express something for which he had no other term. . . . And so he wrote with real fervor of something vague and portentous that is interwoven with the all-too-factual world of business affairs as a profound silence is interwoven with profound speech. He did not deny the usefulness of knowledge; quite the contrary, he was himself an impressively busy complier of data . . . but once he had proved himself in that arena he would say that above and beyond this level of keenness and precision there was a higher realm of wisdom that was accessible only to the visionary. (*MWQ*, 422–23)

“Surrounded by the magic aura of his wealth and the legend of his importance” (*MWQ*, 207), revered by a press besotted with profound statements such as “nothing in world history happens without a rational cause” (*MWQ*, 354), Arnheim the “Hanseatic merchant prince” (*MWQ*, 208) is surely the right man to spearhead the Parallel Campaign. But what ought to be the result of this ambitious initiative, which mobilizes the greatest minds? What is this truly great idea, “the greatest and most important thing of all?” asks Arnheim in a brainstorming session with Diotima and her husband, Section Chief Tuzzi. Is it religion? Yes, of course, but religion is not “modern” enough. Is it the nation? The state? Science? Art? But is art “more important than the misery of ten thousand people” and if so, could “ten thousand works art make up for the misery of a single human being?” (*MWQ*, 437). A general peace conference? What if Austrian artists decorated

the Peace Palace at The Hague with frescoes (MWQ, 209–11)? How about a Nietzsche Year, asks Clarisse, or a Year of Austria, asks Count Leinsdorf? Surely, this would allow Austria to show the world, “for once, who we could be!—but so to speak only until further notice, and for a year at most” (MWQ, 146). Diotima floats an even grander idea: a World-Austrian or Global Austria Year, “in which Europe could recognize Austria as its true spiritual home” (MWQ, 248). Should the Parallel Campaign slogan be *Back to—!* Back to Religion, Back to the Baroque, Back to Gothic, Back to Nature, Back to Goethe, to Ancient Germanic Law, to Moral Purity? Or should it be instead *Forward to—!* Forward to a New Human Race, Technicism, Accelerationism, Photogenic Rejuvenation (MWQ, 251, 436)? The vagueness of those slogans, Musil remarks, is appealing: “For vagueness has an elevating and magnifying power” (MWQ, 147). Speaking of campaigns and parallels: it is almost impossible not to draw one with our current political situation. We seem to live and breathe empty, stupid slogans lifted directly from Musil’s novel, many of which are actual names of political parties: “Make America great again!” “Yes we can!” “Aspirational Britain.” “*Forza Italia!*” “*En marche!*” “*Podemos!*” “*Jetzt!*” “*Vorwärts Tyrol!*” Not much has changed, it would seem.

2. Flaubert on Petty Bourgeois Stupidity

To remain with literature a while longer, and to continue weaving the medical metaphor, let me go back in time and turn to Flaubert, who is perhaps *the* novelist of stupidity. The struggle against stupidity through literature could even be described as his vocation. In a letter to his very young friend Ernest Chevalier, written toward the end of 1830, filled with spelling mistakes yet remarkably mature and humorous, the ten-year-old Gustave agrees with Ernest that New Year celebrations are “stupid” (“le jour de l’an est bête”) before suggesting that, given his own taste for comedy and Ernest’s interest in recounting his dreams, they should consider writing together. The material, he says, would be provided by this lady (“une dame”) who visits his father regularly and “always tells them stupidities” (“qui nous contes [*sic*] toujours des bêtises”).⁶⁷ Flaubert’s anti-stupidity radar was already up and running.

Further evidence can be found in Julian Barnes’s highly instructive and amusing *Flaubert’s Parrot*, where we find the following passage:

I studied the doctoral thesis of Gustave’s brother Achille: it was called “Some Considerations on the Moment of Operation on the Strangulated Hernia.”

A fraternal parallel: Achille's thesis later became Gustave's metaphor. "I feel, against the stupidity of my time, floods of hatred which choke me. Shit rises to my mouth as in the case of a strangulated hernia. But I want to keep it, fix it, harden it; I want to concoct a paste with which I shall cover the nineteenth century, in the same way as they paint Indian pagodas with cow dung."⁶⁸

A strangulated hernia—what an apt image! Stupidity is indeed what strangles thought, chokes it, inhibits it. It is its own pathology, against which it needs to immunize itself. Critique is thus also a clinic, and philosophy a form of surgery. This is a recurring motif among those who take stupidity seriously: like Musil, Flaubert sees stupidity as a disease, and one that is life-threatening. Similarly, Adorno speaks of stupidity as a "scar" and a "thwarting" of life,⁶⁹ a "castration" of perception, a "sacrifice of the intellect" and the "murder" of thought.⁷⁰ Stupidity, we could say, is a life-threatening condition for thought, and arguably its greatest threat.

Flaubert himself described *Bouvard et Pécuchet* as "a kind of encyclopaedia of Modern Stupidity," and had imagined "an encyclopaedia of human stupidity" as a subtitle for his incomplete novel.⁷¹ Bouvard and Pécuchet are two Parisian copy clerks who meet one day and realize they share the same passion for knowledge. When Bouvard inherits a sizable fortune, they decide to move to the Normandy countryside and devote themselves to exploring every branch of knowledge known at the time (from agronomy to medicine, chemistry, physics, history, theology, philosophy, psychology, education, etc.). Their manic and exhaustive approach, for the description of which Flaubert himself had amassed a bibliography of over 1,500 volumes and thousands of pages of notes, follows a regular pattern: their enthusiasm for a subject triggers a phase of documentation, followed by experimentation, failure, skepticism, and the birth of their next passion. In the end, depressed and disgusted with the world in general, they decide to "return to copying as before."

What is peculiar about their approach to knowledge, their desire to know, is that it signals the degree zero of thought and learning. Why? How can an encyclopedia of knowledge be at the same time an encyclopedia of stupidity? What's most striking about the book is that the various rationalities Bouvard and Pécuchet explore—some of which, like phrenology or magnetism, are presented as stupid in themselves—are entirely divorced from questions. Or when questions appear, they are themselves stupid, and of the type Wittgenstein warns us against: "What is matter? What is the Mind?" "Is the correct method the ontological or the psychological method?" "And what about Morality in all of this? Ah! never mind." "And what about the

hair of the duke of Angoulême? Was it flat or frizzy? Or perhaps curled?"⁷² Those questions don't signal problems, only possible solutions. As such, they are false or pseudo-questions, and remind us of the unnecessary or useless questions of the zealous pupil. One could go so far as to argue that the question "what is x ?"—in many ways the philosophical question par excellence—is itself stupid. For the x in question is already given; and it is given in an obvious way that doesn't call for any questioning. Bouvard and Pécuchet's relation to science is entirely driven by a sort of blind faith in science itself, as if knowledge were in itself a form of salvation. They want to know, and to know everything, but they are incapable of *learning* anything. All they can do is copy, that is, reproduce something that is already given. They can understand reality only by reproducing it. Of reality, they can understand only what can be reproduced or repeated mechanically. And this raises the question of what is more important, to know or to learn, to repeat or to question.

But what is extraordinary is that, after three hundred pages and a progressive descent into the depths of stupidity, in the chapter in which philosophy, and even Hegel's philosophy,⁷³ is discussed, our two protagonists are struck by an epiphany that signals the possibility of a dialectical inversion:

Then a pitiful faculty developed in their mind, that of seeing stupidity and no longer being able to tolerate it.

Insignificant things began to sadden them: newspaper advertisements, the profile of a bourgeois, a foolish remark they overheard.⁷⁴

Encyclopedic knowledge did not after all bring them what they had expected. But what they encountered or experienced in the process of their mad quest is something far more valuable, and surprising: a sense or sensitivity for stupidity, and the realization of their own stupidity, which took the form of knowledge in place of thought. They took the faculty of knowledge to its negative limit (in the form of sheer accumulation), and from this limit were faced with something else, at once infinitely more demanding and joyful: the task of thinking. It is itself endless, but not in the same way, not because it is quantitative. It is endless because we can never say of thought "That's it, I am now done thinking, I have reached its shores." It is a task that must be renewed, endlessly, like Penelope's loom. It is the task of philosophy. But it turns out to be too much for Bouvard and Pécuchet, who want to go back to "copying like before," and thus to return to their previous form of stupidity. They see that possibility, in a flash, but retreat to their petty bourgeois conventionalism.

Madame Bovary is written in a similar vein, and provides something like a typology of stupidity, beginning with what (borrowing from Musil) we could describe as the “honourable and straightforward stupidity,” the kind that belongs to one who is “a little dull of comprehension, and has what one calls a ‘dim wit.’”⁷⁵ It is represented by Charles Bovary, and announced on the very first page, through the masterful description of his awkward hat as he enters the classroom as a fifteen-year-old, and of which, at the very end, Flaubert tells us that “it had depths of expression like the face of an imbecile [*imbécile*].”⁷⁶ References to Charles’s *bêtise* and *stupidité* abound.⁷⁷ He is what the French would call a *benêt*, a simpleton, who exasperates his wife, but inspires the reader’s sympathy, as it seems innate and innocuous. It can’t be seen as a vice, whether intellectual or moral.

Then there is the stupidity of Emma Bovary, Charles’s wife, and her lover Léon. This is the stupidity of clichés and platitudes, which in their case takes the form of sickly sentimentality and cheap romanticism. It makes one smile, albeit somewhat awkwardly, as we recognize the dinner conversation we find ourselves occasionally drawn into, which we know gives one the impression of having said or thought something when one has actually said nothing.

Finally, there is the conquering, triumphant, and tyrannical stupidity of Homais the chemist, which ends up being the triumph of stupidity as such: the last two sentences of the novel, which come after the description of Emma’s ruin and sordid suicide, her pathetic husband’s death, and her daughter’s grim future as an orphan, signal Homais’s utter and total victory: respected by the authorities and supported by public opinion, he is awarded the medal of honor. He now rules over the small and, in the grand scheme of things, utterly insignificant town of Yonville in Normandy. Baseness and pettiness have triumphed.

It is by far the most serious type, by which I mean the dangerous and malign type, the conquering and powerful type that makes you cry and scream with rage, the type that Jankélévitch summarized with the term *méconnaissance*. Stupidity provokes rage, indeed needs to enrage. And no one was more enraged by stupidity than Flaubert.⁷⁸ Homais’s stupidity is self-satisfied and embodies petty bourgeois mentality (never more evident than in his use of slang or *argot* to shock the bourgeois). It takes the form of the struggle of Science, Truth, and Progress against the dark forces of religion, prejudice, and superstition. His God, he says, is that of Socrates, Franklin, Voltaire, and Béranger (a popular singer and songwriter at the time). He “believes” in the laws of physics and chemistry, not in miracles and sacraments. He incarnates medical knowledge, and more broadly the light of reason and

modernity, against the occult powers of religion. This doesn't stop him from admiring Christianity for having abolished slavery and introduced morality into the world. He is, in short, a *philosophe* and a free spirit. His stupidity establishes itself as the new religion, the indisputable holder of truth and progress. It asserts, pontificates, and lectures. But this is knowledge as ascendancy, which can be far more damaging than religion: it has the power to ruin lives, physically and morally, to crush dissent and quash disagreement, to diminish and humiliate. It is stupidity with a good conscience, and exercised as power. It is the tyrannical stupidity of rationalism, which announces Foucault's critique of medical and especially psychiatric power.

The conclusion Flaubert invites us to draw is that nothing and no one is immune from stupidity. Stupidity can take the form of science, philosophy, art, or religion—of *Geist* and *Bildung*. There is encyclopedic, romantic, or revolutionary stupidity. But in the most dangerous kind, power is always at stake: power over the soul, the mind, or the body. The question, then, becomes one of knowing how to distinguish between science (or philosophy, or literature, or religion) and stupidity. And Flaubert shows us how difficult it is, but also how it can be done.

To conclude this foray into literature, let me return to the question with which I began, that is, the sense of philosophy that is required in order for stupidity to be seen as a real problem. What's required is that we move away from the analytic of truth, which, historically speaking, philosophy tends to identify as its task. Furthermore, we need to recognize that neither a discipline of the faculties nor a method is enough to guard us against the danger of stupidity, which threatens our ability to think from within. Stupidity is not just an object of thought for philosophy, but an inhibition or thwarting of the process of thought and, at the same time, a question through which the very question of what it means to philosophize is revealed. What is required instead is a dialectic and pedagogy of thought, a new *critique* of thought. By critique, I mean a diagnosis and therapeutic of thought, and the various faculties it mobilizes, oriented toward the possibility not of knowledge as such, but of the faculty of questions and problems. Questioning (*das Fragen*), Heidegger once wrote, is the piety (*Frömmigkeit*) of thought.⁷⁹ The philosopher feels that his or her fate is played out in the question, in the almost obsessive care regarding the manner in which he or she poses questions, in his or her incessant return to questions and problems, in excess of answers and solutions. Stupidity, by contrast, is the inability to question, the force—internal to thought itself—which kills thought in the womb. But I also understand critique in the sense that Kant himself had in mind in his essay on *Aufklärung*. By that, I mean the critique of ourselves and our

own present, a critique that failed him in his anthropology and lectures on geography. Let's refer to critique in that second sense as a form of vigilance, a philosophical virtue that, as Musil claimed, we can learn to cultivate by struggling against ourselves, our own stupidity.

III. Kant's Stupidities: On Race and Other Anthropological Musings

In a deliberately anachronistic turn of phrase, Marcel Proust spoke of "the Dostoevsky side of Madame de Sévigné."⁸⁰ In a similar vein, one could speak of the Flaubert or Musil side of Kant: Kant's writings on geography and anthropology are peppered with remarks and observations that could have come out of the mouth of Bouvard, Pécuchet, or Arnheim—peppered, that is, with clichés and stereotypes about the moral character and traits of nations and peoples. But there is also something more disturbing and threatening, a threat and a poison that is distilled at the same time that Kant constructs his formidable critical apparatus. There is also an Homais in Kant. You will recall that Kant defines stupidity not as mere dim-wittedness, but as a deficiency in the faculty or power of judgment, which, from a philosophical perspective, he dismisses as a merely empirical problem. Let me elaborate a bit on this point by turning again to his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.⁸¹ In that text, he reiterates what he said in the first *Critique*: judgment (*iudicium*), which is nothing other than the faculty of thinking the particular, or "discerning whether something is an instance of the rule . . . cannot be instructed but only exercised" (*Ak* 7: 199). Wit (*ingenium*), by contrast, is the other side of judgment, or the faculty of the universal. Thus, "the power of judgment is a matter of noting the differences in a manifold that is identical in part," while "wit is a matter of noting the identity of a manifold that is different in part" (*Ak* 7: 201). The sheer lack of judgment, which I have referred to as dim-wittedness, is to be distinguished from what, following Kant, I have referred to as silliness or foolishness, and which designates bad judgment indeed, but one that is not lacking in wit. Ultimately, however, *iudicium* and *ingenium* are two sides of the same coin, so much so that the third *Critique* refers to them respectively as determinate and reflective judgment. Both can sin, as it were, by default or excess:

The outstanding talent in both is noticing even the smallest similarity or dissimilarity. The faculty to do this is *acumen* (*acumen*), and observations of this kind are called *subtleties*; which if they do not advance cognition are called *hairsplitting* or *conceited prattlings/empty subtleties* (*vanae argutationes*), and the

person who indulges in them is guilty of an admittedly useless, although not exactly untrue, employment of understanding in general. (*Ak* 7: 201)

In other words, our ability to notice infinitesimal differences, and thus our faculty of judgment, can lead to useless, even stupid claims that are neither true nor false and can't possibly lead to genuine knowledge. Whereas the sheer lack of judgment applies, as we saw, to Ovid's description of King Midas in *Metamorphoses*, excessive judgment can lead to the production of empty generalities or differences, for example, regarding peoples and cultures. My claim is that *some* of Kant's comments on the differences between peoples, races, genders, or nations in the *Anthropology* are precisely stupidities of that kind—that is, of the kind that does not reflect a lack of judgment or wit as much as it does an empty, useless foray into the world of differences, a misuse or abuse of judgment. Sometimes, it is best *not* to judge.

But there is more. In what follows, and drawing on some of Kant's own remarks on race, I will argue that stupidity can not only exist alongside, but also be the product of, certain rational constructions and discourses of truth. Specifically, I will argue that Kant's own stupidities in relation to the topics I have just mentioned can be attributed not (or at least not simply) to the prejudices of his time or, as we saw him do in his definition of stupidity, to an occasional lapse of judgment but, on the contrary, to the considerable and specific role he attributes to judgment as such, and to teleological judgment in particular: his concept of race is ultimately inseparable from his concept of final causes or purposiveness, without which, he claims, we cannot *think* about organized nature, and reveals a rational architectonic that underpins even his seemingly most casual (and easily dismissed) remarks on sexual, gender, or cultural differences. In other words, I want to claim that Kant's stupid claims about peoples and races stem from his philosophy, and more specifically from his teleology. Too *much*, not too *little* judgment is in fact the problem. His concept of race is an instance of a stupid response to a badly posed problem. This might sound shocking, as we're so used to thinking of Kant not only as a model of philosophical intelligence, discernment, and nuance, but also as a philosopher of enlightenment bent on proving the peaceful and necessary coexistence of knowledge and morality, or theoretical and practical reason, as well as an advocate of equality and mutual respect among human beings. This is the view held, for example, by Loudén, who grants that Kant's writings "exhibit many private prejudices and contradictory tendencies," but feels that "Kant's theory is fortunately stronger than his prejudices, and it is the theory on which the philosophers should focus."⁸² Unlike Loudén, I believe that Kant's prejudices can't be

detached from his theory, and that his stupidities are held up by, and inscribed within, a form of rationality. In fact, and as we saw in the case of Homais the chemist, I want to argue that the worst—as they are the most harmful—stupidities are those inserted within discourses of truth and authority, and held in the name of “science” and “morality.” Those harmful stupidities, which emanate from the structures of knowledge and power defined by a “universal” type (white, male, bourgeois, etc.) and the normative and normalizing system it constructs, are precisely the kind that many rationalities within the human and social sciences—from anthropology to psychiatry—have generated and will no doubt continue to generate. This is the type of stupidity that is closest to thinking, and thus the most likely to threaten, inhibit, or poison it. It is the type against which thinking, qua critique, needs to struggle constantly. It is therefore necessary to think Kant against himself, and, more importantly perhaps, to think against ourselves, against our own stupidity. In that respect, stupidity is a transcendental or dialectical issue—that is, one that stems from the way in which we pose a given problem. It is the effect of a badly posed problem, which, in addition to relying on teleological judgment as a necessary component of our thinking of organized nature, and thus of our conception of natural history, involves a certain idea of freedom as the end of nature. As such, it exceeds any conception of stupidity as either lack of judgment or poor judgment.

Another, I believe entirely legitimate way of approaching Kant’s racism would be to consider it as an ideological instance, and a very obvious one at that, of white racial domination or supremacy—as a pure product of the political and economic European expansionist project, based on private property and the exploitation of labor, including slave labor.⁸³ Why not argue, as some have done, that the “white racial frame”—by which we need to understand the “interpretation prism” that generates “conceptual deficiencies and biased refractions” that are “not at all contingent but an artifact of white racist ideology”—is sufficient to account for Kant’s concept of race?⁸⁴ If the world, even to Kant, *seems that way*, is it not because of a hermeneutical frame that is the product not of a “deliberate misrepresentation” of reality, or of a “deliberately engineered conceptual bias,”⁸⁵ but of socioeconomic as well as epistemic relations of domination and exclusion: of “whiteness” as a *dirty* politics of truth, that is, of a productive system of power and knowledge constituted through domination *and* sedimentation?⁸⁶ In response, I will say the following: First, the frame or prism in question is one that some of Kant’s contemporaries, such as Herder and Diderot, questioned and rejected. This means that there is something in Kant’s philosophy that allowed this hermeneutical frame not only to take root, but to find a new legitimacy.

My second, related point, is that Kant's white supremacy is not simply an ideological effect or product of a systemic racism, rooted in European imperialism and capitalism. To be more specific: the *concept* of race he develops is intimately bound up with his conception of teleological judgment, nature, and freedom, as well as with the emergence of the modern *episteme* of order, and taxonomy in particular, which introduced a new visibility and legibility of the world.⁸⁷ To be sure, the combination of the two aspects in the Kantian concept of race is also bound up with institutions and power structures such as the family, social clubs, and the university, as well as with slavery and the global projection of capitalism. But its specificity can't be attributed solely to social relations of production. Ultimately, race is a matter of visibility: of what one chooses to see, or is made to see, and to not see; of the perspective or center from which one sees; of the visibility that one forces onto the world and others, who might see or wish to see the world differently. There is a certain obviousness and blindness built into the visibility of race, an imposed visibility that is also a veil, and a harm.

1. Kant's Remarks on Race

We must first emphasize that, far from being occasional and peripheral, Kant's comments on race are numerous and span his entire career. They can be found in his pre-critical writings, and in *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) in particular (which are, it needs to be said, little more than a reworking of Hume's "Of National Characters" [1748]). But they also appear in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), as well as in his lectures on *Physical Geography*, which he delivered in Königsberg on no less than forty-nine occasions between 1756 and 1796.⁸⁸ The lectures and the *Anthropology* were meant to be exoteric and, crucially, propaedeutic: aimed at a broad audience, their purpose was to entertain while providing "instructive and easily understood knowledge," well suited for a "social century" (*Ak* 2: 312–13). They were delivered "for our own enjoyment," but also to produce "rich material for social conversation" (*Ak* 9: 165), of the sort, presumably, that is dear to the then-emerging bourgeoisie, whether petty or grand, whether embodied by Emma and Rodolphe, or by Arnheim and Diotima. The social and sociological dimension of those lectures is crucial, as it reveals Kant's desire to educate and disseminate knowledge through social conversation, at the dinner table, in clubs or cafés. However, their relative lightness of tone and presentation should not conceal their seriousness. Insofar as physical geography is about the world as an "object of external sense," and anthropology is about the world as an

"object of inner sense," those disciplines should be seen as philosophy, and as a significant contribution to our knowledge of the world (*Weltkenntnis*) in general—that is, as encompassing "the human being and nature" (*Ak* 9: 158). Physical geography studies nature, anthropology the human being, but the latter is in the end more important, since "nature exists for the sake of the human being" and "the human being is the end of nature."⁸⁹ As I've already begun to suggest, this teleological view of nature, of the human within nature, and of reason within the human, is the source of Kant's seemingly entertaining and often stupid comments, but also his answer regarding the question of how to think about organized nature. Finally, Kant sees geography and anthropology as an essential part of a child's education, and a solid introduction to the other, more theoretical sciences.

In addition to those lectures and texts, Kant wrote three essays on race between 1775 and 1788.⁹⁰ Those essays went through several editions during his lifetime. Kant was very serious about the issue of race, although his remarks on race (like those on gender, peoples, and nations) are often a pretext for light entertainment. More importantly still, Kant's essays and numerous comments on race go to the heart of his philosophical anthropology and geography, and stem from some of his most fundamental epistemological and metaphysical principles. Kant's first essay on race, for example, served as an advertisement for his geography and anthropology lectures, the aim of which was "propaedeutic." The topic of race was therefore a good way into the lectures, which, in turn, were preparatory for both theoretical and practical philosophy. Similarly, Kant's third essay of 1788 is a methodological essay that defends the use of teleological principles in philosophy against its critics; but it is also, and simultaneously, an essay in defense of the epistemological function of the concept of race. In other words, the concept of race illustrates the validity of the methodological use of final causes in philosophy. And in this intersection of race and teleology consists Kant's stupidity. This intersection, Robert Bernasconi argues, earns Kant the dubious honor of having invented the *scientific* concept of race, or having elevated race to the level of a legitimate *concept*.⁹¹ Kant did so by associating race primarily with color (and the white man's fascination with the question of the origin of the black man's skin) (*Ak* 8: 93–94); by understanding color as an expression of a purposiveness (physical adaptation) at work in the biological sphere, which excludes both chance (or "blind purposiveness") and the mechanical causes as explanations for adaptation (*Ak* 2: 434–35; *Ak* 8: 98; *Ak* 8: 166); and by regarding as *permanent* and *irreversible* the division of races and their characteristics (*Ak* 8: 105). Kant attributed the latter to the activation of innate and shared "germs or natural predispositions" (*Keime*

oder ursprüngliche Anlagen—Ak 8: 62) under specific circumstances, related to climate (*Klima*) and soil (*Boden*) (Ak 2: 434–35).

If I qualify this “honor” as dubious, it’s because the “scientific” concept of race is of course shot through with (European and white) normativity. Thus, Kant’s division of humanity—and thus rationality—into four different races (white, black, red, and yellow), which he inherits from Linnaeus’s division of the genus *Homo* into four “varieties,” also corresponds to a hierarchy, at the top of which figures the white race:

Humanity has its highest degree of perfection [*Vollkommenheit*] in the white race. The yellow Indians have a somehow lesser talent. The Negroes are much lower, and lowest of all is part of the American races.⁹²

The Negro, Kant writes in *Reflexionen zur Anthropologie*, “can be disciplined and cultivated, but is never genuinely civilized. He falls of his own accord into savagery.”⁹³ But Native Americans are the most *stupid* of all, as we can see from the Barth manuscript of Kant’s *Physical Geography*:

The Fuegians, however, are so stupid that, regardless of the fact that the cold there is so terrible that two Englishmen froze to death in the middle of their summer, they have not hit upon the idea of fitting doors to their houses.⁹⁴

The list of idiotic and offensive remarks goes on, and it should not come as a surprise, David Harvey remarks, that, given his threatening picture of “unwashed Hottentots, drunken Samoyeds, conniving and thieving Javanese, and hordes of Burmese women lusting to get pregnant by Europeans,”⁹⁵ Kant ends up placing limits to, and strict conditions on, the very idea of cosmopolitan right he promotes elsewhere: given those cultural differences, his theory of universal hospitality can only be conditional and temporary, and thus not so universal in the end.

It is tempting, of course, to attribute such racist (or sexist) remarks to the prejudices of Kant’s time, and to claim that it is wrong to judge what philosophers were saying over two hundred years ago by today’s norms. To which one has to reply that, in Kant’s time already, some (like Herder or Büsching) were dismissive of the very vocabulary of race and held anti-racist views. Anton Friedrich Büsching was a professor of philosophy who also taught geography, and the author of a monumental *Neue Erdbeschreibung* in eleven volumes, which appeared between 1754 and 1792. His “description of the earth” was an important source for Kant’s geography lectures. Büsching writes the following:

Men also differ greatly in their make, size, method of living, and in their manners. But as to the difference in their intellectual faculties, we are not to look for that in their nature, or climate, but in the greater or less opportunity they have of improving and exercising their mental powers. An inhabitant of *Greenland* or *Lapland*, a *Moor* or a *Hottentot*, is in his way as intelligent as one among civilized nation. . . .⁹⁶

In addition, and as Bernasconi remarks, Kant could have argued in favor of race mixing, as it would allow Africans or Americans to share in white perfectibility. Instead, he insisted that their capacity for adaptation was now lost: "Africans, having adapted to a climate where nature's bounty did not require them to work, were now no longer capable of working except when forced to do so by others."⁹⁷ Consequently, race mixing would necessarily translate into the degradation and pollution of the white race. Unsurprisingly, Kant ends up calling for the separation of races, and most of all the protection of the white race.⁹⁸

2. *The Methodological and Epistemological Status of the Concept of Race*

Let me now move deeper into the substance of Kant's claims, beginning with his 1785 essay "Determination of the Concept of a Human Race," in order to understand how he arrives at his concept of race, methodologically as well as epistemologically. This determination, he begins by saying, cannot be gathered from the available (travel) literature, which contributes more to "exciting the understanding to investigation on this point than to satisfying it" (*Ak* 8: 91). For observation and experience come about as a result of such a concept, not the other way around: "One finds in experience what one needs only if one knows in advance what to look for" (*Ak* 8: 91). This is almost an admission of guilt. For if one *starts* with the concept of race, everything we observe and experience will be with a view to confirming this concept. Now it would be naive to think that modern science is purely empirical and methodologically experimental. Too many philosophers and historians of science, from Kuhn to Heidegger to Foucault, have disputed that useful but ultimately simplistic view of how science really works. Method is also if not primarily defined as a theoretical pre-orientation in the world of experience, a framework or grid within which certain phenomena come to light and begin to speak to us. But it is also one that can fissure and collapse in the face of facts and evidence that the model should in principle, but in fact can't, predict or explain. As far as Kant is concerned, the concept of race results from a method and an organizing principle, one that

does not derive from experience, but orients it. However, Kant insists that this method is neither fanciful nor arbitrary. It is, he claims, precisely and entirely consistent with the use of reason in the natural sciences: throughout, he makes sure that his "maxim" is "exactly in keeping with the use of reason in natural science and the only one fit for a consistent mode of thought" (Ak 8: 96). Specifically, and as we'll see in greater detail, he sees his investigation as a contribution to, and an extension of, the then-burgeoning genealogical science of natural history, and Buffon's *Histoire naturelle générale et particulière* (1749) in particular: "I take as my principle not to admit any botching influence of the power of the imagination on nature's business of generation, and not to admit any human faculty to effect alterations in the ancient original of the species or kinds through external artifice" (Ak 8: 97). To do so would be to engage in "delusion and fiction," and would confuse "the art of explanation" with "the art of magic" (Ak 8: 97).⁹⁹ In this instance, the "maxim," applied to the field of natural history as concerned with phyletic origins, consists in asserting that human hereditary traits are the product of "the germs [or seeds] and predispositions lying in the species itself" (Ak 8: 97), and that "different classes of human beings had to arise" from "the germs [or seeds] of a *single first phylum* [or stem: *Stamm*] . . . suitable for the gradual population of the different regions of the world" (Ak 8: 98–99). Thus, in Kant's eyes at least, the thesis of monogenesis (and, ultimately, the category of race), which he shared with virtually every naturalist of his time, from Linnaeus to Buffon, Blumenbach, Cuvier, and Camper, follows from the use of reason in natural science and is, as such, susceptible to being verified empirically. The "determination" of the concept of race as "the classificatory difference of the animals of one and the same phylum insofar as this difference is unfailingly hereditary" (Ak 8: 100) is, in the case of human beings, verifiable through miscegenation: if the result of intermixing is half-breed, then we can conjecture that each parent belongs to a different race. For Kant, the concept of race is a necessary outcome of the unacceptable theory of polygenesis, and the only alternative to the idea of different human species. Kant also agreed with contemporary proponents of monogenesis in attributing the existence of the different classes or races to the process of degeneration from the primordial type of the human species. The process in question was itself thought to be the result of environmental differences and the influences of climate, diet, and mode of life on hereditary traits.

How, then, does Kant justify the need for the concept of race? How does he derive the idea of race from the idea of species? Following Buffon, Kant defines a species as the ability to produce fertile offspring, and understands

it as a *temporal* reality.¹⁰⁰ How, in other words, do we arrive at “the division of the human species into visibly different classes,” a division that is itself “natural” (Ak 8: 93) and genealogical, rather than merely “logical” and morphological, as Linnaean taxonomy claims? This specific methodological claim is crucial, as it shows very clearly how, in the quest for an adequate taxonomy, Kant sides with Buffon’s natural history rather than with Linnaeus’s logical nomenclature. This doesn’t mean that such classes or races are directly or immediately visible, or that their visibility is absolutely straightforward. At the same time, visibility is itself an epistemic criterion, the sign that a further classification beyond that of species is called for.¹⁰¹ What better, more obvious criterion, in that respect, than the visible surface, the skin color, despite the fact that “a difference in skin colour might appear very insignificant to some” (Ak 8:93)? Kant’s identification of the *visibility* of race with skin color is as quick as it is problematic. It’s what allows him to identify the four races already mentioned (Whites, yellow Indians, Negroes, and copper-red Americans). Race, expressed as skin color, is the “classificatory difference” within the human species required better to understand the evolution of that species. But what kind of classification does it correspond to? Where does the power of difference lie? As we’ll see, while clearly not Linnaean (that is, descriptive and based on morphological resemblances and differences between organisms), it’s not entirely genealogical or historical either.

In his early work on physical geography as well as his 1775 essay on race, Kant had already distinguished between two divisions and taxonomies. On the one hand, the “natural division” of natural historians (and of Buffon in particular), into species and kinds or genera and species (*Gattungen und Arten*), is based on the historical study of the material *relations* between organisms, and is rooted in the understanding (*Verstand*). It follows the genetic or phyletic division of real, *physical* nature. The “school division” of Linnaean taxonomy, on the other hand, is based on the morphological *resemblances* (*Ähnlichkeiten*) between fully formed organisms, and amounts to a *logical* system of nature concerned with classes (*Klassen*). It is an *arbitrary* product of reason, useful for our memory. The first is *narrative*, the second *descriptive*.¹⁰² Classes divide the animals according to resemblances (*Ähnlichkeiten*), that is, by looking for similarities and dissimilarities between them.¹⁰³ As such, they would seem to be a matter of judgment—that is, as we recall from the *Anthropology*, of the ability to establish *subtle* differences that reveal *acumen* (and many of Kant’s own remarks on cultures and peoples are meant to illustrate such a virtuous use of the faculty of judgment). This is how Kant sums it up in the 1785 essay on race:

Initially, when looking only for characters of comparison (in terms of similarity or dissimilarity), one obtains *classes* of creatures under a species. If one looks further to their phyletic origin [to their *Stamm*, their *stem* or *souche*, as Buffon calls it], then it must become apparent whether those classes are so many different *kinds* or only *races*. The wolf, the fox, the jackal, the hyena and the house dog are so many classes of four-footed animals. If one assumes that each one of them required a special phyletic origin, then they are so many kinds. However, if one concedes that they also could have originated from one phylum, then they are only races of the latter. In **natural history** (which is concerned only with generation and phyletic origination) *kind* [*Gattung*] and *species* [*Art*] are not distinguished as such. This distinction occurs solely in the **description of nature**, in which only the comparison of marks matters.¹⁰⁴

In classical, Linnaean taxonomy, biological categories tended to be created by observing similarities (or technically, homologies) among the anatomical parts of fully formed or individuated organisms. To the extent that this ignores the process of individuation that generates these organisms, these essentially *static* classifications (say, the classification as four-footed animals of foxes, wolves, sloths, etc.) conceal the dynamic and virtual horizon from which they unfold. So long as we classify differences by identifying a common trait that allows us to group beings within an identity of resemblance, we remain under the authority of a purely empirical conception of "class" or "kind," one that can never make the move from actual, already individuated systems to their virtual field of individuation. By contrast, natural historians such as Buffon adopted a more dynamic, genealogical approach, which was strengthened and transformed with the birth of modern, Darwinian biology, and more recently still with recent developments in nonlinear dynamics and far-from-equilibrium embryology. A good example of this, which I have already mentioned, is the *tetrapod limb*. This is a structure that can take many divergent forms, ranging from the bird wing, to the single-digit limb in the horse, to the human hand and its opposed thumb. Now, it is hard, if not impossible, to define this structure by looking at the properties common to the various fully grown life-forms (in other words, by concentrating on homologies at the level of the final product). Focusing instead on the embryological *processes* that produce this structure allows the creation of a more satisfactory classification. In the words of one commentator, this new approach "sees limb homology as emerging from a common *process* (asymmetric, branching and segmenting), rather than as a precisely repeated archetypal pattern."¹⁰⁵ One and the same "virtual limb"

unfolds through different intensive sequences, some blocking the occurrence of particular bifurcations (those leading to the branching out of digits, for example), some enabling a full series to occur, resulting in very different final products.

For Kant, the taxonomic concept of class belongs therefore in a Linnaean, logical *system of nature*, whereas those of *Gattung*, *Art*, and *Rasse* belong in a genealogical *narrative of nature*, such as Buffon's *Histoire naturelle*. And it would appear that Kant's technical uses of *Rasse*, *Stamm*, and *Abartung* were derived from Buffon and the concepts of *race*, *souche*, and *dégénération*. Furthermore, Kant follows the *meaning* of Buffon's own concept of race, most clearly defined in his late *Époques de la nature* (1778). Races in each species of animals, Buffon claims, "are only constant varieties which perpetuate themselves by generation."¹⁰⁶ A variety in this technical sense is precisely not equivalent to the accidental "variant" of Linnaeus, which reveals only an inconstancy of character. Rather, it designates "a subordinate historical lineage within a 'real and physical' species, produced by degenerative change in response to environmental conditions."¹⁰⁷ Faced with different environmental conditions, such as climate and food, species begin to develop variants, which eventually solidify into varieties of the species.¹⁰⁸ Kant will adopt this conception of race as hereditary variation: for him the concept applies only to an identical phylum, or to what is hereditary in an animal species. This is what distinguishes it from the concept of kind.

But Kant departs from Buffon, and thus from a purely genealogical account of organized nature, on at least one crucial point. The point in question goes to the very heart of how Kant understands organization itself, by which we should understand the possibility of *thinking* a coherent concept of organization in the (*necessary*, according to Kant) absence of a purely naturalistic one. In his writings on race from the 1780s and 1790s, illuminated by the "critical" apparatus, Kant argues that the concept of race is neither strictly genealogical nor scholastic, but *teleological*. To be more precise: while he continues to subscribe to the natural-historical idea of race as hereditary variation, he understands the *reason* behind such a variation to lie in the essence of organized nature as suitability or adaptability in the face of varying, contingent geographical conditions. In other words, and as we'll see in greater detail, the "mature" Kant believes it is impossible to make sense of evolution, and thus of race, without appealing to the organizing concept of purposiveness: the very idea of organization requires the concept of purposiveness, and in the final instance purposiveness leads to rationality in a theoretical as well as a practical sense. This concept is a requirement of reason in its attempt to know nature, but one that can't be attributed

to nature itself. While in the end closer to Buffon than to Linnaeus, Kant's position opens up something like a third way. Strictly speaking, it is neither genealogical nor logical, and reducible neither to *Naturgeschichte* nor to *Naturbeschreibung*. Rather, it is a matter of judgment, and teleological judgment in particular.

At this point, and before delving deeper into the role of teleological judgment in Kant's views on race, we need to recall the specificity of the pedagogical role and value he attributes to anthropology and geography in the introduction to his lectures on physical geography. Those disciplines, he claims, are useful inasmuch as they generate a kind of pragmatic knowledge that can guide us in our moral and practical life. As such, they are a propaedeutic in relation to both science and life (*Ak* 9: 157). Pragmatic knowledge, whether of nature or human beings, whether as geography or anthropology, is characterized by the fact that it treats phenomena from a *cosmological* point of view—that is, from the standpoint of their end or purpose. It differs from speculative knowledge, which is strictly physical and physiological. It would seem, then, that the concept of race has a foot in both pragmatic and (at least) natural knowledge. *Methodologically*, it is narrative (or historical) as well as descriptive (or geographical); temporal as well as spatial; phylogenetic as well as climatic. *Pedagogically*, it is speculative as well as pragmatic (or propaedeutic): one can arrive at speculative, physical knowledge by starting with visible differences in skin color. As such, race reveals the possibility of unifying those fields and methods. In fact, it *demand*s such a unity, and thus demonstrates further the demand of a unified reason, or of reason as spanning the speculative and the pragmatic, the theoretical and the practical. This unity is provided by teleological judgment.

3. Race from a Teleological Perspective

Let me now approach the role of teleological judgment in Kant's theory of race by returning to the question with which I began: from what standpoint and on the basis of what authority does "the division of the human species into visibly different classes" become necessary?¹⁰⁹ Why not limit natural classification to the level of the human species and claim that all further differences internal to it are merely cultural? Kant's answer, it seems, is that this further classification is the only way to account for differences that seem to be so clearly *visible*, so deeply rooted, and so irreversible that they could not be the product of mere chance. They can only be indication, if not proof, of the suitability and adaptability of the human species to different geographical (and specifically climatic) conditions, which activate certain

"germs" contained within the species and suppress others. Kant recognizes that we can identify differences within social groups and races—differences he himself "describes" in his anthropology—and that those differences or characteristics are passed on from one generation to the next. If they can be described as "hereditary," it is in a very loose sense, as they are not *unfailingly* so. Race, on the other hand, as expressed by skin color, is unfailingly and universally hereditary, and is in fact the only difference of its kind. But if it is hereditary, it means that it can't be "the effect of another cause than that of the germs and predispositions lying in the species itself."¹¹⁰ What accounts for the emergence of those differences, visible in—yet not reducible to—skin color is a set of external and contingent circumstances, which Kant defines as "climatic." Those external forces activate certain germs, and not others, according to a principle of *suitability* that defines the character and traits of each phylum: "For nature has originally given each phylum its character in relation to its climate and in order to be suitable for the latter. Thus the organization of one phylum has an entirely different end from that of the other" (*Ak* 8: 98).

This "purposiveness," he adds a few pages later, "can be demonstrated nowhere so clearly as in the *Negro race*" (*Ak* 8: 103), and the Negro skin in particular. Kant defines the skin as "that great instrument for the secretion of all that is supposed to be removed from the blood" (*Ak* 8: 170). Of course, we know this characterization of the skin to be wholly inadequate and misled. It is based on a fanciful conception of the relation of the skin to the body's blood, which draws on the theory of the phlogiston, a substance that Georg Ernst Stahl (1659–1734) had identified as the only one in nature capable of combustion. According to this theory, combustion is merely the separation of phlogiston from bodies containing large or small quantities of that substance. As T. Kuhn explains, the phlogiston theory accounted for a large number of physical and chemical phenomena: it explained, among other things, "why bodies burned—they were rich in phlogiston—and why metals had more properties in common than did their ores."¹¹¹ But it also explained the phenomenon of sweating and, by extension, skin color.¹¹² As Suman Seth notes, this "explanation" regarding the origin of sweating and the color and smell of the black skin was also widespread in the English-speaking scientific community.¹¹³ But, in a series of papers and works published between 1777 and 1783 which laid the foundations of modern chemistry, Lavoisier disproved the theory of phlogiston by discovering oxygen and revealing it as the source of combustion. Despite Lavoisier's work, which was written exactly when Kant was developing his scientific views on race and with which Kant was familiar, Kant held on to his phlogistic

theory of skin color, which reveals the extent to which the concept of race was central to his philosophical anthropology and geography. Lavoisier's "discovery" of oxygen had already discredited Kant's theory by the time he was writing the following:

For one knows now that the human blood becomes black (as can be seen at the underside of a blood cake) merely by being overloaded with phlogiston. Now already the strong odor of the Negroes, which cannot be helped through any cleanliness, gives causes for conjecturing that their skin removes much *phlogiston* from the blood and that nature must have organized this skin so that the blood could *dephlogistize itself* in them through the skin in far greater measure than happens in us, where that is for the most part the task of the lungs. Yet the true Negroes live in regions in which the air is so phlogistized through thick forests and swamp-covered regions, that it is, according to Lind's report, deadly peril for the English sailors to navigate up the *Gambian River* even for one day in order to buy meat there. Thus it was an arrangement very wisely made by Nature to organize their skin such that the blood, since it does by far sufficiently remove enough phlogiston through the lungs, could dephlogistize itself much more strongly through the skin than is the case with us. It thus had to transport a lot of phlogiston into the end of the arteries, thereby becoming overloaded with it in this location, that is, under the skin itself, and so shine through black, although it is still red in the interior of the body. (Ak 8:103)

But more important still, and intimately bound up with the physical argument, is Kant's teleological argument, revealed in expressions such as "nature must have organised this skin," or "an arrangement very wisely made by Nature." How does Kant arrive at the principle of purposiveness?

While perhaps ultimately illusory and (contrary to what Kant claimed) not necessary or inevitable, teleology as such does not inevitably lead to the concept of race. Herder's own version of teleology, rooted in the idea of an organic force of infinite plasticity, is a good example. In 1785, Kant wrote a very critical, even vicious review of Parts 1 and 2 of Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, in which he defended his use of the concept of race.¹¹⁴ The second part of Herder's book contains a chapter with the heading "In all the different forms in which the human race [*Menschengeschlecht*] appears on earth, it is nonetheless one and the same human species [*Menschengattung*]." In his book, Herder takes issue with Kant's essay of 1775, and with the very concept of race (*Rasse*): human varieties are not *natural* kinds, or separate races. They are a matter not for "a systematic

natural history," but for "a physico-geographical history" of humanity (*Ak* 6: 256). Furthermore, Herder calls on his fellow Europeans to treat non-Europeans humanely: "the American and the Negro" are your brothers; "therefore, you must not oppress or kill or rob them: for they are human beings, as you are."¹¹⁵ Colors are all shades within a human continuum (*Ak* 6: 256), with no fixed boundaries between them. This, however, should not conceal Herder's remarks on the physical appearance of various peoples, his idea of (European) beauty of outer form as a sign of inner perfection and, on those grounds, his dismissive attitude toward "Asian peoples" (*Ak* 6: 216–19) and "Negroes" (*Ak* 6: 277). Furthermore, Herder posits a living, "genetic force" (*genetische Kraft*), which he believes to be innate and organic, as the cause of inherited changes (*Ak* 6: 275), and claims that, in addition to environmental factors, heredity also plays a role in differences of culture. Like Kant, then, he believes that acquired characteristics can eventually become hereditary, and that they reveal different cognitive abilities. Furthermore, like Kant, Buffon, Forster, and Blumenbach, he believes that "the character of 'Negroes' is a result of their adaptation in the African climate. But only Kant's account includes a list of innate vices, without any compensating virtues."¹¹⁶

What, then, is so specific about Kantian teleology that it requires the concept of race, and especially one that is so highly normative? The answer to that question is paradoxical, if not shocking: it is Kant's restrictive and specifically *moral* conception of life. To put it slightly differently: Kant's concept of race, and his racism in particular, is a function of his highly exclusive, anti-materialist conception of life and his moral perfectionism. In the absence of a true science of life, or a biology, which we mustn't identify with the natural history of the seventeenth and eighteenth century, Kant develops a concept of life that is anorganic and non-naturalistic. Let me explain. Kant defines life as "the faculty of a being to act in accordance with laws of the faculty of desire," and the faculty in question as "a being's faculty to be by means of its representations the cause of the objects of these representations."¹¹⁷ This means that Kant restricts the concept of life to those beings that produce effects according to intentions—which in turn means that "it is illegitimate to extend 'life' or any kind of intentional activity to nature."¹¹⁸ Strictly speaking, then, the transposition of final or free causality to nature is illegitimate, because it would conflate the realm of nature and that of freedom, mechanical causality and free causality (which is what Spinoza does, much to Kant's discontent). As a result, Kant is being very cautious, and might appear to tiptoe around the problem when, in the *Critique of Judgment*, he suggests that, given nature's ability to produce organisms, and thus

beings that *seem* to be governed by ideas, we could call nature an “analogue of life.”¹¹⁹ Yet even this terminology is problematic, insofar as “it attributes to matter either life or an artistic soul, both of which conflict with its nature.”¹²⁰ Nature, for Kant, is pure, mechanical causality, and nothing but matter. This means that “organized beings,” and the idea of organization itself, cannot be attributed to nature alone. At the same time, nature cannot be judged to have produced them according to ideas, since, for Kant, ideas are always and necessarily of *reason*. Contrary to what Herder believes, and as Spinoza had understood, strict naturalism and materialism are therefore incompatible with purposiveness.¹²¹

The challenge Kant faces, then, is to account for the disturbing diversity of nature while rejecting the two hypotheses of *living* matter and a *blindly* purposive cause (such as Herder’s “organic force” and “power of nature”). How, if at all, can the self-generative causality of organisms be distinguished from the mechanistic causality of inorganic matter? In his third and final essay on race, published two years before the third *Critique*, Kant expresses doubts about the maturity of natural history as a science. While recognizing it as “a science of its own,” he also sees it as one that “for now (*and maybe forever*) is realizable more in silhouette than in deed (and in which for most questions a *vacat* is likely to be found).”¹²² The reason natural history might remain in such an incomplete, rough state has to do with the limits of reason itself (*Ak* 8: 162). So while Kant believes in natural history as a science, he does not believe in it as a purely *physical* science, and one that could provide the key to the mystery of the origin of species and organized systems. Consequently, in the absence of a genuine science of origins, the possibility of which Kant even doubts, the only legitimate alternative to think organized nature—and this means a system “in which everything is mutually related to each other as end and means” (*Ak* 8: 179)—is a science of ends. In other words, teleology *supplements* natural history and genealogy. It is because “the physical first origin of organic beings remains unfathomable to . . . human reason in general” that the “teleological mode of explanation” is necessary (*Ak* 8: 169). And while Kant deems the precedence of the “theoretical-speculative investigation” over any other as unquestionable, and secured *de jure*, other principles, including especially teleology, need to be applied if and when “sources of theoretical cognition are not sufficient” (*Ak* 8: 160). So, in the (according to him permanent) absence of a true science of the origin of living organisms—in the absence, that is, of a science of the origin and evolution of species—Kant posits purposiveness not as an actual process present within nature, but as a *rule* by which we judge it, and an indispensable component of cognition: as a necessary supplement

of thought in general, and in particular of natural history as the science that classifies living beings according to their similarities and dissimilarities. In Lord's words: "With the power of judgement, Kant demonstrates that nature's infinite diversity does not demand explanation through a teleologically directed organic force of infinite plasticity, but instead reveals the cognitive necessity of non-naturalistic systems of explanation."¹²³ The important word here is "cognitive": the remarkable heterogeneity of nature points to the irreducibility of our cognitive faculties to nature; it reveals a need for what is more than natural, one that is no longer only rational, as Kant had assumed in the first two *Critiques*, but also *cognitive*. The aim of the second half of the third *Critique*, the Critique of Teleological Judgment, is precisely to show that organic nature *necessarily* leads us to ideas of final causes and a transcendent suprasensible substrate, and that this conclusion is necessary not only for our rational *thinking* about nature, but also for our *cognition* of nature: "The principle of purposiveness can only be effective at the level of empirical judgement if a natural product is regarded as not having been necessitated through natural laws."¹²⁴ The contingency of such a product in respect of these laws is crucial. Kant himself is very careful in the way in which he connects it with the possibility of purposiveness:

That very contingency of the thing's form is a basis for regarding the product *as if* it had come about through a causality that only reason can have. Such a causality *would be* the ability to act according to purposes (i.e. a will), and in presenting an object as possible only through such an ability we would be presenting it as possible only as a purpose. (*Ak* 5: 370, my emphasis)

Equally misleading as upholding contingency in nature, therefore, is positing an intelligent purposive cause wholly separate from nature. Purposiveness must be neither "blind" nor "natural."

Kant's point, rather, is that we can't make sense of the immanent causality of organisms without a concept of final causes, which exceeds a wholly naturalistic or physical explanation: our representation of the tree is thought to be the final cause (or purpose) of the tree's generation, in the same way that the representation of money is understood to be the final cause (or purpose) of the construction of the house. We *necessarily* judge the tree's existence as having come about through an idea, thereby involving something that is outside the laws of nature and not necessitated by those laws.¹²⁵ Unlike the work of art, however, the organism is not brought about through an idea given from elsewhere. Instead, it produces *itself* in such a way that we judge that it *could* have been caused by an idea. It is a whole, the unity of

which comes about through its parts being reciprocally cause and effect of its form, and this in such a way that the idea of the whole, if present "in a being possessing the causality in terms of concepts that would be adequate for such a product," could be its final cause (*Ak* 5: 373). In other words, and still according to Lord, "the parts of a natural purpose must be understood to *produce* one another reciprocally: each part is the efficient cause and effect of the existence of every other part."¹²⁶ And as Kant says, it is only when meeting that condition that a product is "both an *organized* and a *self-organizing* being, which therefore can be called a natural purpose" (*Ak* 5: 374). Or: "*An organized product of nature is one in which everything is a purpose and reciprocally also a means.* In such a product nothing is gratuitous, purposeless, or to be attributed to a blind natural mechanism" (*Ak* 5: 376).

The conclusion Kant draws is that while we assume we can explain the organism's reciprocal efficient causality in terms of natural laws, we cannot *cognize* it empirically without a concept of final causes (*Ak* 5: 383). This is not to say that Kant attributes purposiveness to nature itself. In fact, he is very clear about the fact that purposiveness is not a *constitutive* concept of understanding or reason, only a *regulative* one. *Constitutively*, we are required to understand nature in terms of mechanistic laws alone. This means that we cannot determinatively *judge* organized beings to be natural purposes, since strictly speaking "the organisation of nature has nothing analogous to any causality known to us" and is not explicable in terms of our a priori concept of nature (*Ak* 5: 375). However, Lord goes on to argue, we do legitimately use a "remote analogy" with our own purposive causality to guide over our empirical investigation. In regulating reflective judgment, the principle of purposiveness allows us to consider natural things in terms of a law-governed and unified order beyond that of mechanistic causation (*Ak* 5: 379). And this allows us to judge nature in terms of its particular empirical laws forming an intrinsically purposive system. As Kant puts it: "Everything in the world is good for something or other; nothing in it is gratuitous; and the example that nature offers us in its organic products justifies us, indeed calls upon us, to expect nothing from it and its laws except what is purposive in the whole" (*Ak* 5: 379).

Organized matter is specific in that it calls for a natural science guided by both mechanism and teleology. On the one hand, as "objects in general," organized beings are determined by a priori laws of nature as set out in the *Transcendental Analytic* of the first Critique. On the other hand, as material bodies, they are determined by the laws of matter specified in the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. These also regulate our empirical investigations. Kant's point, however, is that organisms cannot be understood

strictly as material bodies, because we *judge* their intrinsic form to include something that is not necessitated by a priori laws. Their self-organization appears contingent with respect to the laws of nature and matter. This, in turn, means that reflective judgment needs an additional maxim, or a reflective supplement, to cognize and systematize them.¹²⁷ And it is precisely as a result of this move, and the specific way in which he sets up the problem of organized nature, and human life in particular, that Kant finds himself committed to a scientific and highly normative concept of race. I don't believe Kant constructed his theoretical edifice to support his racism; I believe his theoretical approach to the question of organization, of natural history in relation to geography, and his theory of the human being's theoretical and practical faculties generate his stupid and harmful remarks about race, sexual difference, and the merits and vices of peoples across space and time.

The Kantian move is precisely the one Darwin will denounce as illegitimate and illusory when formulating his idea of evolution through natural selection. The concept of end is in no way necessary to think organized nature. If anything, the additional "maxim" of reason is an obstacle to unlocking the mystery of its mechanism, and thinking nature *genetically*. Darwin's theory invites philosophers to reinvent their philosophical concepts, and to shift the emphasis of metaphysics itself from a transcendental to a genetic approach. It's an approach that doesn't ignore the irreversibility or "arrow" of time (and would require the tools of thermodynamics to do so), yet manages to account for the creation of order and the transmission of hereditary traits without recourse to the kingdom of ends. It puts forward the possibility—the validity of which was demonstrated through the discovery and manipulation of DNA, advances in embryology and paleontology, and the emergence of the field known as evolutionary developmental biology ("evo devo")—of a purely immanent, natural causality, irreducible to (yet entirely compatible with) the laws of mechanics. It is the same gene that is at the origin of the development of the human eye and the bug eye (a remarkable discovery that shattered previous conceptions of their origin), and, more surprisingly still, the same gene that is critical to building limbs in human beings and fruit flies (and, more broadly still, anything that sticks out of a body: antennae, legs, arms, horns, etc.).¹²⁸ It is the same gene, and its mutations over thousands of years, which accounts for the difference in skin color between human beings.

On a more strictly philosophical level, Spinoza denounced the same move in the Appendix to Part I of the *Ethics*: "All the prejudices [*praeiudicia*] I here undertake to expose depend on this one: that men commonly suppose that all natural things act, as men do, on account of an end." In the same way that

human beings, ignorant of the true causes of things, believe that their actions are intentional, purposive, and freely willed, they think that “eyes are for seeing, teeth for chewing, plants and animals for food, the sun for light, the sea for supporting fish.” In other words, since every finite mode perceives the world from its own point of view, or the point of view of its own advantage, human beings tend to judge natural things as if they were naturally produced to fulfill human ends. As Lord puts it, it is therefore entirely understandable, unavoidable, and even useful that we see nature in terms of its suitability for human advantage, and for human knowledge in particular; but it is wrong to *imagine* that nature truly is organized in terms of purposes or directed toward our cognitive needs.¹²⁹ We only *imagine* that nature is purposive. Unlike Kant, who believed that we could not *think* organized nature in any way other than teleological, Spinoza believes that as we understand the efficient causes of nature more clearly and rationally—causes that, today, in light of the physics of dissipative systems, nonlinear dynamics and the creation of order, can no longer simply be labeled as straightforwardly mechanistic—we leave the *fiction* of final causes behind. The point here is that while our concept of causality can be refined and expanded to include complex and especially organic systems, it cannot be allowed to reintroduce the concept of purpose. True, we tend to *judge* natural objects as if they were independent of natural causality and the expression of purposiveness. But where Kant sees this judgment as legitimate and necessary, Spinoza sees it as an illusion, and the product of our limited understanding: it is one of those illusions, or perhaps stupidities, that we generate spontaneously. Where Kant sees purposiveness not as an actual instrument of knowledge, but as an idea needed to regulate judgment in the (necessary) absence of a possible knowledge of nature outside mechanical causality, Spinoza attributes this move to a failure of thought itself and an anthropocentric projection of the mechanisms of nature, which turn it upside down.¹³⁰ Nietzsche agrees:

Let us even beware of believing that the world is a machine: it is certainly not constructed for one purpose. . . . Let us beware of attributing to it heartlessness and unreason or their opposites: it is neither perfect nor beautiful, nor noble, nor does it wish to become any of these things. . . . Let us beware of saying that there laws in nature. There are only necessities: there is nobody who commands, nobody who obeys, nobody who trespasses. . . .¹³¹

The principle of purposiveness as governing our understanding of nature also applies to our understanding of history, and the concept of race applies to both. As I began by saying, and as paradoxical (if not shocking) as this

may seem, Kant's theory of race is underpinned by his philosophy of history, culture, and ultimately morality, as much as by his philosophy of nature. For Kant, the purpose of nature is the creation of culture and (out of culture) morality. Purposiveness commits him to a progressive (and stupid) view of history as a whole, whether natural or human. History, he claims, is the story of our "steps from crudity towards culture";¹³² it is "nothing other than the transition from the crudity of a merely animal creature into humanity, from the go-cart of instinct to the guidance of reason—in a word, from the guardianship of nature into the condition of freedom."¹³³ Culture, Kant writes in the third Critique, is "the production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general" (*Ak* 5: 431). It is then divided into the aptitude to make use of the products of nature for one's ends (the culture of skill) and the ability to liberate the will "from the despotism of desires" (the culture of training, discipline) (*Ak* 5: 432).

To be sure, progress in Kant, like purposiveness in nature, is not a metaphysical principle operating in history, or a general law of nature. It is not even an empirically verifiable fact. Rather, it is an a priori principle we are compelled to use in order to structure a historical narrative. It is a "regulative idea" that serves "as a guiding thread for exhibiting an otherwise planless aggregate of human action, at least in the large, of a system."¹³⁴ This means that while progress does not designate an objective reality, it isn't a mere fiction either. Rather, it provides "an indispensable standard for reason."¹³⁵ Such a standard is so demanding and indispensable that, in the face of what would seem to be contradictory evidence—human desire for power and domination, competition, self-interest, endless wars, et cetera—Kant embraces such vicious inclinations as indicative of a grander plan and hidden design. He turns them into the "unsociable sociability" necessary for the advent of a peaceful order and the realization of the kingdom of ends. His version of the invisible hand reads like this:

Thanks be to nature, therefore, for the incompatibility, for the spiteful competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess or even to dominate! For without them all the excellent natural dispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped.¹³⁶

Such is the reason why, however "happy" and "tranquil" Tahitians may have been as a people, they were destined to be "civilized":

Does the author [Herder] really mean that if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti, never visited by more cultured nations, had been destined to live for

thousands of centuries in their tranquil indolence, one could give a satisfying answer to the question why they exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good to have this island populated with happy sheep and cattle as with human beings who are happy merely enjoying themselves?¹³⁷

As we know, Kant didn't think much of happiness, and even less of indolence. To him they are pathological states that get in the way of our Lutheran destiny and moral duty. Although happiness is an idea we can never quite give up on, it can't possibly be considered as a final cause of reason, or the purpose of life on earth. It is therefore our moral duty to make those (happy) people less happy, and more moral and enterprising. Contrary to what Herder believes, the principle that consists in saying "the human being is an animal who has need of a master and expects from this master, or from their connection, the good fortune of their final vocation" is the opposite of "evil."¹³⁸ It is in fact the moral principle that allows for the realization of their potential as rational, moral agents.

The apparent paradox is that while seeing nature as oriented toward human history as toward its own end, and history as directed toward reason and morality, Kant ends up seeing certain peoples and cultures as essentially deprived of both, thus forcing the question of their purpose. In fact, there is nothing paradoxical in what Kant says, and his remarks on Tahitians, Negroes, or Americans are perfectly consistent with, and in fact the consequence of, his (teleological) views on nature, history, and morality: inasmuch as the norm by which progress is measured is itself white, male, and European (or "universal"), anything that does not conform to the norm will be seen as unworthy, backward, degenerate, abnormal, et cetera. His racism is a function of his teleology and his particular strand of humanism. As we know, the same logic applied to the construction of the "normal" sexual type in the psychiatry, psychopathology, and science of sexuality of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other words, as soon as we ask the (stupid) question "What is the *purpose* of the Tahitians, the West Africans, or the British?" we end up with the baffling Kantian answer. Purpose, as Spinoza says, can be asked in relation to man-made things (from tools to political constitutions), but that's about it. As soon as we extend it to anything else (nature, the species, etc.), we expose ourselves to ridicule. We need to join Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Darwin in condemning the illusion and stupidity of purposiveness, the *vanity* that consists in seeing "man" (and the white man in particular) as "the great secret objective of animal evolution. Man is absolutely not the crown of creation: every creature stand beside him at the same stage of perfection."¹³⁹

Conclusion

I hope to have demonstrated that the Kantian solution to the question regarding the possibility of thinking, and even knowing organized nature in its extraordinary diversity, yet equally remarkable ability to follow rules—a solution, he claims, which lies neither in physical (mechanical) nor free causality, but in final causality—leads Kant to a number of stupid and harmful claims about race. Race is a stupid concept because it stems from a problem that is badly posed. In the same way that Lavoisier completely transformed chemistry by seeing the problem of combustion differently and discovering oxygen, the problem of organized nature was revolutionized with advances in thermodynamics, and the second law of thermodynamics in particular, which stipulates that, in the long term, all differences of intensity tend to disappear, and disorder triumphs. How then can we account for the creation of order? How can we account for the fact that, all around us, it is not entropy, but the extraordinary surge toward order that seems to rule? How can we explain the fact that, in the case of life and living organisms, the action of the environment, far from mixing and merging hereditary differences, *selects* them? How can we account for the fact that nature, which seems to be governed by chance alone in the case of the movement of molecules in a box, takes the form of Maxwell's demon in the case of natural selection? Kant poses the *problem* this way: Given that nature, as an object, can't be known outside mechanical causality, we should *think* of organization on the basis of the only other causality available and known to us—namely, purposiveness. What causality other than that of ends do we have at our disposal? Since mechanical genealogy can't provide us with a satisfactory explanation for the diversity and evolution of organized nature, teleology seems to be the only alternative. What Kant can't contemplate are concepts such as emergence, evolution through natural selection, or individuation; at the same time, and perhaps unsurprisingly, what he can't fathom is a *genetic* image of philosophy, by which I mean one that would be defined not by the investigation of the conditions of possibility of knowledge in general, but by its actual conditions of emergence: genesis, emergence, and, more generally, dynamic thought is a blind spot for Kant. In that context, "race" becomes the missing link between mechanical and teleological causality, the smoking gun that reveals the existence of natural purposiveness or adaptability, evidence that we can think differences and classes within species, that there is order and hierarchy within the human species. Similarly, in his explanation of "skin colour," Kant needs to rely on a baroque and highly speculative use of the substance then "known" as phlogiston. Today, skin

color is thought within the paradigm of genetic mutation, and as a function of the particular pigment known as melanin, the production of which, scientists believe, involves more than one hundred genes but is controlled by at least six genes (thus pheomelanin is red to yellow in color, while eumelanin is brown to black). The whiteness of European (and other) skin is itself due to a genetic mutation that cuts short the production of melanin. By adding the missing gene, known as SLC24A5, to the golden variant of the zebra fish, scientists were able to restore the darker color of the fish's "wild" cousin.¹⁴⁰ As to the highly complex and to this day much-debated question of why those mutations come about, the answer lies with evolutionary biology, and therefore with natural selection. In the long term, and as a result of pressures of various kinds, advantages tend to persist while disadvantages tend to disappear. Thus, in the sun-saturated latitudes of Africa, where the human species originated, human skin adapted to have a higher melanin production threshold and produce more eumelanin, thus minimizing the risk of melanoma and passing on this advantage to future generations. This was no longer an advantage when populations started moving north, in sun-deprived latitudes. More exposure to the sun was required, as ultraviolet rays are essential to the production of vitamin D and the absorption of vital minerals, which contribute to bone strength and general health. This new set of circumstances *facilitated* the *selection* of a genetic mutation of the skin. But it did not *cause* that mutation, either mechanically or finally. All of this is to say: skin color is a function of light exposure and absorption, and nothing else. It is one of many features of the human species that demonstrates its adaptability (in this case, to UV light). To attempt to derive character traits from such a specific feature, and even a class or race, is, from a scientific standpoint, entirely illegitimate, and an illusion of rationality. It is a *stupid* move, albeit one that is inseparable from a cultural, institutional context that involves relations of power—of invasion, domination, exploitation, expropriation, subjection, and exclusion—and the promotion of particular interests, with which, I would claim, stupidity is always bound up. The stupidity of the move consists precisely in having translated natural features into cultural ones, in having subordinated the plane of nature (or immanence) to that of ends (or transcendence). It consists in having allowed a system of power based on white male domination to penetrate its thought to the core. It consists in a failure of thought, and especially of critique.

Kant's own stupidity and stupid claims about nations, peoples, and races aren't attributable to a deficiency or failure of judgment, to dim-wittedness, foolishness, or silliness. They can be attributed to his own episteme—that

is, to the conceptual and analytic grid through which something resembling what we today call life, and human life in particular as a species, is understood. The episteme in question is natural history. It consists, as we saw, and as Foucault made clear, in a certain space, in which phenomena acquire a certain kind of visibility, the kind that leads to classification based on fully visible traits. The episteme in question is doubly visible, then, in that it makes nature visible qua history, but limits that history to its own visibility—that is, to its actualization in fully formed organisms. But we also saw how Kant introduces the concept of purposiveness, and the idea of teleological judgment, as necessary supplements to that science's incompleteness: necessary because the incompleteness in question is itself the product of the limits of human reason. In other words, I don't think it's possible entirely to subsume what Kant has to say about organized nature, and even about races, under the category of natural history. The truly philosophical moment consists in the construction of teleological judgment as *a priori* (and therefore as necessary) in our understanding and appreciation of nature. It consists in the claim regarding the inevitability of purposiveness when thinking about nature, and thus the inevitability of the concepts of culture, history, and morality in the very thinking of nature. If it is still natural history, then, it's in the sense of a science not of origins, but of ends; not as genealogy, but as teleology. And my claim has been that Kant's own stupidity, and his stupid claims regarding nations, peoples, and races were produced within that space of thought, at the intersection of genealogy and teleology, of natural history and moral philosophy, of visibility and invisibility (or what is otherwise than visible). It's not a lack of judgment, but a specific understanding of judgment, that led him to stupidity.

Du Bois's approach to the problem of race, and to problematization as such, is strikingly different from Kant's. *Dusk of Dawn* presents itself as an autobiography, but of a particular kind.¹⁴¹ For Du Bois immediately identifies his life (he was seventy-two years old at the time), and everything he has to say about it, with "a Problem." Living, for him, coincided with the "strange experience" of "being a problem."¹⁴² The "race problem"—for that is what is at stake—is not just any problem, but "the problem of the twentieth century,"¹⁴³ "the central problem of the greatest of the world's democracies," and therefore "the Problem of the future world."¹⁴⁴ It is the thread running through the entire book. It is "a matter of segregation, of hindrance and inhibitions"—of the "natural movement, expression and development of souls."¹⁴⁵ It is a system in which "organized groups of men by monopoly of economic and physical power, legal enactment and physical training are limiting with determination and unflagging zeal the development of other

groups."¹⁴⁶ The "color line" cuts through the class divide, and racial patterns in America run deeper than its economic divisions, rendering labor struggles for equality and opportunity more difficult, weakening the power of (white *and* nonwhite) workers.¹⁴⁷ Another name Du Bois uses for the race problem is "Empire," by which he means "the domination of white Europe over Africa and yellow Asia, through political power built on the economic control of labor, income and ideas."¹⁴⁸ Contrary to what many (including Kant) have tried to show, this problem or system cannot be grounded in, or justified by, a "scientific definition of race."¹⁴⁹ Whether at Harvard or in Berlin, Du Bois was confronted with proofs and arguments concerning the inferiority of the Black race, and the superiority of the white race. The scientific concept of race, Du Bois argues, confirming the claim I have been making, is not just misled. It is stupid and wicked. He recounts how, very early on in his teaching career, he set out to show how "the world was thinking wrong about race." "Stupidity" was the source of this confused, supposedly scientific understanding of race: "The ultimate evil was stupidity."¹⁵⁰ Du Bois's autobiography is therefore also the story of the *scientific* concept of race, the sole purpose of which is to "rationalize" a difference of skin color into a difference of power.¹⁵¹ Our ability to come to grips with the race problem, and to struggle against racism, he seems to suggest, is intimately bound up with the need to understand the Western tendency to *rationalize* a behavior—that is, to ground it in discourses of truth, to deploy considerable efforts to legitimize it *scientifically*. The Western will to subordinate and subjugate, to dominate and exploit, is bound up with its will to know and its will to truth—that is, with its own history of *problematization*. Rationalization and problematization are an intrinsic and essential mechanism of the processes of subjectivation, including of domination and exploitation, which define the history of "Empire." The Problem Du Bois speaks of is not just the problem of race. It is, as he says, the experience of *being* a problem. It is the problem of problematization in Western civilization, of its historically specific construction of problems and its connection with the *value* of truth. The illusion, I think, would be to assume that a new, better science will close the space of stupidity and necessarily protect us from prejudice or cruelty. Every making visible and field of visibility generates its own invisibility, blind spots, shadows, from which illusions, prejudices, and stupidities emerge.

As one would perhaps expect, Nietzsche went further still, and conceived of rationality *as such* as "virtuous stupidity" (GS 76: 130). Why? Because what we call rationality is in fact a "discipline of the mind" that progressively became an obligation, and even a virtue. It is a training of the mind

that makes it not broader and more adventurous, as one tends to believe, but narrower and more prudent. It is governed by what Nietzsche calls a "law of agreement," oriented toward *recognition*, and is synonymous with "healthy common sense" (*gesunder Menschenverstand*). It is the faith of the everyman, oriented toward what is most common, in the double sense of the universal or consensual, and the vulgar or unremarkable. Madness, by contrast, and in the eyes of common sense especially, stands for "the greatest danger," that is, for the excess or residue which reason cannot discipline or comprehend, contain or recognize. For Nietzsche, it signals "the enjoyment of the mind's lack of discipline, the joy in human unreason [*Menschen-Unverstand*]" (GS 76: 130). But I would claim that madness thus understood does not exclude the possibility of thought. On the contrary, it designates the excess of thought over its impoverished interpretation as good and common sense, and this means as aligned with the lowest common denominator. It is "*the exception and the danger*" that "*never wants to become the rule*" (GS 76: 131). It is not a coincidence if the philosopher of good sense par excellence, Descartes, is also the philosopher who dismisses madness as wholly irrelevant for his investigation into the nature of the "I" and its relation to truth and knowledge. Common sense and good sense, along with a number of other postulates, including representation, constitute what Deleuze calls the dogmatic image thought, from which he tries to free philosophy as the exercise (and to the discipline) of the "transcendent" or *mad* use of the faculties. When, for example, we analyze the power of the imagination, or memory, or sensibility, we need to ask not how they can combine with the other faculties in order to arrive at something like a common ground—not, in other words, about what they have in common—and derive what we can know, feel, imagine, and remember from that consensus or convergence; rather, we need to ask how they can be pushed to their limit, and a point of crisis, the point at which they no longer "agree" with the other faculties in their commonality but are forced and force one another into a different, *unrecognizable* configuration, one that was until then considered impossible, and one that is indeed inconceivable under the dogmatic, representational image of thought. There would be a stupidity inherent to *Verstand* understood as recognition and representation, as the rule that brings together the human faculties but at the cost of limiting them, inhibiting them, taming them. The history of philosophy, Deleuze argues, is peppered with bursts of madness within this disciplining of thought, points at which the entire edifice of representation is threatened. One can think of the role of the imagination in Kant's third Critique—a role that is no longer one of mediation between the faculty of intuition and that of understanding, which

together produce knowledge, as was the case in the first Critique. Rather, in the analytic of the sublime, the imagination appears as a rogue element that disrupts the quiet economy of the understanding, with which it would want to bind its own fate, but in vain, thus introducing an element of pain within a subject who now feels no longer at home in the world. Naturally, for Kant, this moment of crisis is resolved through a higher, moral synthesis and accord, with Reason as the faculty of Ideas and the seat of our sense of the infinite. One could also turn to the manner in which, in Plato's *Meno* or Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, involuntary memory disrupts the common exercise of memory as recollection and representation, or as the voluntary bringing back of the past into the present, and reveals a reality that is qualitatively different from that revealed by the economy of common sense, and which, Proust tells us, is the only one worth exploring in and through art. The examples of stupidity I focused on in Kant aren't merely accidental; they are examples of the structural stupidity of philosophy understood as the system of representation governed by good and common sense. "Kant's joke," Nietzsche remarks, was that he "wanted to prove, in a way that would dumfound the common man, that the common man was right. . . . He wrote against the scholars in support of popular prejudice; but for scholars and not the people" (GS 193: 205–6). This is why Deleuze lists modern philosophy's obsession with error (and thus truth), rather than stupidity, as another postulate of the dogmatic image of thought. To harm stupidity would also be to harm a certain, indeed historically dominant type of philosophy.

Take, for example, the idea of perfection, which Spinoza rejects as a persistent illusion, and which Darwin also disputes in the context of evolution. Contrary to what we want to believe, evolution does not mean progress, and order does not mean perfection. Order, especially in living organisms, is not an end or a goal—a movement governed by an "ideal" or "final" form, or even maximum fitness. Rather, it is an open and self-organizing structure, a purely physical-chemical *event* caught in a process of becoming, and feeding off its own conditions of emergence. This is what, today, distinguishes the creationist from the Darwinian account of evolution. From the start, it is not evolution as such that was the problem. Theories of evolution had been around for a long time before Darwin. The (then and to this day) controversial feature of Darwin's theory had to do with the idea of natural selection, which does not require the concept of end in any shape or form. This means that evolution has no direction or purpose. It is regulated, yet not by a hidden plan or invisible hand; it is *self-regulated*. If, by natural selection, Darwin had ever meant something like the selection of certain species and the elimination of others according to a conception of adaptability as "survival

of the fittest" (an expression forged by Spencer, which Darwin himself adopted); if, in other words, evolution were governed by some principle of *perfection*, then we could indeed see life as governed by a regulating principle or rule, or something like a grand plan. But that is not what Darwin meant by natural selection. In the sixth edition of *The Origin of Species*, he makes quite clear that the key to understanding natural selection is divergence and differentiation, not perfection: "The varying descendants of each species, trying to occupy as many and as different places as possible in the economy of nature, constantly tend to diverge in character."¹⁵² This means that nature is not interested in perfect beings, whether in the strictly physical or the cultural and moral sense. It is concerned not so much with creating a racing horse or a moral being as with preserving its power to constitute an active and dynamic order, an order through fluctuation. It preserves not the best or the fittest (in the form of actual, fully individuated organisms), but the elements that best allow it to continue to diverge. Evolution is not progress. "Natural selection, Darwin remarks, does not necessarily include progressive development—it only takes advantage of such variations as arise and are beneficial to each creature under its complex relations of life."¹⁵³ This is why "throughout the world a multitude of the lowest forms still exists."¹⁵⁴ As a result, the meaning of the expression "natural selection" becomes quite different. We can no longer say that the adaptation of organisms results from a process of interaction with the environment, as if the latter were merely a parameter within an operation that *selects* the proper organisms and *eliminates* those that aren't. Rather, we need to say that the environment plays the role of a disruptive agent, one that forces life to diverge, that maintains life's ability to be this creative, fluctuating order, this flexible and plastic force that changes its form constantly. The environment is what forces us to change the definition of adaptation from organisms of one species to those of another. It is a principle not of conservation and/or elimination, but of disruption and creation.¹⁵⁵

But we're also familiar with the stupid uses of Darwinian principles in the social and political sphere. We know of stupidities inherent to biopolitics. And I am not speaking (or not only speaking) of the idiotic philosophy of race of the 1930s and 1940s, of white supremacy. I am also thinking of a certain view of social and economic competition, adaptability, flexibility, survival, et cetera. I am thinking of the transposition of certain biological and especially evolutionary principles to the social, economic, and political sphere, and the manner in which they transformed radically the way in which we govern ourselves, and altered fundamentally the government of the self and the government of others. No, science cannot guard us against

stupidity. Only this particular kind of vigilance and prudence that I call critique, which scientists themselves can of course display, can do so. Flows of stupidity run through Kant, interrupting, neutralizing, and paralyzing his thought. Flows of stupidity run through all of us. The question is: How do we stop them? What dams, what protections do we put in place? Musil, Flaubert, and Nietzsche equipped philosophy with a hammer to smash stupidity, especially the kind that is disguised as science. All cultivate the spirit of critique.

TWO

On Superstition

"Can there exist a people free from all superstitious prejudices? This is asking, Can there be a people of philosophers?"

—Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*¹

It is superstitious to put one's hopes in formalities, but arrogant [superbe] to refuse to submit to them.

—Pascal, *Pensées*²

Introduction

Anyone looking for a good example of what we normally have in mind when we speak of superstition might plan a trip to Rome in the winter, and head to the Church of the Madonna of Divine Love. On February 3, the feast day of Saint Blaise, masses are held throughout the day at the church. After each Mass, the priest gives the "blessing of the throats" by holding two candles in the form of a cross and touching people on the throat with them, repeating: "Through the intercession of Saint Blaise, bishop and martyr, may God deliver you from ailments of the throat and from every other evil, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." Alternatively, you might wish to head farther south and be in Naples for the feast of San Gennaro, also a bishop and martyr, and the most important patron saint of the city. Inside the *Duomo*, the Chapter of the Treasure of San Gennaro holds the saint's relics, including two sealed vials of his coagulated blood, housed in the silver reliquary. On the morning of September 19, thousands of people fill the *Duomo* and Piazza del Duomo, hoping to see the saint's blood liquefy in what's known as the miracle of San Gennaro. In a solemn religious ceremony, the Cardinal removes

the vials of blood from the chapel and takes them in a procession, along with a bust of San Gennaro, to the cathedral's high altar. The crowd watches anxiously to see if the blood miraculously liquefies, which is believed to be a sign that San Gennaro has blessed the city. It is thought to be a bad omen if it doesn't. If the blood liquefies—which it usually does—the church bells ring, and the Cardinal takes the liquefied blood through the cathedral and out into the square so everyone can see it. Then he returns the reliquary to the altar, where the vials remain on display for eight days.

There is a common view, largely but not exclusively inherited from the Enlightenment, according to which philosophy and science, rooted in rationality, oppose superstitions of the kind I've just described. I say largely, but not exclusively, because philosophical critiques of superstition were already common in the ancient world, although not always from the point of view of philosophical or scientific rationalism. The notion of *desidaimonia*, or "fear, awe of *daimons*," which the Romans translated as *superstitio*, initially had a positive meaning in ancient Greece, where it designated "scrupulousness in religious matters."³ Very quickly, however, it became a derogatory term used to denote an excessive pietism and preoccupation with religion, an obsessive fear of the gods and attention to signs and omens, and a bigoted penchant for adoration.⁴ In the words of Seneca, "*religio* honours the Gods, *superstitio* wrongs them."⁵ As it is encouraged and preserved by fear, Plutarch argues, superstition "carries with it a certain blockishness or stupidity, destitute of action, perplexed, idle, dead, without any exploit or effect whatsoever," which deprives us of our ability to think and act, forces us into passivity, and turns the world as a whole—"the land, the sea, the air, the sky, darkness, light, silence and his very dreams"—into a frightful place.⁶ Once a person is in this state of mind, circumstances that would not otherwise be particularly dangerous come to pose a serious threat. The danger is exacerbated when superstition affects rulers and military leaders: they become unable to deal effectively with their responsibilities and are likely to embark on destructive courses of action. Superstition is therefore not just a cause of individual misery; it can also constitute a political problem against which states need to be on their guard.

By the end of the first century BCE, *superstitio* was used widely in that negative sense in ancient Rome, where it designated the loss of dignity and freedom associated with excessive piety, exaggerated rituals, and a disproportionate dependency on prophecies.⁷ Pliny the Elder, for example, condemns burning costly incense as *superstitio*.⁸ As Christianity began to spread throughout the empire, *superstitio* was often used to describe this new sect. In a famous letter to Trajan from 112 CE, Pliny the Younger, at that time governor of Bythinia (now in Turkey), writes of a group of Christians as subjected

to a "contagious" and "depraved, immoderate superstition," which, he argued, needed to be nipped in the bud.⁹ Tacitus, a contemporary of Pliny, is even more vehement in his condemnation of the Christian "sect," calling for the suppression of this "recurrent superstition" and disease.¹⁰ Another historian of the same period, Suetonius, recounting Nero's persecution of the Christians after the fire of 64 CE, speaks of "a kind of human in the grip of a new and maleficent *superstitio*" (*Nero* 16.2).¹¹ Lucretius, Cicero, and Seneca all opposed the philosophical attitude to that of the superstitious person, group, or tendency. All see superstition as the expression of an unnecessary and irrational fear of divinities, inciting shameful behavior and limiting our ability to think and act freely. For the thinkers of Roman antiquity, superstition rhymed with alienation.

As a result of his uncompromising natural materialism, Lucretius went further still, using *religio* and *superstitio* interchangeably.¹² By denying the existence of all the traditional gods, and attributing to matter alone full responsibility for the forces of nature, he sought to abolish the ancestral fear of divinities and do away with superstition once and for all. Epicureanism is not only a physics; it is also an ethics, the end of which is *pleasure*, or the absence of pain. Yet pleasure is constantly threatened by obstacles that are infinitely more significant, and harder to overcome, than pain: "phantoms, superstitions, terrors, the fear of death—everything that troubles the soul."¹³ Lucretius refers to those obstacles as a whole, their origin and organization, as religion (*religio*). They consist of a double illusion, or a false representation, which only a genuine understanding of the laws of nature can dispel (*De Rerum* 3: 91–93). Through those illusions we fail to achieve genuine pleasure, and experience pain instead, or pain mixed with pleasure. The first illusion, which comes from the body, consists in believing that we have an infinite capacity for pleasure, when, following Epicurus, Lucretius is adamant that pleasures, insofar as they are natural, and thus material, are necessarily limited (as well as good). Only certain desires—namely, those that are neither natural nor necessary, such as the desire to be rich, or covered in glory—are unlimited, never entirely achievable, and therefore a source of pain. But if we limit our desires to those that are natural and necessary—and this means limited, finite, and achievable—such as the desire to quench our thirst and satisfy our hunger, or, more significantly still, our desire for friendship and philosophy, our pleasure will be pure, unmixed, and devoid of pain. The second illusion consists in believing that the duration of the soul (*anima*) is infinite, when the soul, which is composed of very subtle and highly mobile atoms, is itself material, and thus mortal (*De Rerum* 3: 670–78). It is only to the extent that we believe in the immortality of the

soul that we can fear death and “an infinity of possible sufferings following death.”¹⁴ On the other hand, if we understand body and soul according to the laws of nature, and this means on the basis of the smallest elements that constitute it, we can easily avoid unfounded fears and false representations, self-pity and sadness (*De Rerum* 3: 830–93). As for the Gods, they “must necessarily enjoy immortal life in the deepest peace, far removed and separated from our affairs” (*De Rerum* 1: 44–46). In fact, Lucretius goes as far as to condemn any recourse to gods, divinities, and myths as a principle of explanation of the things of nature, and “the nature of things” (*De Rerum* 1: 21); and he celebrates Epicurus as the great liberator of the human mind and soul from the unjustified and crippling fears (especially death) and beliefs (especially punishment) of religion (*religio*) (*De Rerum* 1: 62–71).

Many centuries later, Francis Bacon held a similar view: superstition is dangerous, and not simply ridiculous, because it “dismounts” sense, philosophy, laws, natural piety, and reputation, and “erecteth an absolute monarchy in the minds of men.” “In all superstition,” he goes on to say, “wise men follow fools; and arguments are fitted to practice, in a reversed order.”¹⁵ Similarly, Pierre Bayle, responding to the appearance of a comet in 1680 and to its interpretation by many as a bad omen, published (anonymously) his *Thoughts on the Comet*, in which he denounces the superstition of his contemporaries and “the malady of making presages for themselves out of everything.”¹⁶ When events of this type are reduced to their natural causes, he claims, the “vulgar images”¹⁷ we produce spontaneously, and the unnecessary superstitious predictions we forge as a result, are stopped in their tracks. And in his article on superstition for *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert*, Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt refers to Bacon, and opposes superstition to reason, as well as to all “sane ideas” compatible with that of a Supreme Being, first formulated by d’Alembert and Voltaire.¹⁸ Speaking of the assault of superstition on the imagination, and the threat it poses to “the natural light” of reason, Jaucourt writes:

Essentially, *superstition* is a cult of religion, false, misguided, full of empty fears, contrary to reason as to all sane ideas that one ought to have of the Supreme Being. Or if you prefer, *superstition* is that form of enchantment, or magic power, that fear exercises over our soul; the wicked daughter of the imagination, it assaults the imagination with specters, dreams and visions; it is she, says Bacon, who has forged the idols of the vulgar, invisible genies, lucky and unlucky days, invisible signs of love and of hate. She attacks the mind, chiefly during illness or adversity; she overturns good discipline and venerable customs in favor of silly rituals and superficial ceremonies. Once she has

planted deep roots in any religion at all, good or bad, she is able to extinguish the natural light and to perturb the healthiest heads.¹⁹

Because superstition is rooted in fear and attacks the most vulnerable minds, it is the greatest danger and threat to social peace. For when they are in the throes of fear, human beings are prone to fanaticism and capable of the worst actions:

Finally, superstition is the most terrible scourge of humanity. Not even atheism itself (and this is saying a lot) destroys natural feelings, nor does it attack the laws or the mores of the people; but *superstition* is a despotic tyrant which forces everything to yield to its own chimeras. Its prejudices are superior to all other prejudices. An atheist takes an interest in civic peace, out of love of his own tranquillity; but fanatical *superstition*, born of disordered imagination, overturns empires.²⁰

For centuries, then, religion was, and often remains, the primary target of the critique of superstition.²¹ Its power, drawn from the infinite power of the imagination, is seen as a threat to the measured and cool exercise of reason, whether in science or philosophy.

Closer to us, and in the context of his metapsychology, Freud developed his own theory on the origin and meaning of superstition, and of religion in particular. I mention Freud because his critique of superstition is more nuanced than, and in fact quite different from, the classical, "enlightenment" critique. His approach will turn out to be closer to that of Spinoza, in that it reveals a deep affective state, namely, ambivalence, which science and reason alone cannot simply wish out of existence. On the one hand, Freud sees the role of science, and that of psychoanalysis in particular, as one of demythologizing: the task, he writes, is "to transform metaphysics into metapsychology"; to trace "the myths of paradise and the fall of man, of God, of good and evil, of immortality, and so on" back to their psychical origin or roots; to discover the hidden motivations behind the beliefs we cherish, which were themselves born of the need and drive to interpret.²² This means that the difference between thought and superstition, or science and religion, is not simply a difference between truth and error. For there is a truth of religion and superstition; there is a real phenomenon to be extracted from its set of beliefs. In fact, and to use an example from individual psychology, Freud goes as far as to say that the superstitious Roman who gave up an important undertaking because he saw an ill-omened flight of birds, or because he had stumbled on the threshold of his door, was

a better psychologist than we moderns strive to be, simply because he had “understood” that he felt conflicted about whatever he was meant to do. Similarly—and to borrow this time an example from group psychology—our seemingly arbitrary and superstitious prohibitions tap into a deeply aggressive drive, which they help to inhibit. As such, metapsychology is an instance of critique, and relies on the key distinction between thought and superstition, rather than between truth and falsity. What those superstitions and metaphysical constructions do is cover up or inhibit thought. What thought does is see in those constructions a problem that needs to be resolved, rather than divine truths and commandments, or even illusions that need to be denounced. It sees them as the *sign* of a hidden reality, which indicates a problem that is of a different nature than the form it takes as a superstition. But to see it in that light is not equivalent to disqualifying it, or rendering it meaningless.

From his early work on *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) to his later writings on group psychology, Freud insists on the similarities between obsessional neurosis and superstition. All forms of superstition, religion included, are in fact expressions of obsessional neurosis, the roots of which can be found in what Freud calls “instinctual renunciation.” The proposition is in fact reversible: insofar as obsessional neurotics believe in the “omnipotence of thoughts,” in “prophetic dreams” or “remarkable coincidences,” which are all manifestations of “suppressed and cruel impulses” and “unconscious phantasies,” they are all superstitious.²³ Furthermore, obsessional prohibitions involve restrictions and renunciations that are just as extensive as taboo prohibitions, and the profound sense of guilt of the often-considerate and sociable obsessional neurotic, which “would be appropriate in a mass-murderer,” actually stems from “intense and frequent death-wishes against his fellows.”²⁴ As such, superstition indicates a problem and a complex reality, namely, *ambivalence*, rather than a mere cultural or personal habit that could be dismissed based on recognition alone. In addition, given their origin and analogy with neuroses (that is, with the psychological mechanics of representation), guilt, and repression, superstitions—particularly of the collective kind—do not belong to a past age, which has already been or is bound to be replaced by another, more “scientific” age. They are there to stay—at least, so long as there are obsessional neurotics. In truth, much of the “worldview” or “system of thought” of animism persists in our modern, rationalist age, since the motive or psychological impulse behind superstition (namely, ambivalence) is present in every human being. The ambivalence in question is visible in the word “taboo” itself, which, according to Wundt, and like the Roman *sacer*, evolved to designate something that is

both sacred and unclean.²⁵ Originally, it did not possess those two meanings; instead it described "what is demonic," "what may not be touched." What is literally untouchable became figuratively untouchable, or sacred. While the word taboo has fallen out of use, Freud remarks, the reality it designates survives, and may even thrive, in the phenomenon of conscience as a place of conflict between certain desires and the sense of guilt and need for self-inflicted punishment they generate, which manifests itself as anxiety. All of this to say that behind the so-called irrational, unfounded fear of superstition, behind or beneath a seemingly arbitrary prohibition, there is a perfectly intelligible and justified fear. Behind the fear of vengeance or bad omen associated with a certain action (for example, touching), behind even the fear of vengeance, there is the fear of a deeply rooted yet prohibited desire. As such, "superstition" is an inadequate or at least provisional concept, which should mark not the end but the beginning of the analysis. Freud calls it a "concept," but an unstable one, which crumbles "under the impact of psychoanalytic research."²⁶

Religion, Freud claims, is rooted in psychology, and the history of religions points in the direction of a single source, a single repressed "event," which can only be deduced or posited, rather than demonstrated: the "original" murder of the father, his "return" in the shape of the totem animal, the subsequent and progressive elevation of the totem to divine status—from a human form with an animal's head to a supreme deity whose power extended over gods and men alike, and eventually to a single god tolerating no other. Thus, every religion is "a return of the past," yet one that was never present in the way that actual religions are. However ancient, religions express the return of a founding event, one that combines feelings of love, even reverence, and hostility, jealousy, and guilt (for having "killed" the father). Those ambivalent feelings are still at work in religion, including Judaism, even though, in the religion of Moses, they cannot be expressed directly, but only as a reaction to that event, which takes the form of a sense of guilt on account of that hostility, of a bad conscience for having sinned and continuing to sin against God. In fact, Freud claims, the prophets kept alive this sense of guilt, including when things were going badly for the people and "the illusion, loved above all else, of being God's chosen people" had become difficult to maintain.²⁷ What better way of reconciling this difficult predicament and the promise of happiness than by appealing to "a sense of guilt on account of their own sinfulness?"²⁸ Since the people had not obeyed God's commandments, "they deserved no better than to be punished by him."²⁹ The following lines, lifted as it were from Nietzsche's critique of the ascetic ideal, push the point further, and emphasize the dark source of our highest moral values:

And, driven by the need to satisfy this sense of guilt, which was insatiable and came from sources so much deeper, they must make those commandments grow ever stricter, more meticulous and even more trivial. In a fresh chapter of moral asceticism they imposed more and more instinctual renunciations on themselves and in that way reached—in doctrine and precept, at least—ethical heights which had remained inaccessible to the other peoples of antiquity. . . . These ethical ideas cannot, however, disavow their origin from the sense of guilt felt on account of a suppressed hostility to God.³⁰

Naturally, this sense of guilt was extended and radicalized in Christianity, in which the figure of Christ, as the son of God sacrificed to atone for the original sin—the unnamable crime, the parricide—is also the figure in whose name Jews were persecuted for having killed God *and* his son, and for refusing to see the latter as the Redeemer.

But are the “consolations of the religious illusion” and the “atrophy” of the mind it entails entirely unavoidable? No doubt, those into whom this “sweet—or bitter-sweet—poison” has been instilled from childhood will never shake it off.³¹ But what of the other men and women, who have been “sensibly” brought up, that is, in a minimally neurotic environment? To be sure, they seem to be at a disadvantage:

They will have to admit to themselves the full extent of their helplessness and their insignificance in the machinery of the universe; they can no longer be the centre of creation, no longer the object of tender care on the part of a beneficent Providence. They will be in the same position of a child who has left the parental house where he was so warm and comfortable.³²

This initial stage, however, need not be permanent: human beings “cannot remain children for ever; they must in the end go out into ‘hostile life.’ We may call this ‘education to reality.’”³³ Freud is lucid regarding the difficulty of avoiding illusions, and the fundamental cruelty of human instincts, which he witnessed firsthand in the 1930s. Still, is the inclination to aggression and cruelty *irreducible*? We saw how it has been—and continues to be—channeled by being turned inward, through a series of prohibitions, and even through the promise of love. But can it ever be eradicated? Is our choice between illusions or superstitions of various kinds, or can it ever be a matter of choosing between superstitions of various kinds, on the one hand, and a true republic, on the other? In his 1927 essay, for example, Freud holds on to the Enlightenment belief in a not-too-distant age dominated by science and the intellect, rather than by superstition and illusion. Yet this rational

optimism is fragile, and never far from giving way to a deep pessimism regarding human beings' ability to govern themselves peacefully. The rise of fascism following the "Great War" confirmed the latter. As for communism, steeped in the "untenable illusion" of private property as the source of inequality and hostility among men, he has the following words of warning: "In abolishing private property we deprive the human love of aggression of one of its instruments, certainly a strong one, though not the strongest; but we have in no way altered the differences in power and influence which are misused by aggressiveness, nor have we altered anything in its nature."³⁴ Private property, in other words, is not the source of aggressiveness, and it is entirely illusory to believe that its abolition would eliminate once and for all the sad passions of hostility, envy, and aggressiveness. It fails to address the metapsychological issues underpinning socioeconomic inequalities. I will return to the question of the traces of superstition within Marxism in the context of my discussion of Althusser's theory of the ideological state apparatus.

Thus far, I have referred to superstition mostly in relation to religion, as well as to the sort of obsessional behavior we normally associate with the irrational fear of leaving a hat on a bed, or walking under a ladder. However, I wonder whether, in today's context, religion ("metaphysics" in Freud's sense) ought to be the main concern, or whether magical thinking is not also, and perhaps more fundamentally, at work in other areas of life, such as economics and politics, especially in our "advanced," post-industrial societies. I also wonder whether irrational fear should be the defining criterion of superstition, or whether other affects, such as hope or love, and other tricks of the imagination should also be included. This is why I will eventually turn to Spinoza and Marx. As we'll see, Spinoza and Marx, while clearly defining philosophy or critique in opposition to superstition, don't just criticize superstition in the name of truth, and as something that, in the face of truth, could simply vanish. They don't criticize superstition as that which flies in the face of truth, and as a result of a simple process of recognition. Instead, they see philosophy, or critique, as a practice and a process of transformation, which, like superstition itself, needs to be renewed and adapted—and indeed as a condition of truth itself, or of a discourse of truth. Denouncing something as a superstition or an illusion it is not sufficient to make it go away: we need to alter its ground, target its material conditions of existence. Like stupidity, superstition is largely immune to truth.

In addition, Spinoza and Marx will allow me to consider the ways in which superstition operates in the political and economic domain. This hypothesis might seem far-fetched and outlandish, especially in relation to market-centered economics. For decades, we have been hearing about market

rationality and efficiency. Most mainstream economic theories are based on rational choice theory—that is, on the assumption that markets and their actors will behave rationally, or in a way that will maximize their advantage and minimize their cost, if and when they are provided with adequate information. This theory was so successful that it was applied to other domains, such as moral philosophy and political theory. More importantly, the rational virtues of the market—self-interest, competition, flexibility, resilience, et cetera—are considered obvious by so many that they are upheld as paragons of rationality as such, and as norms to follow in all human affairs and spheres of government (or “governance”), from the family to the polity, from schools and universities to hospitals, from love and friendship to art and literature. We have grown accustomed to hearing citizens referred to as “stakeholders” and heads of state as “CEOs.” And we have even grown accustomed to the idea that a good CEO (or a CEO *tout court*) will make a good head of state. More significantly, our corporate gurus and influencers have begun to speak in ways that are, like God’s ways, impenetrable, creating sense out of nonsense, reality out of fantasy, and *thereby* (as if magically) earning our respect and even admiration. They are today’s prophets, men and women who reach the summit of Mount Market, where they see flashes of lightning and hear thunder crash, before returning to the valleys and plains to spread the good word amongst mortals in barely comprehensible language. A recent survey of religious attitudes in America confirms this faith in the free market as God’s work: according to the 2011 Baylor Religion Survey of 1,714 American adults, about 20 percent of Americans “combine a view of God as actively engaged in daily workings of the world with an economic conservative view that opposes government regulation and champions the free market as a matter of faith.”³⁵

For over twenty-five years now, Lucy Kellaway of the *Financial Times* has been writing articles lamenting the appearance and proliferation of empty words and nonsensical sentences in the corporate, managerial world. In the mid-1990s, she objected to words such as “global,” “downsize,” and “marketplace.” What innocent times those were! Things have moved on rather nicely since, although perhaps not in the right direction. Kellaway now has a particular bee in her bonnet about Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz. I can’t blame her: Schultz describes his company as delivering “an immersive, ultra-premium coffee-forward experience.” Now what’s remarkable about this twaddle—and here I am veering momentarily away from Kellaway’s piece—is that it has become a template for the entire service industry, including the recently created education industry. After all, as an academic, I, too, am involved in delivering an immersive, ultra-premium forward experience—the now-ubiquitous “student” experience. Or, as a well-known

Business School puts it in its “mission statement,” “to provide a transformational learning experience, enabling our stakeholders to realize their full potential.” Other examples of such obscure and mysterious language include this from Rob Stone, CEO of the advertising agency Cornerstone: “As brands build out a world footprint, they look for the no-holds-barred global POV that’s always been part of our wheelhouse.” Finally, Angela Ahrendts, CEO of Burberry, once included the following in the company’s annual report: “In the wholesale channel, Burberry exited doors not aligned with brand status and invested in presentation through both enhanced assortments and dedicated customized real estate in key doors.” No one can understand what this means, other than the fact that Burberry seems to be moving into the doors business. And that, I think, is precisely the point. What’s at stake here—no pun intended—is not so much the words themselves, empty, meaningless, and easy to dismiss. It’s the effect they produce, the authority they carry, and therefore their capacity to shape our desires. For this is very much a highly ironic case of the emperor (or empress) being naked, yet everyone desperately wanting to believe that those to whom we defer are indeed dressed in dazzling (Burberry) costumes. It is, as I’ll argue in detail, the expression and natural outcome of the fetishization of commodities. Our capitalist gurus actually need to speak in that way if we are to have *faith* in them—that is, to grant them the right to say what we should wear, drink, and “think,” and to pay them fat salaries in return. Their words don’t speak to our faculty of understanding and analysis. They speak to our collective imagination, our passions, and our desire to be led—even into servitude. Their words are those of a magician or a sorcerer, full of mystery, and indicative of otherworldly powers. CEOs are the shamans of today: they speak in tongues, and their obscure language is the manifestation, if not the proof, of their exceptional, quasi-divine status. They have reached such heights, measured in monetary terms, that it is no longer possible for them to speak like us—much in the way that Louis XIV and the court at Versailles spoke a French that few could understand. Their obscure mode of expression, which leads to endless and fruitless interpretation, is the sign of their wisdom and clairvoyance, of a knowledge, understanding, and foresight that only they possess, and that has naturally propelled them to the economic and symbolic stratosphere. Magical thinking requires magical talk. Financial capital turns into social capital, social capital into cultural capital, and cultural capital back into financial capital. Thus spin the wheels of capitalism.

In this chapter, I focus on two regimes or configurations of superstition, both of which speak to our present, and our own servitude, defined as an unnecessary dependence on emotions such as fear and hope. I have

already alluded to the possibility, indeed the necessity, of seeing our relation to the capitalist mode of production, its commodities and agents (the *entrepreneurs*), as a contemporary manifestation of superstition. And I will deal with Marx's critique of ideology as rooted in commodity and financial fetishism, and his conception of superstition, or attachment to the form of the object qua commodity, as a form of alienation, in the second part of the chapter. But I will begin by analyzing its political, and specifically theological-political, manifestation by turning to Spinoza's political theory and the example of the constitution of the Jewish covenant under Moses. This will also allow me to show Spinoza's proximity to Freud, and Spinoza's own view regarding the inevitability of superstition, or the government of the multitude through affects, in the political context. Superstition, Spinoza and Marx argue, is the individual or collective crystallization of emotions in a cultural or symbolic form, and therefore a (perhaps insurmountable) obstacle to freedom. More specifically, it consists of the combination of emotions that are normally opposed to one another: hope and fear, love and hatred, reverence and scorn. The root of superstition, therefore, is affective, and is a way of remedying our darkest drives and impulses. But if, as I believe, Spinoza and Freud are right about the inevitable nature of political superstition, the Marxist analysis must itself be revised: so long as the form of the state remains in place, the transformation of economic relations and conditions, however radical, will not suffice to eradicate superstition. In other words, communism generates its own illusions, and economic materialism is not sufficient to ward off all forms of superstition. I will present this argument in the third and final part of the chapter by drawing on Althusser's theory of ideological state apparatuses.

I. Theological-Political Superstitions

1. *The Theory*

Spinoza's contribution to the problem of superstition is, I believe, unsurpassed. It cuts across his historical, political, and philosophical writings, and takes the form of the following question: How can the power of thought and knowledge be increased against the powers of superstition? How can the human mind be liberated from the many illusions generated by our fancy and fantasies, or by the power of our imagination? In that respect, it echoes and extends a concern that can be traced back to ancient philosophy, and to Epicureanism in particular. Equally, however, and in a way that will become fully apparent only at the end of this chapter, it anticipates the Marxist

theory of ideology, which is itself underpinned by a critique of commercial and financial "fetishism."³⁶ For behind this first way of formulating the question lies another, more political question, which I'll be concerned to explore: How is power really exercised (rather than simply represented), and how is obedience secured? What are the mechanisms through which the masses are made to do something, to act and behave in a certain way? Spinoza's answer is remarkable: If we take a good look at what is happening all around us, and has happened throughout history, we see that obedience is arrived at and most effectively secured not through sheer oppression and physical coercion, but by skillfully playing the chords of the human heart, by appealing to our imagination and emotions, be they fear, hope, or love (or some combination thereof). There is no fundamental difference between the politics of fear and the politics of hope, between "Project Fear" and "Project Hope."³⁷ There is, however, a difference regarding the nature of affects that are mobilized. Joyous passions are by definition better than sad ones (although there is also a *jouissance* of spite and fear). But both types of passions circumvent or bypass critical thought. Both give the impression and illusion that passions alone can guide and govern us. Both simplify, caricature, and deceive.

Spinoza claims, in essence, that superstition should be our point of departure when considering the mechanics and *modus operandi* of power, and any discussion of freedom should take place against the backdrop of that fundamental question. "Revealed knowledge," as he calls it, has no object but obedience (*objectum cognitionis revelatae*), and that is what distinguishes it from "natural knowledge."³⁸ The real difficulty, where obedience is concerned, is not to subject bodies, but to win over hearts and minds. To be sure, the *Political Treatise* (TP 5: 6), when considering the best possible form of government—by which Spinoza means the state that maximizes the chances of peace, security, and concord amongst citizens—seems to oppose hope and fear, in the same way that it opposes freedom and servitude.³⁹ A free multitude is led more by hope than by fear: that is, by the hope of living well, or better. A subjugated multitude, by contrast, is led more by fear than by hope, and in particular by the fear of death, which it does everything in its (limited) power to avoid. But between the ideal state of total freedom (which, Spinoza believes, cannot be attained), or even relative freedom (expressed in hope), and that of absolute servitude, manifest in the fear associated with a sense of permanent insecurity, there is what we could call the normal state of politics and government, which manifests itself in an often-conflicting combination of those affects, or in what, following Freud, we could call the politics of ambivalence. This is why, early in the text (TP 2: 10, 3: 8), Spinoza claims that so long as an individual is prone to fear *or* hope,

she is not truly free. For if obedience can be obtained through pure physical coercion, or by instilling fear in others, it can also be obtained through hope, which has the advantage of subjecting the mind as well as the body. Therein lies the origin of superstition.

The problem as I intend to pursue it is best summarized in the following thought, which Spinoza borrows from Quintus Curtius: "Nothing governs the multitude as effectively as superstition [*Nulla res multitudinem efficacius regit quam superstitio*]." ⁴⁰ This is not a definition of superstition. In time, and following Spinoza himself, I believe one will have to be given. For now, however, let me focus on superstition as a means or mechanism of government, and thus on its relevance and use in a historical and political context. Because the multitude is governed by affects rather than reason (*quia non ratione, sed solis affectibus gubernatur*), and because those affects are capricious and often contradictory (*TTP* 17: 210), there arises the need to organize, contain, and channel them through a certain discipline, which draws on human imagination. Every society is, at least to a certain degree, dependent on technologies of the imagination in order to tame the antagonistic and unpredictable nature of human affects. The difference between pure superstition and other configurations of imagination becomes one of degree: each configuration reveals a more or less adequate understanding of our condition, and thus a different degree of power (*potential*). If we measure the success of governments by their ability to bring the masses or "multitude" together and to have them do something specific, or act in a certain way, then, Spinoza argues, superstition is an indispensable tool, and in fact the most *effective* form of government. Of course, Spinoza doesn't believe that it is the *best* way; and the *Political Treatise* is his attempt, curtailed by his own death, to identify the conditions under which citizens of a given state can flourish. The primary aim of the state, as I have already suggested, is to provide "peace and security of life" (*TP* 5: 2). This formulation far exceeds Hobbes's definition of peace as "the absence of war" (*De Cive* 1, 12), and signals instead a "union or harmony of minds" (*TP* 6: 4) as well as the "strength of mind" (*fortitudo*) without which genuine peace cannot be sustained. ⁴¹ It is, if you will, a maximalist conception of peace, which points toward the state as providing the conditions for minimizing antagonistic passions and facilitating the flourishing of minds, thus increasing the power of the multitude.

Still, superstition as a mechanism of government can't be brushed aside too easily. For anyone vaguely familiar with Spinoza, who is often referred to as "rationalist," this claim might seem surprising, if not contradictory. For superstition, as a specific art or technique of government that draws on the imagination, corresponds to the lowest or least "adequate" type.

The world as we apprehend it through our imagination—a broad category that includes sensations and perceptions as well as mental images such as memories or fantasies—is necessarily partial, confused, and fleeting. It is characterized by what Spinoza calls inadequate ideas concerning the nature of things (or “bodies”). By contrast, the world as we apprehend it through the intellect and intuitive knowledge (as if seen by God, that is, immediately and in one glance, in all its necessity and coherence) is characterized by adequate ideas and is oriented toward the singular essence of things. Our immediate and default relation to the world, which unfolds “according to the common order of nature,” leads to partial, inadequate knowledge—the sort of knowledge that is ignorant of the causal connections between the various determinations of nature. As such, it subjects individuals to a life of passions. Spinoza’s claim regarding superstition thus suggests that the most effective type of government, at least insofar as it seeks obedience from those it governs, is one that appeals to, and draws on, not the highest cognitive faculties of human beings (namely, reason and intuition), but the lowest and most confused; not the complete knowledge and free judgment we can gain from what he calls common notions of types of things, and the laws governing them, but the limited knowledge we gain from everyday experience and the passions that shape both the nature of our experience and the way we act on them. This, in turn, means that however rational or enlightened one might be at the individual, ethical level, and in matters related to the understanding of causes and effects, it is far less easy, if not altogether impossible, to behave in that way as part of a group. Governing the multitude is a tricky and messy business, and one that cannot achieve the same degree of clarity, distinctness, and certainty of outcome as can the government of one’s own life. Unlike the philosophy of the Enlightenment, then, which sees in knowledge and its public dissemination the solution to all social problems and the end of the religion and politics of superstition, Spinoza doesn’t dismiss superstition and prophecy as merely superfluous, or as an easily avoidable illusion. Instead, he tries to understand how and why it *works*; whether it is inevitable; and the extent to which it can be contained.

So, superstition is an effective means of government because we are naturally prone to it, by virtue of being imaginary beings. In that respect, Spinoza anticipates Feuerbach, who recognized in human imagination (*Phantasie*) “a special organ of superstition.”⁴² It is mainly on the basis of imagining that we take part in collective forms of life; and because the passions integral to our limited experience “have their own dynamics and effects, the actions and social practices to which it gives rise are not always advantageous to

us."⁴³ Now, as Susan James goes on to remark, the dynamics in question may be destructive and may lead, for example, to civil war. But they can also be productive, and can be used "to build comparatively if imperfectly harmonious ways of life."⁴⁴ Specifically, superstition is able to capitalize on the fact that human beings, who are naturally and constantly affected by the world around them and are thus in the throes of emotional upheavals, feel thrown back and forth between two polar opposites, namely, fear and hope (*TTP* Pref.: 1). While seemingly opposed, fear and hope are actually two sides of the same coin, or two ends of the same spectrum. They are both passions, which reveal a degree of servitude under the power of imagination.

Fear, Spinoza tells us, is an inconstant *sadness*, which arises from the idea of a thing, about the outcome of which we are in some doubt (*E* 4, Def. of affects 13).⁴⁵ Hope, on the other hand, is a *joy*, which arises from the idea of a thing, about the outcome of which we are also in some doubt (*E* 3, Def. of affects 12). So long as we live in a condition of uncertainty, and do not control our destiny, these two passions are unavoidable and inseparable. The only difference between them is that fear is a form of sadness, whereas hope is a form of joy and as such, always preferable. These are the opening sentences of the *TTP*:

If men were always able to regulate their affairs with sure judgement, or if fortune always smiled upon them, they would not get caught up in any superstition. But since people are often reduced to such desperate straits that they cannot arrive at any solid judgement and as the good things of fortune for which they have a boundless desire are quite uncertain, they fluctuate wretchedly (*misere*) between hope (*spem*) and fear (*metum*). (*TTP* Pref.: 1)

Superstition, then, is a direct function of this "wretched" or "miserable" condition of uncertainty in which, for the most part, we find ourselves, and which leads to the affective polar opposites of *metus* (fear, dread, anxiety) and *spes* (hope, expectation). When things go our way, we become overly confident and optimistic, and lose sight of the limits of our power and knowledge. A fortunate situation or experience becomes a "sign" of more fortune to come and, as Freud says, of our deluded sense of power. When things go badly, when fear and anxiety and depression kick in and we feel powerless, we find solace in fanciful constructions—a promise from a self-declared prophet, a vision from a seer, a sign in the sky or in the entrails of an animal, a miracle—and think it natural to surrender our freedom to such mysterious powers. We should never cease to be astonished by the fact that, as history demonstrates, human beings would rather feel hopeful and

loved than actually free, and often “fight for their own servitude as if they were fighting for their deliverance.” Why, for example, do they “not think it humiliating but supremely honourable to spill their blood and sacrifice their lives for the glory of one man” (*TTP* Pref.: 7)? Why, in the absence of coercion or the use of physical force against them, do they consistently act in a way that does not correspond to their own interest?

To answer this question, we need to look more closely at Spinoza’s views on servitude. In the Preface to *E4*, he defines it as a form of impotence, or a lack of power (*impotentia*). In fact, Part IV of the *Ethics* as a whole seeks to demonstrate that servitude is impotence or powerlessness *as such* (*E 4*, Prop. 17 Schol.). Impotence is itself defined as the inability to control or govern (*moderandis*) and contain (*coërcendis*) one’s affects (*affectibus*). It designates the “passive” life—that is, the life in thrall to passions. Servitude is ignorant and blind desire, that is, desire abandoned to itself in what it imagines to be its own spontaneity, but which is in fact only its submission to external forces. The passivity of affective life, along with the sadness that usually accompanies it, are thus a result that contradicts and frustrates the fundamental movement of desire, which is the pursuit of joy, or, in Spinoza’s view, the increase of one’s power to act and think. By contrast, Spinoza defines freedom as the life governed by the intellect (*mens*) alone, which provides life with an adequate idea of external causes. He writes:

I say expressly that the intellect has, not an adequate, but only a confused knowledge, of itself, of its own body, and of external causes, so long as it perceives things from the common order of Nature, that is, so long as it is determined externally, from fortuitous encounters with things, to regard this or that, and not so long as it is determined internally, from the fact that it regards a number of things at once to understand their agreements, differences and oppositions. (*E 2*, Prop. 29 Schol.)

In an article devoted to Macherey’s *Introduction à l’Éthique de Spinoza*, Jason Read takes the passage I just cited to mean that the difference between knowledge and ignorance, like that between freedom and constraint, is not between a causal order and the absence of such an order, but between two different causal orders.⁴⁶ As Spinoza himself puts it: “Inadequate and confused ideas follow with the same necessity as adequate, or clear and distinct ideas” (*E 2*, Prop. 36). All ideas are in some sense necessary. Some express and comprehend their necessity (this is thought *sub specie aeternitatis*), while others are necessarily ideas of contingency. There is a logic to error and illusion, not just to truth. This, still according to Read’s reading of Macherey,

means that a causal connection runs through every act of thinking, from the most confused to the most adequate, in the same way that a causal connection runs through every action. The only real difference is between those ideas or actions that are determined externally and those that are determined internally. The former are subject to the overpowering causality of other things, which Spinoza refers to as “the common order of nature,” while the latter are subject to the intellect’s ability to reflect on things and conceive of clear and distinct ideas.⁴⁷ There is always a reason why we think inadequately. There are always determinate conditions and relations behind our inadequate ideas, even if we’re not able to see them as such. For example, Spinoza demonstrates how the experience of a particular chronological order (meeting Paul in the morning, and so on) produces the idea of the contingency of utter chance, not realizing that “a thing is called contingent only because of a defect of our knowledge” (*E* 1, Prop. 33 Schol. 1).⁴⁸ This is what allows Spinoza to claim throughout the *Ethics*, and most famously in the Appendix to Part 1, that the various illusions of superstition—the belief in God the king, in a universe governed by final causes, et cetera—are not purely negative, or to be discounted. They are, as Read remarks, “produced by conditions that range from the basic striving for survival to the limits of the imagination, and finally, to the political struggles and ideologies that benefit from superstition.”⁴⁹ As we’ll see, religion itself, which Spinoza focuses on in the *Theological-Political Treatise*, is not simply or necessarily superstitious; it can be a politically meaningful activity, with a real (albeit limited) function in the constitution of a peaceful and free community. In fact, Spinoza spends much of the *TTP* trying to show how philosophy is eminently compatible with piety, and distinguishing a true from a superstitious form of religion.

At a political level, then, any form of government that draws on passions rather than adequate ideas corresponds to a certain state of servitude, even if the passions in question—for example, hope or devotion—are joyful. But why is that? It is because the government in question privileges imagination over reason, passivity over activity, or external causes over adequate ideas. It’s precisely insofar as the mind has inadequate ideas—that is, ideas of images or bodily affections representing states of affairs, or the effect of an external body on its own—that it is said to *imagine*. When it is able fully to *understand*, that is, relate to a given body from the point of view of its essence, or *sub aeternitatis specie*, and no longer simply from the point of view of how it is in actual time, then it is said to *know*. Insofar as human beings are determined to do something as a result of an inadequate idea, they are passive: what they do, they do not on the basis of their own essence, or of

a cause that can be perceived by the intelligence of their power. Adequate ideas, on the other hand, are true ideas, which are in us in the same way that they are in God. They too are representative, but in a different sense: they represent not states of affairs, or affections, but what we and what things *are*. They can be *explained* by virtue of our own essence or power, as the power to know and comprehend. Euclidean geometry is, once again, the model Spinoza follows to illustrate his thesis: we can't think of a triangle without also thinking that it has three sides, or that its three angles make up two right angles. In this instance, the object of thought determines the mind to think that, automatically and necessarily. This means that we can't have the idea of a triangle, and *then* deny or affirm its properties. It's the idea *as such* that causes us to affirm its properties (*E* 1, Prop. 17 Schol.). Spinoza generalizes this example by concluding that "if the abstract figures of geometry can be understood as causes that determine the mind to think, then the same must be true, and possibly truer, in the case of ideas drawn from the arguably more messy world of concrete experiences and desires." A further, more general conclusion follows: only the government of oneself and others through adequate ideas corresponds to the reign of freedom and virtue. "All appetites or desires," Spinoza writes, "are passions only insofar as they arise from inadequate ideas, and they are accredited to virtue when they are aroused or generated by adequate ideas" (*E* 5, Prop. 4 Schol.). The crucial problem, consequently, consists in knowing how to constitute or obtain adequate ideas, given our tendency spontaneously to generate inadequate ideas.

But, assuming for the moment that there is a path to such a goal, the matter does not end there. For in addition, and to complicate things further, Spinoza is very clear about the fact that the recognition of truth as such is never sufficient to make us abandon our false ideas or superstitions (and therein lies his potential contribution to a critique of ideology): "Nothing positive which a false idea has is removed by the presence of the true insofar as it is true" (*E* 4, Prop. 1). This is a surprising and particularly insightful claim, which points to the limits of truth as such, by which I mean its mere presence and evidence: in and of itself, or *insofar as it is true*, truth isn't effective and never sufficient. This is a conclusion that heads of state and politicians have rightly drawn for centuries, and philosophers find difficult to accept: truth will only take us so far. Let me turn, once again, to Read's analysis:

As [Spinoza] demonstrates with a favourite example of seventeenth-century philosophy, the apparent motion of the sun, there is nothing in the (adequate) idea of a heliocentric solar system that dispenses with the image of the sun rising in the east. The imaginary image of the sun as a small object circling

the earth is not dissipated by the knowledge that things are otherwise. While true or adequate ideas have a particular causality, determining the mind to think (as in the example of the triangle), this causality is not absolute. Knowing the truth, or knowing the right thing to do, does not mean that one always acts accordingly. Human action is marked by that curious pattern of activity that Spinoza describes as “seeing the better and doing the worse” (E4p17s). True knowledge of the better or the worse (or what increases or diminishes the body’s and mind’s power) does not necessitate the corresponding actions or even desires. There is a limited power, a limited causality or effectivity, of the true “insofar as it is true” (*praesenti veri quatenus verum*).⁵⁰

This claim is all the more surprising in that it appears to contradict Spinoza’s argument at the end of Part II, which ascribes a certain causality to ideas. How, then, should we understand Spinoza’s “insofar as it is true?” Macherey’s view is that whatever causality or effectiveness true ideas may have, they do not stem from the sovereign power of their truth but from their causal connections with other ideas:

By themselves true ideas are not capable of dispensing with the illusions of the imagination or the desires and fears that overcome the mind. If a true idea overcomes a false idea, an illusion, it is not because it is true but because of its force as an idea, the intensity with which it is held, and the frequency with which it is reflected upon. In order for the truth, for knowledge and thought, to become effective, to govern one’s thought and actions, they must become actualized in ideas, actions and behaviours.⁵¹

All of this is to say that one can’t combat superstitions and false beliefs only with true ideas. Truth itself needs to be turned into praxis and habit, inscribed in our daily life. Only when it is *embodied*, when it affects other ideas and our bodily states, does it become effective. This is something another seventeenth-century philosopher, Pascal, had understood when, in defense of Christian rituals, he wrote: “We must combine outward and inward to obtain anything from God; in other words we must go down on our knees, pray with our lips, etc., so that the proud man [*l’homme orgueilleux*] who would not submit to God must now submit to his creature.”⁵² To which he added, recognizing the limits and at the same time the necessity of superstition: “It is superstitious to put one’s hopes in formalities, but arrogant [*superbe*] to refuse to submit to them.”⁵³

How, then, do we extract ourselves from our (natural) state of servitude, or relative impotence, and reach a state of freedom, or power? Or, to

formulate this in more political terms: how do we move from a state of society in which passions rule freely and superstition prevails to one in which reason governs the life and institutions of society as a whole? Spinoza is very clear about the fact that the force through which human beings persevere in existence (*in existendo*) is always surpassed by the power of external causes. And it is by virtue of being thus exposed to the power of external causes that human beings are subjected to passions. The government of (or by) affects—which he calls “superstition”—is thus the natural and dominant form of government: human beings, he says in the *Political Treatise*, “are necessarily subject to affects” (*TP* 1: 5) and want others to conform to their own desire. But insofar as this form of government inhibits the power of the individual, it amounts to a form of servitude; insofar as human beings are subjected to passions, “they cannot be said to agree in nature” and oppose one another constantly (*E* 4, Prop. 34). In other words, the reign of passions is one in which human beings cannot live in peace with one another. This is obviously the case for sad passions such as envy or hatred, to which I’ll return in chapter 3. But even when they live as subjects of joyful passions, the latter tend to be the result of a projection into a future the outcome of which is uncertain; their hope might therefore be groundless, or crushed, and followed by a period of despair.

The question then becomes a twofold one, corresponding to two possibilities: how can human beings minimize the generation of sad passions, and maximize the generation of joyful passions, so that they will live together harmoniously and enable their power, perfection, or desire to increase? More decisively still, how can a government *by* and *through* the affects move to a government *of* the affects (by Reason) (*E* 4, Prop. 17 Schol.)? The two questions are of course intimately linked, insofar the government of life by reason will necessarily amount to doing what’s good for human nature and what agrees with the nature of every single person (*E* 4, Prop. 35 proof). This means that, so long as we are not dominated by affects that are contrary to our nature, “the power of the mind whereby it endeavours to understand things is not hindered” (*E* 5, Prop. 10 proof); it is thus free to form clear and distinct ideas of such things, and to be less affected by them, that is, less passive in relation to the affects they generate (*E* 5, Prop. 6). Yet Spinoza is quick to add that this type of life is extremely rare, given that human beings are disposed to envy and mutual dislike (*E* 4, Prop. 35 Schol.). But this is no reason not to try to attain it and see that the life that is filled with joyful passions is itself unnecessary when compared with the life that is guided by Reason, or the life that corresponds to the highest expression of human desire and perfection.

Having said that, it would seem that Spinoza leaves wide open the question of how joyful passions can be generated within the *civitas*, and, between the absolute servitude of the passions, incarnated in the state of nature, and the absolute freedom of what Hegel would call the rational state, which states or regimes (if any) are preferable. To be sure, and in the absence of a perfect knowledge of our affects—that is, of our ability to order and connect the affections of the body according to the order of the intellect—the *Ethics* provides what Spinoza calls a “right method of living” (*rectam vivendi rationem*), or “fixed rules of life” (*certa vitae dogmata*) (E 5, Prop. 10 Schol.). For example, hatred and envy should be conquered by love or generosity, rather than hatred. Similarly, anger and fear will be conquered by courage and strength of mind (*fortitudo*). What those examples have in common is their ability to identify what is good in a given thing or situation, and thus their ability to ground their action on a feeling of joy rather than sadness. But will those practical rules of conduct, and this provisional ethics, allow us to understand and, more importantly still, live happily within socially and politically organized passions, or essentially imaginary states?

My claim is that, far from moving away from the politics of superstition, and ever closer to a free republic, our age, and even our democratic regimes, encourage superstition; far from liberating us from passivity, they perpetuate it. The alternative, it seems, is between the politics of hope and the politics of fear, or between the politics of the heart and the politics of the guts. At the same time, freedom is increasingly associated with the freedom to choose—and to choose from within, and according to norms generated by, the market—and not with the freedom to think, or (which amounts to the same thing) with the freedom to act and live according to principles dictated by reason. Increasingly, freedom is considered as a given, rather than as something to be conquered, wrested from our state of natural servitude (our own stupor, superstition, and stupidity), and educated. The habits of the market have replaced those of religion. But thinking is still devalued and marginalized.

2. A Historical Example: The Ancient Hebrews

In order to disentangle such technologies of the heart we need to turn to Spinoza’s analysis of the history of the Ancient Hebrews.⁵⁴ The latter, which occupies most of the *TTP*, becomes the pretext for a more general reflection on the imaginary nature of society itself: every political body needs to organize itself around an imaginary construction that will tame the unruly and unstable affects of the multitude. At the same time, and in order to

understand its style and real target, we need to emphasize the specific historical circumstances under which Spinoza wrote his *Treatise*. Throughout the seventeenth century, and despite their (deserved) reputation as a sanctuary for religious minorities and free thinkers, the United Provinces were torn apart by disputes concerning the political authority of the Church. What began as a controversy between the Cartesians and the Voetians—the followers of Gisbertius Voetius, rector of the University of Utrecht and a staunch defender of Orthodox Calvinism—evolved into a political divide pitting the Republicans, supported by the Grand Pensionary Johann De Witt against those who, like the Voetian theologians, longed for the return of a quasi-monarchical Stadtholder.⁵⁵ It is also generally thought that the publication of the *TTP*, on which Spinoza worked between 1665 and 1670, was precipitated by the death of Adriaan Koerbagh in 1669. Koerbagh was a close friend of Spinoza and held views similar to Spinoza's regarding the identity of God's laws and those of nature, as well as the questionable nature of Christian beliefs such as the divinity of Christ or the objective reality of miracles. He made those views public, under his own name and in Dutch, in two treatises that provoked the anger of the Calvinist clergy.⁵⁶ He was charged with blasphemy and sentenced to ten years in prison. Spinoza expresses his outrage and indignation at Koerbagh's treatment in the Preface to the *Treatise*. In many ways, then, the *Treatise* is Spinoza's response to the threat of an overthrow of the fragile institutions of the Dutch Republic by those radical Calvinists who, like the ancient Hebrews he describes in the *TTP*, saw themselves as chosen by God and planned to turn the Republic into a theocracy. It is an attempt to convince aspiring philosophers and free thinkers that the use of natural reason is compatible with piety and the true content of Scripture. He spent the next seven years (until his death in 1676) on another political treatise, the *Tractatus Politicus*, to which I'll return in my discussion of spite and resentment.

The general argument regarding the organization of a political collective is the following: people *never* surrender their natural right or power entirely; the social pact signals not the abdication but the transfer of the power of the multitude, which means the translation of its sovereignty into law, or of *jus* into *lex*. This is why, in the long run at least, the multitude tends not to submit to forms of power that are based exclusively on coercion and repression (*TTP* 17: 201–2). In this view the right and power of the state is not limited to what it can compel human beings to do from *fear*. In fact, it is the tyrannical ruler, or oppressive regime, which should (and does in fact) live in fear of the right and power that the oppressed always retain, and end up exercising sooner or later. As a result, good government needs to include other

mechanisms to command obedience, other ways of aligning the power of the individual with that of the state. Good government ensures that subjects *desire* to obey: "Obedience is less a matter of physical action than of internal mental action, so that the person who is *most* under the control of someone else is the one who is *wholeheartedly* [*integro animo*] set on obeying all the other's commands" (*TTP* 17: 202). As a result—and bearing in mind that human beings also fail to submit to the common power for exclusively rational reasons—myths, rituals, and other collective forms of government through the imagination, or what we could call technologies of the heart, become an essential ingredient of politics itself: "The ruler with the greatest authority is the one who *reigns in the hearts* of his subjects" (*TTP* 17: 202). Hope and love, together with a *degree* of fear (such as in the feeling of reverence, which combines fear and admiration), are far more effective tools to command obedience than coercion, repression, and terror.⁵⁷

Let me now turn to the more specific example of the Hebrew state. According to Spinoza's reconstruction, Moses was able to institute such a regime of the imagination precisely by inserting the immanent, historical, and contingent condition of his people within the framework of a more general *sacred* history, which transcended it. In his view, after the exodus from Egypt and their liberation from tyranny, the people of Israel regained their natural right to do anything that was in their power. It is in this context that Moses labeled the Hebrews the "chosen people," and employed the idea of *historia sacra* as a means of encouraging them to subject themselves to a lawful condition. Spinoza is very explicit on this point: "This is why Moses, with his virtue and by divine command, introduced religion into the commonwealth, so that people would do its duty more from devotion than from fear" (*TTP* 5: 74). On one level, and as a first pact, the Hebrews transferred their natural right only to God, and not to any mortal, by following the advice of Moses. They decided to obey *absolutely* all of God's commands and to recognize no law other than that which God had revealed to Moses. Rightly, they referred to God as "the King of the Hebrews." In this theocracy, civil law and religion, citizenship and religious duties became indistinguishable. In fact, and on another level, no such transfer ever took place, for the simple reason that no single human being ever benefited from it. Instead, "everyone surrendered his right equally, as happens in a democracy [*Democratia*] . . . and they all remained completely equal in this contract" (*TTP* 5: 206). Soon thereafter, however, they *did* relinquish their sovereignty and promised to obey not whatever God said to them but whatever God said to Moses. Moses became the interpreter of God's laws, and thus also the supreme judge, who in turn could not be judged. By transferring to Moses

the right to consult God, and regarding him as a prophet and divine oracle, they also abandoned their right to choose his successor, and thus turned their democracy into a theocracy. The political, horizontal plane of immanence, defined by freedom and equality, gave way to a vertical, theocratic plane of transcendence.

Spinoza's analysis of the Hebrews' history displays a very peculiar view of political theology. While Carl Schmitt claims that the most important (modern) political concepts are derived from theology,⁵⁸ Spinoza suggests the opposite: ideas such as that of a unique, omnipotent God are in fact a (religious) solution to a specific historical and political problem (*TTP* 3). It is because the Hebrews had only recently left Egypt and the state of slavery in which they had been kept and to which they had become accustomed that Moses had to present God as a supreme lawgiver and persuade them to subject themselves to the law. In the theological-political nexus, it is the political, and not the religious, which comes first. Despite its title, Spinoza's *Theological-Political Treatise* can thus be read as an attempt to bring political theology to an end, because it is an attempt to bring the transcendence of the sacred history back into the immanence of political history. On many occasions, Spinoza asserts that the real purpose of religious ceremonies and the sacred history that sustains them is the preservation of the state, rather than the glorification of God.⁵⁹ And that is what makes them historically significant.

The Hebraic state was, from the point of view of obedience, and initially at least, a remarkable success. It managed to bring the desires of the Hebrews as a whole in line with the desire of God as interpreted by the prophets, and then in line with Moses as God's privileged interlocutor and interpreter. In other words, it succeeded in gathering, channeling, and funneling the desires of the Hebrews through the transcendence of the Law and the devotion inspired by prophecy. Its success was due primarily to its ability to create techniques of obedience, which shaped bodies and minds alike and which included: love of country, religious fervor (combined with hatred for other religions and states), regular and precise rituals and ceremonies, holidays and traditions such as the Jubilee, practices such as charity and love (*caritas et amor*), and of course, all the commandments and prohibitions prescribed by the Law (*TTP* 17: 224). Not just love, then, but piety, was the secret of the Hebrew covenant. In sum,

every single thing they had to do according to a specific prescript of the Law. They could not plough as and when they pleased, but could only do so at certain times and in particular years, and with one kind of beast at a time; they could sow and reap only in a certain way and at a particular time; their

lives without exception were a continual *practice of obedience*. . . . (TTP 17:224, emphasis added)

And again:

Three times in the year they feasted with God . . . they had to cease from all work on the seventh day of the week and allow themselves to rest; and, besides these, other times were designated when honest enjoyment and feasting were not so much allowed as prescribed. I do not think that anything can be devised which is more effective than this for swaying men's minds. Nothing captivates minds more effectively than the cheerfulness arising from devotion, i.e. from love and wonder together. (TTP 17: 225)

The aim of this rigid set of rules, habits, and codes was to discipline the mind and the body, to direct the affects of the Hebrews. It was to govern their desires by channeling and orienting them. The role of the body in this remarkable technique of government was most evident in circumcision. According to Spinoza, this practice alone would have been sufficient to keep the Hebrew people separated from any other and (Spinoza states with characteristic irony) make them supremely confident that, should the opportunity present itself again, God would not hesitate to choose them once more (TTP 3: 55). By inscribing the covenant with God on the body itself, circumcision also affected the mind, and thus proved to be a powerful and effective technique of government. The Hebrews ended up *loving* the Law, that is, desiring "only what was prescribed" (TTP 17: 224), and were even ready to fight and die for it. They *enjoyed* obeying and desiring Moses' prescriptions, much in the way that, later on, and to return to Pascal's insightful remark, Christians would enjoy and identify with the rituals and prescriptions of the Catholic Church. The result of this enterprise was that the Hebrews saw their situation as one of "freedom rather than slavery" (TTP 17: 224). In that respect, Moses inaugurates the reign of pastoral power and epitomizes the figure of the ascetic priest, whose genius consists in turning the unruly and potentially rebellious multitude into an obedient flock.

Spinoza applies the same idea to Christian ceremonies, which were instituted with a view to preserving the political community within which they were established (TTP 5: 75). Similarly, the Chinese "zealously retain a kind of topknot on their heads, by which they distinguish themselves" from other people (TTP 3: 55). In sum: the character of such rituals may vary from one society to another, but all societies have to rely on them, because

every society needs to manage and control the unstable and unpredictable nature of human affects.

Freud holds a remarkably similar view in the third essay on *Moses and Monotheism*, written in the darkest hour of European history and the most violent display of anti-Semitism that continent has ever known. In a Prefatory Note from June 1938, he writes of the certainty that, had he not left Vienna and found refuge in London that year, he would have been persecuted not only for his controversial line of thought regarding the figure of Moses "The Egyptian" and the origin of Judaism, but for his "race." In essence, the question he asks about Moses is the same as Spinoza's: "How is it possible for a single man to evolve such extraordinary effectiveness that he can form a people out of random individuals and families, can stamp them with their definitive character and determine their fate for thousands of years?"⁶⁰ What, in other words, is the secret of the character of the Jewish people, "a character which is probably what has made their survival to the present day possible?"⁶¹ The answer he provides is also similar to Spinoza's. By anchoring the Jews' identity in religion and assuring them that they were God's chosen people, Moses increased their self-esteem considerably, to the point of making them feel superior to all other peoples.⁶² Elsewhere, as we saw, Freud defines religion as an illusion and a superstition, rather than a mere error. Like Kant, he points to its practical use and its *civilizing* function, while disputing its claim to truth. In addition, and crucially, of the many precepts of the new religion, which all demonstrated the Jews' willingness to love and obey their God as a result of having been chosen, the prohibition against making an image of God stood out. By making God invisible, it signaled "a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality," of "an abstract idea" over "sensory perception," and thus shaped the Jews' inclination toward intellectual pursuits.⁶³ The prohibition elevated God to a higher degree (from its original sensuous, totemic origin); it made its people feel "proud" and "superior to other people who have remained under the spell of sensuality."⁶⁴ But why, Freud goes on to ask, should an advance in intellectuality, a "set-back to sensuality" or "instinctual renunciation"—without which, he claims, there can be no civilization—be the source of a greater self-regard?⁶⁵ *Prima facie*, the renunciation of an instinctual demand, especially of an erotic nature, is a source of displeasure—at least when it is the result of external obstacles. But, Freud remarks, psychoanalysis teaches us that instinctual renunciation can also be the result of an internal process, driven by the inhibiting and prohibiting force of a supreme authority, whether of the group as a whole or of the individual. A different, sometimes higher kind

of pleasure is derived from the *obedience* to such a commanding, punishing authority. Such an authority—the successor and representative of an individual's parents—is also a source of love, and one we are too afraid to lose by defying it. By obeying it, we seek its approval; and its approval is experienced as “liberation and satisfaction.”⁶⁶ Moses is thus credited with having “created the Jews” through a particularly effective allegiance to an authority that is both loved and feared.⁶⁷ He federated a random set of individuals and families into a cohesive group by subjecting them to a strict and long list of precepts and prohibitions, which they learned to desire and even love:

The people of Israel had believed themselves to be the favourite child of God, and when the great father caused misfortune after misfortune to rain down upon this people of his, they were never shaken in their belief in his relationship to them or questioned his power or righteousness. Instead, they produced the prophets, who held up their sinfulness before them; and out of their sense of guilt they created the over-strict commandments of their priestly religion.⁶⁸

And that, Spinoza would say, is a prime example of effective government, of a government through *voluntary* servitude and superstition—even if, when all is said and done, it is one that also puts the chosen people on the path of reason, and therefore at an advantage with respect to other collective assemblages that are still dependent on perceptual knowledge.

Instinctual renunciation, by which Freud means the renunciation of an aggressive, hostile impulse as a result of a deep-seated fear, is in fact the root of all religions, if not of civilization itself. In the second essay of *Totem and Taboo*, he traces a line that runs through the taboo regulations of so-called primitive or animist societies, the prohibitions of monotheistic religions, and the foundations of modern morality:

It may begin to dawn on us that the taboos of the savage Polynesians are after all not so remote from us as we were inclined to think at first, that the moral and conventional prohibitions by which we ourselves are *governed* may have some essential relationship with these primitive taboos and that an explanation of taboo might throw a light upon the obscure origin of our own “categorical imperative.”⁶⁹

The source of our categorical imperative, and of the moral and religious prohibitions we take for granted, is, Freud claims, identical to that of the taboos governing distant societies. Those forms of authority are all instruments of

government, ways of bringing people together by demanding that they renounce their most fundamental and aggressive impulses.

With the publication of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud began to see the human psyche as the seat of a primordial aggressive drive, one that is independent of the economy of pleasure that defines the ego- and libidinal instincts and, as such, constitutes the greatest threat to the constitution and expansion of peaceful societies. Since the original inclination to aggression and cruelty is “the greatest impediment to civilisation,”⁷⁰ the fundamental question for the emergence and survival of civilization, and the primordial political question, is that of the inhibition of such instinct. The founding political question consists in asking how to combine single human individuals into ever greater unities (“families, then races, peoples and nations,” and ultimately “mankind”), how to bind them *libidinally* to one another (for “necessity alone, the advantages of work in common, will not hold them together”).⁷¹ As Spinoza had rightly argued in his political writings, the only way to build a true (that is, long-lasting and peaceful) *civitas* is not through fear, hatred, or even utility, but through love. But in the absence of a purely rational republic, in which each would act as a result of a careful process of deliberation and a rational decision, a certain training of the psyche, preferably one based on love, will be inevitable. While preferable, such a libidinal regime is nonetheless rare. For the most part, the remedy against man’s desire for aggression has consisted in the emergence and solidification of prohibitions of the type we have spoken of, and the constitution of a new and in fact tyrannical authority: namely, “conscience.” By that, Freud means the introjection or internalization of that aggressive desire, its reorientation toward its point of origin, namely, the ego, now split between the ordinary ego and the “superego,” which infiltrates—in fact, poisons—the ego with a constant sense of guilt and a need for punishment. The cost to the ego is, in that respect, significant, if not disproportionate: there is no hiding from the superego, and the once crucial distinction “between doing something bad and wishing to do it disappears entirely,” thus raising cruelty to new and in reality limitless heights. The mechanism of control and inhibition has been entirely internalized.

In conclusion, and with a view to opening up the final part of this chapter, I would like to borrow a term from Louis Althusser and suggest that, for Spinoza, every society requires its own “ideological state apparatus.”⁷² The use of that term in this context isn’t arbitrary: Althusser explicitly says that it is Spinoza who opened his eyes to the *material* existence of ideology.⁷³ With this expression, he meant not only its material social *conditions*, that is, its connections with interests blinded by the imagination of a social group (ideology as

false consciousness), but also the *materiality* of the very existence of ideology: its rituals, day-to-day practices, and institutions; its history and specific function, related to, yet distinct from, the (essentially repressive and violent) state apparatus. Using a more Foucauldian vocabulary, we could say that relations of production, and the reproduction of the conditions of production, operate alongside technologies of the self or techniques of embodiment, which vary and evolve according the epochs of history; but all—pastoral, disciplinary, eco-normative, algorithmic—involve the repetition of gestures and words, the acquisition of habits, the internalization of norms of behavior, et cetera. As a result, the question of emancipation and counter-conduct is also, and equally importantly, the question of the status of bodies and embodiment *outside* these forms of power. This is why, Read argues—and as we can see from E4p10s—“liberation from ‘servitude,’ from the powers of the false, is not accomplished once and for all in the act of comprehending the truth, but must itself become a practice, a habit, of organising our thoughts and affects.”⁷⁴ Like obedience, freedom needs to be *embodied*.

This sits well with Spinoza’s monistic framework, for which the ideal and the material, or mind and body, aren’t opposed to one another. As much as he argues for a radical separation between the first kind of knowledge—which originates in signs, random encounters, and the imagination—and the second, which originates in common notions, this separation is one that needs to be put into practice, time and again, in order to be effective (E 2, Prop. 40 Schol. 2). Knowledge is not this magic wand that makes all superstitions and illusions disappear; it is itself a fragile practice that requires a continual struggle against the tide of superstition and imagination. It is a mode of existence, and even a way of life, that does not leave the realm of affects and the imagination behind, but engages and transforms them.

II. Economic Superstitions, or Market Fetishism

One would think that the obvious point of departure for a Marxist critique of superstition would be his concept of ideology, insofar as it designates the range of discourses and practices, from religion to law and philosophy, which emanate entirely unaware from the depths of social and economic relations. As such, they express something fundamentally different from what they claim to express; and the truth they pursue, the objects they identify, and the subjects they shape turn out be mere illusions. The critique of political economy, and the rationality it promotes, demands a critique of all the other rationalities that have a claim to truth regarding human reality. Inevitably, I will begin by looking at ideology thus understood (section 1).

Very quickly, however, I will turn to superstition in a more fundamental, and specifically economic sense, which Marx captured with the term “fetishism.” It does not (or at least not primarily) refer to the item of clothing or the mobile phone we worship and “absolutely must have.” This more familiar sense of fetishism is, from the Marxist perspective, only secondary and derivative. It is rooted in the capitalist mode of production itself, which Marx summarized with the notion of “commodity fetishism” (sections 2 and 3).⁷⁵ By the same token, it also means that superstition can’t be attributed to mere ideology (to religion, for example)—that is, to what is after all only a surface effect of a deeper, more mysterious set of relations. Although it does indeed function in that way in Marx’s work, it also and more significantly designates the very form of social relations under the capitalist mode of production. This, I believe, means that there is an *imaginary* reality of capitalism itself, embedded not in ideology, but in commodity (as well as financial) fetishism. Similarly, and simultaneously, it means that ideology has a material existence or reality, and even a history. The latter point, as I have already suggested, will require a careful evaluation of Althusser’s concept of ideological state apparatus, to which I will turn in the third and final section of this part of this chapter. As an indication of traces of superstition within the Marxian discourse itself, however, I will end this second part with a few critical remarks on Marx’s own ambiguous, if not ambivalent claims regarding the place of “man” in relation to nature, and the fantasy of omnipotence to which he at times succumbs (section 4).

1. Superstition as Ideology?

The critique of superstition is an invisible thread that runs through the whole of Marx’s thought, from his very early philosophical writings to the third volume of *Capital*. In his doctoral thesis from 1841, *The Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, we find the following passage:

Whereas *Aristotle* reproached the ancients for believing that the heavens needed Atlas to support them . . . Epicurus finds fault with those who believe that man needs the heavens. He finds Atlas himself, on whose back the heavens hang, in human stupidity and superstition [*in der menschlichen Dummheit und dem Aberglauben*]. Stupidity and superstition also are Titans.⁷⁶

In that early work, Marx seeks to compare, contrast, and assess two different conceptions of not only atomism, but also freedom. As in Spinoza, the

question of superstition is intimately bound up with, and in fact identical to, that of servitude (Marx, following Hegel, prefers to call it “alienation”), and of knowing how to free ourselves from its shackles. Marx’s reading of the ancient Greek materialist schools of thought, which had flourished in the aftermath of the collapse of liberty in Athens in the late fifth century BCE, brought him face to face with those bent on rejecting the burden of traditional superstitions. It planted the seeds of a new materialism, beyond the idealist tendencies and metaphysical derivations of the Hegelian school of thought. The materialism in question, however, was to find its expression not in a revised, modern atomism or philosophy of nature, or a new philosophical system, but in a critique of political economy. As Marx will put it most clearly almost two decades later in the Preface to *A Contribution to Political Economy* (1859), his early work, especially his critical examination of the Hegelian philosophy of law in *Critique of Hegel’s Doctrine of the State* (1843), led him “to the conclusion that neither legal relations nor political forms could be comprehended whether by themselves or on the basis of a so-called general development of the human mind, but that on the contrary they originate in the material conditions of life, the totality of which Hegel, following the example of English and French thinkers of the eighteenth century, embraces within the term ‘civil society’; that the anatomy of the civil society, however, has to be sought in political economy.”⁷⁷

While retaining political economy as the ground on which the battle against superstition (or “ideology”) was to be fought, the critique in question required a confrontation with, and departure from, the views of the “modern political economists,” by which Marx meant the likes of J. B. Say, A. Smith, D. Ricardo, and J. S. Mill. As we’ll see, Marx eventually came to the conclusion that it’s not just the superstructure of ideology, but the entire system of economic production and exchange, known as capitalism, that is a superstition, concentrated and summarized in the phenomenon of “commodity fetishism.” The system in question is not simply a set of beliefs; it is a system of servitude, or alienation. And it needs to be fought with the same vigor and determination once displayed by the physical materialists against religion, which he had analyzed in his doctoral thesis. In fact, Marx sees “ideology” (by which he means the entire production of ideas, representations, and forms of consciousness, such as religion, morality, law, or metaphysics) as a mere effect of our social conditions of existence, one that can be addressed only through a rigorous critique and transformation. As paradoxical and scandalous as this may seem, the values, laws, and truths of those superstructures are today’s heavens, in whose hands we put our trust, or the Titans that prop up ideology. We assume that they represent the real

world, when in fact they are nothing but the emanation of the material conduct of men and women—that is, of the relations and forces of production that determine their existence. By contrast with German idealism, Marx and Engels write in *German Ideology* (1845–46), which descends from heaven to the earth, materialists ascend from earth to heaven. They do not set out from what human beings say, imagine, or conceive about themselves in order to arrive at human beings in the flesh. Rather, they set out from real, active human beings, from the life-process that sustains and shapes them, and then demonstrate the necessary character of the ideological formations, reflexes, and habits they hold dear. In a way strikingly reminiscent of Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura*, and his critique of superstition as stemming from our ability to project our fears and hopes onto natural figures and images, Marx and Engels speak of the “phantoms formed in the human brain [*die Nebelbildungen im Gehirn der Menschen*]” as a result of their life-process, and of the need to bring them back to their material, empirically verifiable conditions.⁷⁸ The superstition, in this instance, consists in holding onto the truth of the *content* of those representations, and indeed of the very *form* of those representations (the form “metaphysics” or “religion”), as Hegel himself does, as if they existed independent of their material conditions of production. It consists in believing that consciousness determines life, when it is in fact life that determines consciousness.⁷⁹ In that respect, Marx's critique of superstition echoes that of Feuerbach, who, in his short book *The Essence of Religion* (1845)—which became the basis for his Heidelberg *Lectures on The Essence of Religion* in 1848—argues (like Lucretius) that the essence and ground of religion is our encounter with nature. Because we are creatures of imagination or *Phantasie*, and rooted in sensuous experience, we do not first relate to nature through abstract thought, or perceive it as an objective phenomenon determined by laws. Our desires and wishes, hopes and fears transform the beings of nature into suprasensible beings, and the uncanny character of nature into a familiar and comfortable nature. In his *Lectures*, Feuerbach opposes those who believe that “man has a special organ of religion, a special religious feeling.”⁸⁰ But this is perhaps where the proximity with Marx ends. Indeed, like Spinoza, Feuerbach recognizes “the existence of a special organ of superstition,” and thus something like an inevitable, innate tendency to construct imaginary entities.⁸¹ Marx, on the other hand, is more of a rationalist, and believes that a proper critique (by which he means a critique of political economy) can root out all superstitions. Lenin agrees: economic slavery, he argues, is the cause of religious belief among men.⁸² For both Marx and Lenin, ideology is a pure illusion, an empty and vain dream, with its reality wholly exterior to it. It is a purely imaginary construction and, as

such, nothingness. Yet it is not a coincidence that, as I began to show earlier in this chapter, Althusser turns to Spinoza to complicate Marx's concept of ideology, and forges that of ideological state apparatuses, irreducible to and relatively autonomous from the (repressive) state apparatus. He thus paves the way for a conception of superstition as something that can't be simply wished (or rationalized) out of existence.

But, anticipating somewhat what I will be discussing in detail in the third and final part of this chapter, I want to take the discussion in a slightly different direction and suggest that, through his analysis of fetishism, Marx actually comes close to thinking together the reality of the relations of production (and the role of the state in sustaining and reproducing them) and that of ideology in the more sophisticated, Althusserian sense. Alongside "superstition" (*Aberglaube*), Marx famously uses the words "mystification," "magic and macromancy," "metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties [*metaphysischer Spitzfindigkeit und theologischer Mucken*]" to characterize the various forms of the capitalist fetish. What if the root of all superstitions, the superstition that makes all other superstitions possible, were fetishism? This would mean that superstition is not just a matter of ideology in the restricted, vulgar sense, but a matter of the material conditions of production themselves; not just an effect of relations of production at the level of representation, but an effect of the material form in which they are given (commodity, money, interest-bearing capital, etc.). In what follows, I want to argue that there is a materiality of superstition itself, with the consequence that any critique of superstition is at the same time a transformation of the material conditions of existence. If that's the case, then there is no difference whatever between theory and praxis, and philosophy (as critique) names both at the same time.

But Marx doesn't immediately arrive at this conclusion, as a brief survey of his early writings reveals. If we turn to his notes on James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*, written during the spring and summer of 1844, we see that he distinguishes between two forms of superstition with regard to the nature of the relation between money and property. The first, "primitive" view sees actual, solid money as an absolute value contained in the precious metal, and the true source of wealth: "For the primitive economic superstitions of peoples and governments cling to tangible, palpable and visible bags of money and hold that the sole reality of wealth lies in the absolute value of the precious metals and in the possession of them."⁸³ This is the view that "the enlightened, worldly-wise economist," such as Ricardo or Mill, criticizes, by showing that money is a commodity like any other and that, consequently, its value depends on the relations "between the costs of

production and supply and demand (competition), or between the costs and the quantity of competition of other commodities."⁸⁴ No doubt, these "modern economists" saw through the "sensuous superstition" according to which money "exists exclusively in precious metals."⁸⁵ The problem is that they replaced one, "crude" superstition with a "sophisticated" superstition that is, for that very reason, harder to expose. In another text from the same period, known as *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, and in the third manuscript in particular, which deals with private property, Marx speaks of the way in which "to this enlightened political economy, the supporters of the monetary and mercantile system, who look upon private property as a *purely objective* being for man, appear as *fetish-worshippers*, as *Catholics*."⁸⁶ They are fetishists because they view wealth (or property) only as an object, and not in its subjective existence, that is, as *labor*. Adam Smith, by contrast, and in the words of Engels, is the Luther of political economy.⁸⁷ He disqualified the idea of wealth "as something outside man and independent of him—and therefore only to be acquired and maintained externally."⁸⁸ Private property, he claims, is equivalent to labor, and labor is a human reality. However, far from leading Smith to a critical position, the recognition of this fact signals a shift of private property into the being or essence of the human, and thus the reification of the human. As such, political economy is "the denial of man," it is "anti-human";⁸⁹ and it is a more sophisticated form of superstition.

Is this, then, the "sophisticated" superstition of political economy? Is the equivalence or reversibility of labor and wealth, of human sweat and property, the superstitious source of political economy? Both superstitions, Marx claims, have their roots in the same idea. The "enlightened" form of superstition is unable to do away with its "crude" sensuous counterpart, because "it does not attack its essence but only a specific form of that essence."⁹⁰ Although Marx does not call it that yet, the essence in question is what he will later call "commodity fetishism"—namely, the process by which social relations are defined not as a "human involvement," but as exchange, which ends up in value as expressed by money. In the relation of exchange, the human being is only the mediating term, "the *abstract relation* of private property to private property, and this abstract relation is the *value* which acquires a real existence as value only in the form of money."⁹¹ This means that something real—the *human* reality of labor as the true source of value—is covered up or concealed in the exchange value as measured by money, and incarnate in the commodity form. That is the illusion or trick, and the source of the superstition regarding the origin of value: something is revealed, made manifest, and thus given a semblance of reality, while

something else, the true mechanism of value, is disguised. Everything that matters, everything *decisive* takes place out of sight. Unbeknownst to them, human beings' relation to things, and to other human beings, is altered, even inverted: "Since in the process of exchange men do not relate to each other as men, things lose the meaning of personal, human property."⁹² As simple mediation between private property and private property, human beings become the property of things. They are reified and commoditized. At the same time, things are increasingly given human-like attributes and properties, if not magical powers and virtues. Were the process to be recognized for what it is, social relations themselves would have to be altered, and labor would have to take center stage—not, as political economists believe, simply as wage-earning activity, but as the mechanism through which capital generates more capital, or surplus value.

Nowhere is this process more visible than in the phenomenon of money, which is the greatest fetish of all, since it represents the form in which this abstraction is externalized, the value in which private property as a system of exchange can be universally expressed. Let us, for the time being, focus on money in its simplest form, as an abstract equivalent between commodities or values. I'll turn to its more complex and most fetish-like form later on, when I examine its role as interest-bearing capital. We should note in passing, though, that the constant invention of highly sophisticated and opaque financial products since the early 1980s has taken this abstraction to a new level. Unlike barter, where one exchanges the *surplus* one doesn't need, in the economy of exchange labor is immediately wage-labor, and divided. Since the individual no longer exchanges his surplus, the object of his production becomes a matter of complete indifference. What matters now is money, surplus *value*. In the context of the division of labor, the product, the material of private property, acquires the meaning of an equivalent, namely money, which is the immediate result of labor as well as the mediator of exchange. It is the sensuous, corporeal manifestation of the estrangement of the thing, qua private property, from human beings, and its unfettered dominion over them. Money represents a total indifference both to the nature of the material, or the specific nature of private property, and to the personality of the owner of private property. The relation of person to person now becomes "the universal rule of the thing over the person, the product over the producer."⁹³ The other has no relation to my product as a human being, because I myself have no relation to it:

Of course, in your eyes your product is an instrument, a means whereby to obtain possession of my product and hence to gratify your needs. But in my

eyes, it is the end of our exchange. It is you who serves as the means, the instrument, in the production of this object which is my goal.⁹⁴

The dialectic, however, does not end there. For unbeknownst to you,

you have turned yourself into the means, the instrument, the producer of your own object so as to gain possession of mine. . . . Thus you have really become a means, an instrument of your object even for yourself; your desire is its slave. . . . If our mutual servitude to the object really appears at the beginning of the development as the relation of dominance and slavery this is no more than the brutal and frank expression of our essential relationship.⁹⁵

We see, then, how the situation of exchange, even before it has been defined more precisely as a relation between capitalist and proletarian, is one of illusion and alienation, of superstition and estrangement. The relation is no longer one between persons, or even between persons and things, but between persons *as* things, and as mediated by money. The only relation, one of subordination, is to this universal mediation and quantifier.

All of this is to say that modern political economy replaces the original *sensuous* superstition regarding money with another, *abstract* superstition, which creates increasingly abstract forms of money (from paper money to the numerous representatives of money such as IOUs, bonds, bills of exchange, or other more complex financial products), by which I mean forms that are increasingly remote from the reality of labor that underpins them. Political economy conceals the alienation that is inherent to labor “*by ignoring the **direct** relationship between the worker (labour) and **production**,*” and failing to see how, by producing “marvels for the rich,” labor “produces privation for the worker.”⁹⁶ It fails to see the necessary correlation between alienated labor and private property.

Marx expands on his idea of money in the third of his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Inasmuch as it is able to buy everything and appropriate all objects, money is the most valuable object. It is “omnipotent.”⁹⁷ What I *am* and what I *can do* is defined not by my individuality and capacities, but by my purchasing power: “The stronger the power of my money, the stronger am I.”⁹⁸ Money is able to transform—launder—all my incapacities, and even vices (wickedness, dishonesty, unscrupulousness, stupidity, etc.) into their opposite. Through money I can have anything the human heart desires: beauty, honesty, intelligence, love, et cetera. Do I not therefore possess all human abilities when I possess money? Insofar as money is the highest good, isn’t its owner also good? There is therefore something magical, something

otherworldly about money. It is the greatest alchemist, who can change anything into its opposite. Marx quotes Shakespeare's *Timon of Athens*:

Gold? Yellow, glittering, precious gold? No, gods,
I am no idle votarist: roots, you clear heavens!
Thus much of this will make black, white; foul, fair;
Wrong, right; base, noble; old, young; coward, valiant.⁹⁹

Musil puts it somewhat more humorously in the chapter of *The Man Without Qualities* with the revealing title "Some of the Rules Governing the Lives of the Rich." Arnheim, the rich Prussian financier,

was convinced that being rich was a personal quality. Every rich man regards being rich as a personal quality. So does every poor man. There is a universal tacit understanding on the point. This general accord is troubled only slightly by the claims of logic that having money, while capable of conferring certain traits of character on whoever has it, is not in itself a human quality. Such an academic quibble need not detain us. . . . Destroy his bank account and his credit, and the rich man has not merely lost his money but has become, on the very day he realizes what has happened, a withered flower. (MWQ, 455)

Money has the greatest power of all, that of inversion and universal transformation: it "turns *real human and natural powers* into purely abstract representations, and therefore *imperfections* and tormenting phantoms, just as it turns *real imperfections and phantoms*—truly impotent powers which exist only in the individual's fantasy—into *real essential powers and abilities*."¹⁰⁰ Its power "transforms loyalty into treason, love into hate, virtue into vice, vice into virtue, servant into master, master into servant, nonsense into reason and reason into nonsense."¹⁰¹ In other words, it turns the world upside down. To put it back on its feet requires, quite literally, a revolution.

2. Commodity and Money Fetishism

Ten years later, having broken up with philosophy (that of Hegel and Feuerbach in particular), abandoned the idea of writing a philosophical treatise, and devoted himself instead exclusively to the analysis of modern capitalist society and a critique of political economy, Marx nonetheless expands on his early critique of superstition, mysticism, and fetishism, which he inserts within a rigorous and systematic theory of value and the commodity form. In that respect, the analyses carried out in *Grundrisse* (1859) belong together

with volumes 1 (1867) and 3 (1864–75) of *Capital*. But they also stretch back to his doctoral dissertation on Greek and Roman atomism.

In one of the most famous passages of *Capital*, Marx defines the commodity as a curious phenomenon, one that “appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing,” yet is in reality “a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties.”¹⁰² The same chapter evokes “the mystical character of the commodity,” and “the whole mysticism that surrounds the world of commodities [*aller Mysticismus der Warenwelt*], all the magic and macromancy [*all der Zauber und Spuk*] that surrounds the product of labour on the basis of commodity production.”¹⁰³ The author makes very clear that the veil of mystery that surrounds commodity production is not the result of bourgeois interpretation, and added *ex post* to the phenomenon, but belongs to the process of production itself, that is, to social reality. It is an illusion or superstition, therefore, which is a direct product of real social relations, embedded in production itself. Value, as Marx notes, “does not have written on its forehead what it is.”¹⁰⁴ On the contrary: it wears a mask, and thus gives the impression of being something that it is not.

In order to understand how this superstition is generated, and at the risk of going over familiar ground, we need to turn to Marx’s analysis of the dual nature of the commodity, beginning with the first chapter of his 1859 *Critique of Political Economy*. Every commodity, the book claims, has a twofold aspect: namely, use value and exchange value. By use value, Marx means the commodity insofar as it is necessary, useful, or simply pleasant for life. It is oriented toward the satisfaction of a particular need, and is thus a means of existence in the broadest possible sense. It is identical with the natural, palpable existence of the commodity. Now what is distinctive about use value is that while it corresponds to an object of social need, it doesn’t express a relation of social production. Furthermore, use value is a necessary but not sufficient condition of the commodity. This means that it is the “material basis” for the manifestation of a specific economic relation, namely, exchange value; yet it is insufficient to account for that relation. As such, it doesn’t belong in a critique of political economy.

Consequently, the critique in question will need to focus on the value of the exchange value, insofar as it designates an *economic* relation. The relation in question is quantitative. That is its strength, as well as its weakness: it is able to bring together two entirely heterogeneous entities, but at the cost of converting a quality into a quantity. How exactly does it do this? Through their use value, commodities can be exchanged with one another. In this relation, they constitute an identical magnitude, and thus value. Despite their

disparity in use value, they establish a commonality of exchange value: the quantity w of commodity x is equivalent to the quantity y of commodity z .

All commodities, whether as use or exchange value, are themselves the product of social activity, the result of a vital force—the very force that we call labor. As such, every commodity is incarnate, and more specifically *objectified* labor. They are “materializations” of that social activity, “crystallizations” of the same unit of measure. All of this is to say that what exchange value represents and tends to conceal is labor, which is a *human* reality, and thus a quality. Implicit here is a critique of Ricardo, who, in Marx’s eyes, had nonetheless established two important things: namely, that the *substance* of value is labor and that the *magnitude* of value is measured by the amount of time needed to produce a commodity. But Ricardo neglected a third key aspect of the relation: namely, the value *form*. This, according to Rancière, is the distinctly Marxian, critical question: “Why does the content of value take the form of value?”¹⁰⁵ Why is that particular content expressed in that form? Why does labor present and represent itself (*sich dartsellt*) as value, and why is its duration measured by the magnitude of the value of products? The critical question, therefore, consists in the problematization of the content-form relation, which Ricardo took for granted. What calls for thinking, according to Marx, is the very fact that labor is represented as value, that it adopts the form of exchange value. And once that basic form of puzzlement or wonder is introduced, another, *qualitative* relation emerges, one that the commodity form, as exchange value, covers up or conceals. That relation—labor—is the true and fundamental object of a critical political economy. The role of critique, in that respect, is to reveal something that is for the most part hidden, and to reveal it as necessarily hidden, but only under those specific historical conditions. As such, the role of critique is to expose the reality of labor under capitalism as both necessary for the production of surplus value and contingent from a historical perspective, in the sense that another form of social organization, not based on alienated labor, is possible. It is the role of praxis to bring the latter about.

Exchange value extracts from commodities, and establishes between them, a system of equivalence, which irons out or equalizes the labor that underpins it. It brings together heterogeneous realities, or realities that are *qualitatively* different from the point of view of their use value, by ignoring not labor as such or as a whole (since capitalism recognizes labor as the social form that generates exchange value, and thus homogeneous, undifferentiated labor, or “abstract general labor”), but differentiated, concrete labor, which results from the activity of workers with *different* individual characteristics. Exchange value effaces labor as expressing the *individuality*

and concrete *subjectivity* of the worker. Marx thus draws a key distinction between labor as the “natural condition of human existence,” or as a “useful activity directed to the appropriation of natural resources,” and labor as the specifically social form that generates exchange value.¹⁰⁶ The measure of the latter is *labor-time*: “Regarded as exchange-values all commodities are merely definite quantities of *congealed labor-time*.”¹⁰⁷ Labor-time—as measured in hours, days, weeks, et cetera—is the living state of existence of labor, or lived time, but reduced to its quantitative aspect. It is the labor-time of an *individual*, his or her labor-time, but only insofar as it is common to all—that is, the time required by any other person, someone in the abstract, to produce the same commodity. Only as such a universal, empty magnitude does it represent a social magnitude. This means that exchange value transforms difference into identity, quality into quantity, subjective duration into objective time. It is an operation of representation, reduction, and reification. To put it differently: the only difference it recognizes is one of quantity; the only relation it recognizes is one of abstraction. “How many? How much?” are the only questions the social form of labor can ask. They are, quite literally, the measure of its power. As for the process of reification, it consists, as I have already explained, in the systematic translation—in fact, perversion—of social relations between individuals into social relation between things. A “material veil” is thrown onto those human relations, which do not disappear, but are rendered invisible. To be sure, this “mystification” is still a very simple one in the case of a commodity: we all know, albeit intuitively, that the productive activities of real people underpin its exchange value. But it becomes less simple in more advanced forms of production, such as money: the monetary system is perhaps the greatest illusion, insofar as it conceals a complex relation of production behind a physical object with specific properties, and is perceived as the most natural, most effective means of exchange. It is at once the most abstract form of value, and the ultimate aim of all economic activity. It is the particular commodity that represents the exchange value of all commodities, and thus takes one even further away from the reality of production. It is the means through which commodities confront one another as exchange values, and the end of production. As such, it is not a “symbol,” or a mere representation, but a “mystification”—that is, the perverted appearance of a social reality, something that seems to exist by itself and necessarily, independent of individual human beings and their distinctive relations of production. But we have gone even further in recent times. With the new form of mining (namely, data mining) and the algorithmic revolution, there is no longer a difference between the production of the commodity and the commodity itself since

we have become the commodity. What is sold and bought, but also manufactured, are human desires, thoughts, fantasies, and fears; our professional, family, and friendly connections; our intimacy and lived experience, which we are encouraged to live more *fully*, more *authentically*, by comporting ourselves more like commodities. Social relations in the broadest sense and commodities are immediately translated into one another, made *equivalent* and instantly monetized.

As if by magic, then, the commodity as exchange value presents the world upside down and gives to all the impression that it is natural for things, and even for human beings, to stand on their head. Consider the example of an ordinary table. To be sure, the wood of which the table is made is altered when it is turned into a table. Yet, as a thing of use, the table remains an ordinary thing of wood. But everything changes when it appears as a commodity—that is, when it takes on the *form* of exchange value. Remarkable things begin to happen: “It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it suddenly were to begin dancing.”¹⁰⁸ Once again, Marx attributes this mysterious, quasi-magical power of the commodity to its ability to present a specific social relation and reality—namely, labor—as if it were a relation between actual, physical things, and as if the value of the product existed independent of its producers, as a relation between values. This is the extent to which the analogy with “the misty realm of religion [*die Nebelregion der religiösen Welt*]” is warranted.¹⁰⁹ For there, Marx explains in terms reminiscent of Lucretius’ assessment of *religio*, “the products of the human brain seem to be [*scheinen*] independent beings endowed with a life of their own, which enters into relations with each other and with the human race.”¹¹⁰ Fetishism, then, or economic superstition, designates the tendency to believe in a world of products, as incarnate in value, without proper consideration for the process and conditions of production. It consists in severing the abstract world of value from its concrete, material origin. Divorced from the reality of labor, physical entities like commodities can appear to exist in the nebulous, celestial sphere of suprasensible beings: as pure, disincarnate value. It is as if meaning were divorced from language, and language from the human brain; as if the world of gods and moral values were divorced from human needs, desires, and aspirations, from the fears and struggles of human beings. In that respect, there is a structural similarity between Marx’s critique of political economy and Nietzsche’s critique of morality, between the fetishism of economic values and that of moral values (to which I’ll return in my discussion of spite and *ressentiment*). In each instance, it is a matter of asking about

the material conditions under which values are generated, and thus about the possibility of a different organization of those conditions, a different society or culture. It is not a matter of critique in the Kantian sense, that is, as concerned with the conditions of possibility of experience and judgment. Critique in that sense remains abstract (and empty): it misses the concrete, material, or pre-reflective soil from which thought itself grows. It is therefore not critical enough, or critical in a sense that doesn't change anything. It can only account for, or justify, what is already given. It has no transformative power. It lacks teeth. Historical critique, on the other hand, whether dialectical or genealogical, contains within itself the possibility (indeed necessity, if one adopts a positivist stance) of historical transformation. Equally, though, historical transformation makes possible the overcoming of the illusion or "mysticism." This is what I mean: in order to suspend the translation or masking of social relation in relations between things, which corresponds to the operation of fetishism, a moment of realization or consciousness is not sufficient. It is not enough, therefore, to see the commodity as a "hieroglyph" that needs to be deciphered. It is only with the transformation of social relations themselves, and of the modes of production, that the conditions generating fetishism will be eradicated. Critique, in that respect, cannot be dissociated from praxis. This in turn suggests that fetishism is itself Janus-faced: it masks or veils, but is also a sign, a hieroglyph that forces one to think and act. I will return to this point.

3. Financial Capitalism as Fully Fledged Fetishism

The fact that advanced, especially financial capitalism appears to have moved beyond the production and consumption of tables and chairs, and introduced complex investment products—at times so complex that only a handful of people can understand them—is of no consequence with respect to Marx's theory of value. If Marx is right, this development only signals a further advance in the nebulous realm of fetishism—that is, a further stage in the production of abstract value, a greater distance between those products and the realm of labor. Indeed, those products seem to have reached the stage of pure, entirely disincarnate value. But there are always social relations at the root of their production, and human lives at the end. Every once in a while a major financial crisis occurs and reminds us of that fact. Ten years after the mortgage subprime meltdown, minds are still fresh with the once irresistible mortgage-backed securities (MBS), asset-backed securities (ABS), collateralized mortgage obligations (CMO), and collateralized debt obligations (CDO). The subprime crisis was itself made possible by

historically low interest rates, introduced in response to the dotcom tech bubble that burst in 2000, as well as strong credit incentives. So-called NINJA loans were extended to people with no income and no job or assets. So long as those loans could be repackaged as mortgage-backed securities and other structured credit products, and passed on with a premium, the party kept going. So long as the hot potato—the high risk—continued to change hands, “value” (in the form of profit) continued to be generated. In the end, mortgage-backed securities, like the so-called junk bonds of the 1980s, are nothing but a sophisticated and technologically advanced form of credit. Western economies have been propped up by debt since the early 1980s, and as a deliberate response to the stagflation of the 1970s. The fact that many of those instruments are now managed by highly complex algorithms, which bypass the realm of individual human decisions and relations altogether, only accentuates the reification of our global economy. But what is credit, independent of the highly sophisticated vehicles through which it can be delivered, and the manner in which governments have encouraged or facilitated it to make private property accessible to all—that is, to turn all citizens into (highly indebted) consumers?

Marx deals with this question in detail in the notes he accumulated for the third volume of *Capital*, and his analysis of interest-bearing capital in particular.

Thus far, I have examined the “mystifying character” of capital in connection with the simplest categories of the capitalist mode of production, that is, with commodities and money. This character transforms the social relations that underpin the process of production, and the production of wealth, into properties of the commodities themselves. In a way that is yet more explicit, it transforms the relation of production itself into a thing: namely, money. Now all forms of society, Marx argues, are “subject to this *distortion*, insofar as they involve commodity production and monetary circulation. In the capitalist mode of production, however, where capital is the dominant category and forms the specific relation of production, this *bewitched and distorted world* [*diese verzauberte und verkehrte Welt*] develops much further.”¹¹¹ If we see capital in its immediate form, as a way of extracting surplus labor, this relationship is still very simple. The capitalists themselves are quite aware of it, as the fierce struggle over the length of the working day indicates. But even in this seemingly simple situation, which pits labor against capital, things are in fact more complicated. For what we see, with the development of relative surplus value in the specifically capitalist mode of production, is the tendency on the part of the forces of production and the social relations to detach themselves from the process of production—that

is, to shift from labor to capital. Capital thereby already becomes "a very mystical being [*ein sehr mystisches Wesen*], since all the productive forces of social labour appear attributable to it, and not to labour as such, as a power springing forth from its own womb."¹¹² But the mystification does not end there. The process of production is immediately followed by a process of circulation, which is equally responsible for the transformation of surplus value into profit and further forces the conditions of the original production of value into the background. Surplus value in the form of profit is now attributed not to its actual source, which is the portion of capital invested in labor, but rather to the total capital. "All this," Marx concludes, "conceals the true nature of surplus-value more and more, concealing therefore the real mechanism [*Triebwerk*] of capital."¹¹³ Is this the end of the process of mystification and abstraction, of what Marx also calls "the autonomization of the form of surplus-value" and "the ossification of its form as against its substance, its essence?"¹¹⁴ Not quite. In fact, it could be argued that this process of autonomization has, in principle, no end, and that capitalism will continue to insert new layers of abstraction, new veils, between labor and capital. The ability to sell debt, extract value from it, and convert it into capital, or to "short" values, thus extracting value from potential loss, are mere indicators of yet more sophisticated financial instruments to come. Marx, however, saw in "the division of profit into profit of enterprise and interest (not to mention the intervention of commercial profit and financial profit, which seems to derive entirely from the circulation sphere, rather than that of production)" a key moment of completion of the process in question.¹¹⁵ One portion of profit, in contrast to the other, separates itself completely from the relations of capital and seems to derive not from the exploitation of wage-labor, but from the wage-labor of the capitalist himself. By contrast, interest then seems independent both of the wage-labor of the worker and of the capitalist's own labor, as if capital were its own independent source. If the fetish-like character of capital originally appeared on the surface of circulation, as value creating value, it reappears now, "in its most estranged and peculiar form [*in seiner entfremdetsten und eigentümlichsten Form*]," as interest-bearing capital.¹¹⁶ Using a Hegelian formulation, we could say that "capital-interest" or "interest-bearing capital" is the "truth" of capital, and of the fetish form of capital, "since profit still retains a memory of its origin which in interest is not simply obliterated but actually placed in a form diametrically opposed to this origin."¹¹⁷ Alongside "land ground-rent" and "wage-labour," "capital-interest" completes the "economic trinity" of capital and "the *mystification* of the capitalist mode of production, the *reification* of social relations, and the immediate coalescence of the material relations of

production with their historical and social specificity: *the bewitched, distorted and upside-down world* haunted by Monsieur le Capital and Madame la Terre, who are the same time social characters and mere things."¹¹⁸

Let me now move deeper into Marx's analysis of interest-bearing capital. "In interest-bearing capital," he writes, "capital as a system of relations [*das Kapitalverhältnis*] reaches its most extreme and fetishized form."¹¹⁹ Why? Because interest-bearing capital corresponds to the highest degree of concealment of those relations, or the point at which a highly abstract, *mediated* relation and process of circulation appears *immediate*. In it, the movement of capital experiences its greatest abbreviation, since the social relation "is consummated in the relationship of a thing, money, to itself," bypassing altogether the transformation of money into capital.¹²⁰ As such, it is the ultimate stage of abstraction in the process that translates human relations in relations between things (in this instance values), and thus the most complete form of reification. It is also the fulfillment of the capitalist's desire, since "interest-bearing capital brings the capital fetish to its consummate form [*die Vorstellung vom Kapitalfetisch vollendet*], with the idea [*Vorstellung*] that ascribes to the accumulated product of labour, in the fixed form of money at that, the power of producing surplus-value in geometric progression by way of an inherent secret quality, as a pure automaton."¹²¹

Let us examine this claim in more detail. What we are confronted with, in the case of interest-bearing capital, is a situation in which money is transformed into capital and generates money, and value creates value, without the intermediary process that connects the two extremes—that is, the series of human mediations that constitute the process of capitalism. Hence the formula, which encapsulates the process in question and summarizes the ideal of capitalism: $M—M'$:

The fetish character of capital and the representation of this capital fetish is now complete. In $M—M'$ we have the irrational form of capital, the misrepresentation and objectification of the relations of production, in its highest power: the interest-bearing form, the simple form of capital, in which it presides over its own process of reproduction. The ability of money or a commodity to valorise its own value, independently of reproduction—that is the mystification of capital in the most flagrant form.¹²²

Financial capitalism is both the condition of possibility or "headquarters of capitalism" (to use Schumpeter's expression¹²³) and the natural outcome of the *entrepreneur* economy: $M—M'$. Marx contrasts this form of fetishism with commodity fetishism. With merchant or industrial capitalism, we have

the following structure and relation: $M—C—M'$ (money for commodity for more money), which is itself different from the more immediate circulation of commodities, characterized by the transformation of commodities into money, and money into further commodities ($C—M—C$). In the latter, one sells to buy, whereas in the former one buys to sell. In the case of merchant or industrial capitalism, profit appears as the result of a sale, and the product of a social relation rather than of a mere thing. It represents a process, namely, the purchase and sale of commodities. Interest-bearing capital represents an altogether different situation. All we see is “the giving-out and the repayment. Everything that happens in between is obliterated.”¹²⁴ To say that the financial capitalist “gives out” his money as capital is tantamount to saying that it must be returned to him as $M + \Delta M$, that is, as a value to which a surplus value has been added (interest), or as realized capital. The money’s owner lends or “alienates” it only on the double condition that it is returned to its starting point after a definite period of time, and is returned as realized capital.¹²⁵ The financial capitalist’s money has become capital simply by having been given to someone else. What is obliterated in the process is the real movement of capital: the transformation of money into means of production; the production process that transforms those means into a commodity; and the transformation of the commodity back into money through its sale. Interest-bearing capital corresponds to the fully realized form of capital precisely by virtue of its ability to bypass and erase the ordinary process of production and circulation of goods, the actual social relations they involve, and because it leads one to believe in the existence of a world of pure things:

The *thing* (money, commodity, value) is now already capital, and capital reveals itself as a simple thing; the result of the overall reproduction process appears as a property belonging to a thing. . . . In interest-bearing capital, therefore, this automatic fetish is elaborated into its pure form, self-valorising value, money breeding money, and in this form it no longer bears any scars of its birth [*keine Narben seiner Entstehung*]. The social relationship is consummated in the relationship of a thing, money, to itself.¹²⁶

In this complex process, financial capital erases its own traces as it progresses. The process in question, as Rancière rightly points out, is twofold.¹²⁷ It is a process of objectification or reification (*Verdinglichung*), in which a social relation is reduced to a mere thing (interest). But it is also and perhaps less obviously a process of subjectification (*Versubjektivierung*), in which the thing, capital, becomes an autonomous subject, which produces interest spontaneously. So, we have a reification of the social determinations of

production, and simultaneously a subjectification of the things in which those social determinations are represented and concealed. Naturally, this double process, which is none other than fetishism itself, was already present in the commodity as produced by capital. But interest-bearing capital brings it to another level and a more complete form.

One can also arrive at a similar critique of the economic, commodity form of superstition by drawing on Lacan's idea of surplus enjoyment, or *plus-de-jouir*, modeled after Marx's concept of surplus value. Lacan introduces this idea in his later work, to describe the fragmentation of the Thing, or the impossible object of desire, into a multiplicity of objects, to which he refers as objects *a*. In advanced capitalist societies, the articulation of the *objet a* and the *plus-de-jouir* takes the forms of relations of consumption. The function of the *plus-de-jouir* is perhaps most visible in the "cult" status of the commodity, which presents it as an object of desire in a very specific sense. In the most general sense, and independent of its context, the *objet a* is, first, the cause of desire and, second, essentially and originally "lack." It is therefore the mark of the originally split or divided subject. The Thing, according to Lacan, signals the horizon beyond that split, one we can intimate but never quite reach. Now so long as *jouissance* is associated with the *objet a* of a sexual drive, it can be satisfied or appeased, if only partially—either by attaching itself to an organ and the body (through imaginary incorporation or symbolic introjection), or through sublimation (in which case the drive is *zielgehemmt*, deviated from its original sexual goal).¹²⁸ All objects of desire, in this sense, fill a gap, or plug the hole of desire as signaling the inaugural division of the subject.¹²⁹ All economies are economies of substitution, *bouche-trous* economies: potentially, any empirical, even physiological object (the eye, the mouth, the anus, the voice) is a supplement, a substitute, a plug for a lost object. But what happens with capitalism? It is no longer satisfied, but caught up in an endless *plus-de-jouir*—an acceleration and intensification of the function of the *objet a*, which goes round and round the chain of desire, like the *furet du bois joli*, while being subjected to what Baudrillard, displacing the famous Marxist formulation, called the inevitable "falling rate of enjoyment." When *jouissance* is thought of as *plus-de-jouir*, and this means as something that satisfies, but never fully, that makes up for the loss of *jouissance*, but never entirely, as something that grants enjoyment while perpetuating the *manque-à-jouir*, then the list of objects *a* grows and extends to include objects of culture, industrial production, and sublimation. In the age of capitalist (hyper)production and consumption, all objects become objects *a*, "vessels of surplus value."¹³⁰ And *jouissance* is itself entirely absorbed in the *plus-de-jouir*. The objects in

question all contribute to *jouissance*, yet never amount to *jouissance* as such. They function “as the place of capture of *jouissance*” (S XVI, 249). Plentiful and produced at a remarkable rate, they provoke and titillate our desire, yet only emphasize our *manque-à-jour*. They allow, indeed force us to enjoy, but only partially, by bits. They provide, Lacan says, “nibbles [*lichettes*] of *jouissance*.”¹³¹ Our world fills with substitutes of *jouissance*, which are bits of nothing, crumbs of *jouissance*. In truth, the only available *jouissance* is the *jouissance* of one’s own constituted alienation: it is the perverse enjoyment of one’s servitude. In his long radio interview from 1970, Lacan speaks of “the necessity of the *plus-de-jouir* in order for the [capitalist] machine to function,” and of the “hole”—the hole of *jouissance*—that this mechanism plugs.¹³² In other words, capitalism produces an endless lack, a series of bottomless pits, which the *plus-de-jouir*, as bound up with surplus value, fills frantically but only momentarily:

On the one hand, surplus-value is accumulated in order to increase the means of production of capital. On the other hand, it extends consumption, without which the production in question would be in vain. In any event, it is incapable of generating a *jouissance* that would signal a slowdown of this model of production.¹³³

On the contrary: it demands that the subject enjoy this lack, identify with it, and assume the position of commodity. It aggravates the subject’s lack or loss of being through the production of a surplus-object, an accumulation without end. As the dominant “cause of desire,” surplus value is responsible for “the extensive and thus insatiable production of the *manque-à-jouir*.”¹³⁴ It converts the subject’s lack-in-being into a commodity surplus. As Žižek puts it, under capitalism the superego is revealed in the injunction to enjoy the “sign” or “cult” value of the commodity. It “does not enjoin us to follow our duty against the temptation of succumbing to the pleasure provided by the use-value of a commodity (‘Do not buy stoned-washed jeans—even if they are comfortable to wear, you are thereby endorsing imperialist ideology!’); on the contrary, the commodity’s sign value, the ideology associated with it, enjoins us to enjoy its use-value even if we really do not feel any need for it.”¹³⁵

Capitalism thus renders enjoyment impossible, even as lost. That is what it desires. An object of consumption will never measure up to the lost object (object *a*); and accumulation will never compensate for the feeling of loss and frustration associated with the renunciation of *jouissance*. All there is is lack, elevated to the *n*th power: a *plus-de-jouir* in the sense of a

no-more-enjoyment that is also and at the same time a *plus-de-jouir* in the sense of an excess, or an ever more. Within the capitalist economy, there are just too many holes. It keeps producing them, and they siphon off desire. Behind every hole one plugs, there is a bigger one; one's entire vital energy is sucked into this punctured reality. I myself become full of holes, fragmented, dispersed. Such is the folly of capitalism, one that has generated its own rationality. Capitalism is paradoxical in that it is a formidable apparatus of production, but one that produces lack: it produces *through* lack and *for* it. Without lack, it ceases to exist. Its problem is to know how to create more lack, how to turn lack into the condition and substance of all relations. This is the paradox of a system that manages to use resources, an entire ecosystem, life itself to the bone, yet through overproduction. The *plus-de-jouir* is the tragic condition of the subject of capitalism: I can't go on, yet I must go on.

4. "Man," or the Last Fetish?

There is, however, another, initially more hidden cost to this economic form of superstition. It is one that Marx recognized, but never fully developed; and it is one that has become the decisive issue of our time: the cost to the environment. This cost is intimately bound up with what Marx describes as the social metabolism (*Stoffwechsel*) between human beings and nature—a metabolism that, he believes, is defined by an "irreparable rift (*einen unheilbaren Riß*)" under the capitalist relations of production.¹³⁶ The metabolism in question is not specific to capitalism: socialist economies have also led to the total exploitation and devastation of the earth. Capitalism, by virtue of its intrinsically global logic and infinite quest for resources, has nonetheless played a crucial role in ecological catastrophes. But the cost to the environment is perhaps more fundamentally linked to the illusion and perhaps superstition that we have called—and still call—"Man." By that, I mean the anthropocentric illusion and operation that detaches human beings from the material, *natural* world to which they belong, from which they grow, and by which they are sustained, and elevates them to the status of lord of the earth, or, as Descartes put it, master and possessor of nature. To be sure, this human-centered, Promethean view is one that runs—or would seem to run—through Marx's own text, and through the *Communist Manifesto* in particular.¹³⁷ It is also one that Marxist thinkers adopted for a long time. However, a number of recent works have argued for a more ecological reading of Marx, and for the need to (re)connect his social materialism with scientific naturalism.¹³⁸ We cannot and should not forget that Marx

wrote his doctoral thesis on the ancient atomists, who saw a direct connection between their investigation into the basic mechanisms of nature and the question of human freedom; or, from another perspective, between an insufficient knowledge of nature and superstitious fears. Nor should we forget that Marx engaged in the systematic study of natural and physical science throughout his life. As this is not a book on Marx, I am more concerned with identifying resources in his text to combat what I would call the fetishization of the human, speciesism, and the productivist paradigm. Not a day goes by that we are not reminded of the fragility of the earth on which we stand, and which we have done so much to imperil. Every day we are reminded of the delirious superstition that consists in believing in the human as the culmination of the evolution of life, as its greatest and final achievement; of the delusional belief in a world that revolves around us and is there for us; of the earth as resource.

To be sure, Marx dreams of an economic order that would stay as aligned with use value as possible, and would be based on a precise and reasonable assessment of human needs and natural resources. And there is no doubt that he saw in capitalism an infernal machine forced to create artificial needs (in fact, desires) in order to continue to expand, and unable to rest until it has conquered every corner of the world and of the human psyche. This is how he puts it in a remarkably prescient passage from the *Grundrisse*, in which he foresees the phenomenon known today as globalization:

The tendency to create the *world market* is directly given in the concept of capital itself. Every limit appears as a barrier to be overcome [*Jede Grenze erscheint als zu überwindende Schranke*]. Initially, it is a matter of subjugating every moment of production itself to exchange and to suspend the production of direct use values not entering into exchange. . . .

On the other side, the production of *relative surplus value*, i.e. production of surplus value based on the increase and development of the productive forces, requires the production of new consumption; requires that the consuming circle expands with the expansion of the circle of production. Firstly, quantitative expansion of existing consumption; secondly: creation of new needs by propagating existing ones in a wide circle; thirdly: production of *new* needs and discovery and creation of new use values.¹³⁹

Occasionally, Marx also foresees capitalism's threat to the environment and the planet as a whole. A couple of paragraphs after the passage I just quoted, he touches on this key issue, and thus on the possibility of bringing into focus yet another kind of value, irreducible to either use or exchange. In the

end, however, he focuses on what he sees as the inevitable destruction of capitalism itself under the weight of its own contradictions, rather than on the destruction of natural resources, and the planet as a whole. The argument is as follows: the necessary expansion of the market and “universal industry” through value-creating labor goes hand in hand with “a global system of exploitation of all natural and human resources [*ein System der allgemeinen Exploitation der natürlichen und menschlichen Eigenschaften*]” or with “the universal appropriation of nature [*die universelle Aneignung der Natur*]” through science and technology.¹⁴⁰ Indeed, everything happens as if “the theoretical discovery of the autonomous laws of nature” were merely “a ruse so as to subjugate it under human needs, whether as an object of consumption or as a means of production.”¹⁴¹ In other words, the advent of modern science coincides with the Promethean and specifically capitalist project of the subjection of nature by humans.¹⁴² With the advent of capital, “nature becomes purely an object [*Gegenstand*] for humankind, purely a matter of utility,” and ceases therefore to be recognized as an independent power.¹⁴³ With a degree of irony, as the words appear in English, Marx sees in this tendency “the great civilising influence of capital” and “a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere *local developments* of humanity and as *nature-idolatry* [*Naturidolatrie*].”¹⁴⁴ The particular assemblage of capital, science, and technology, therefore, appears as the overcoming of nature fetishism, understood this time as the urge to endow nature with divine agency and powers. Marx’s assessment becomes even more ambiguous, if not ambivalent, when he recognizes capital as a force that “drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature deification and worship [*Naturvergötterung*], as well as all traditional, confined, complacent, encrusted satisfactions of present needs, and reproductions of old ways of life.”¹⁴⁵ Ultimately, however, this fetishization of nature is replaced by the fetishization of an almighty subject, bent on taming and exploiting nature qua resource: capital, he claims, dismisses this deification of nature; it is “destructive [*destruktiv*] towards all of this, and constantly revolutionizes it, tearing down all the barriers which hem [*hemmen*] in the development of the forces of production, the expansion of needs, the diversification [*die Mannigfaltigkeit*] of production, and the exploitation and exchange of natural and mental forces.”¹⁴⁶ There is something intrinsically disruptive, destructive, and revolutionary about capital. There is no sphere of life, social and more generally cultural, which it leaves untouched. It alters our view of other human beings, our place in the world, and our relation to nature. In the end, Marx emphasizes the contradictions

inherent to such a position, and recognizes the seeds of self-destruction and permanent crisis planted by capital itself:

But from the fact that capital posits every such limit [*Grenze*] as an obstacle [*Schranke*] which, *ideally*, it would overcome, it does not by any means follow that it has *really* overcome [*überwunden*] it; and, since every such barrier [*Schranke*] contradicts its character, its production moves in contradictions which are constantly overcome [*überwunden*] but just as constantly posited. Furthermore, the universality towards which it irresistibly strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development, allow it to be recognized as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive it towards its own suspension or destruction [*Aufhebung*].¹⁴⁷

Capitalism is, in the long run, unsustainable, and destined for destruction (of the earth, and possibly of itself), because the process of overcoming and conquest that characterizes it will eventually reach and meet its end: it will fall under the weight of its own contradictions. It could be argued that the current ecological and climate crisis signals such an end, and announces the imminent destruction of capitalism: an *epochal* rather than an ordinary developmental crisis.¹⁴⁸ The jury is out. But the crucial dimension, which Marx recognized, is that of the destruction of the earth as such: long-distance trade in food and fiber for clothing, and the use of chemicals for agricultural purposes, amounts to “a progress in the art, not only of robbing the worker, but of robbing the soil.”¹⁴⁹ What is highlighted here is the possibility of the demise of the biosphere as a whole, and the need to think of the earth as such and for itself—that is, as the fragile ground of human existence, for which we share some responsibility, and the estate with which we are entrusted. With hindsight, we can wonder whether the ultimate idolatry and fetishism wasn’t—isn’t still?—that of a certain mode of production and conception of the human being as “sovereign” of the earth.

Marx’s position is, in that respect, ambiguous. This, I think, is due to the fact that he continues to think in metaphysically modern terms, and within a dualism of subject and object, “man” and “world.” As we saw, in commodity or interest-bearing fetishism, human relations are treated as if they were relations between things, and things (commodities, money) are treated as if they were subjects. This is the economic, and specifically capitalist form of superstition. The dimension that is absent from this subject-object or human-thing dichotomy is their common origin and soil, namely, the earth. The earth precedes this distinction and at the same time renders it

possible. It is what sustains subject *and* object, the silent and easily forgotten material ground from which we construct our metaphysical views and categories and derive our power to organize, carve up, and conquer it, to territorialize it and exploit its resources. It is the original and ultimate material condition of our existence, the condition of possibility of *everything*, even of our ability to turn against it, set it up, use and abuse it. This is why we, as human beings, bear responsibility for it, and why it even defines us as human beings. After all, *humanus* has its etymological and ontological roots in *humus*, in the ground and soil of the earth. Human beings are thus *of* the earth, both in the sense of belonging to it and being cut from the same cloth. The earth, then, is not an object, or something that stands simply opposed (*Gegenstand*). It is not even, to borrow a term from Heidegger, a mere resource (*Bestand*), something that we can use and abuse with impunity. But it is not the opposite of that either—namely, and to use Marx’s own terms, an “independent” power and an object of idolatry. Neither object in the sense of resource and utility, nor subject in the sense of an independent, divine power, the earth stands in a relation of mutual dependency with humankind. This, in turn, means that the human being is itself not a subject, at least in the sense of a being who can detach itself from the fabric of the world, as if it were itself made up of a different fabric, as if the flesh of the earth were not also its flesh. A subject stands erect, *sovereign* upon the earth, as if the earth belonged to it. This is a metaphysical view of the world, and even a historical program of planetary domination, which Descartes captured when he claimed that science would render us “as if master and possessor of nature.”¹⁵⁰ It is the same program which, in the midst of the French revolution and the context of a struggle for human freedom, Robespierre reiterated when, in the remarkable speech to the French Convention of April 24, 1793 in which he defended his version of the declaration of the rights of man and citizens, he declared mankind “the sovereign of the earth.” In one stroke, then, Robespierre asserts the freedom and equality of mankind *and* the subjugation of the earth: Man becomes the universal subject, and is no longer a subject of the Earth, subject in relation to a Subject. And it is the same program of subjugation which Marx himself recognizes, and values, in capitalism. This is the contradiction we need to think, and overcome. The current climate and environmental crisis *forces* us to do so.

I suggest we speak of the endowment or usufruct value of production, in addition to its use, exchange, and surplus value. I suggest that we inscribe a carbon value to everything that we produce, and to the way we live. In Roman-based legal systems, usufruct designates the temporary right to the use and enjoyment of the property of another, without changing the

character of the property and without the right to dispose of or damage it. A usufruct combines the two property rights of *usus* and *fructus*. *Usus* refers to the right to use something directly without damaging or altering it, and *fructus* refers to the right to enjoy the fruits of the property being used. While the usufructuary has the right to use the property, he or she cannot damage, destroy, or dispose of the property. A usufructuary does not have full ownership of the property, because he or she does not enjoy the third property right, *abusus*, the right to consume, destroy, or transfer ownership of the property to someone else. While not formulated in Roman legal terms, this is an idea that remains deeply rooted in many societies and civilizations across the globe. The various First Nations of Canada and of Central and South America, for example, see in the idea of "land" the capacity to perpetuate a way of life and a system of values, rather than a repository of natural resources to be exploited for profit. To be sure, "land" refers to the natural resources, technology, and labor that are necessary for a people to sustain itself over time. But "land" also designates a cultural identity and a set of relationships. Land is something that one lives *with*, not just *from*. Yes, the land takes care of its people. But the people, in return, take care of the land. The attitude to the land is not one of accumulation and exploitation, of use and abuse; it is one of *care*. The land, they say, is something we inherit, and pass on to future generations. It is not something we own or possess. For over two centuries, however, our Western, techno-capitalist civilization has abused the earth: that is, we have behaved as if, far from being its usufructuary and receiving it in endowment, we were its full owner, and had the right to consume and destroy it. For centuries, we behaved as if *terra* and *territorium* were one and the same thing, and as if the territorialization of the earth gave us the right to own it. We have poisoned the air and waters, increased the occurrences and scale of tornadoes, hurricanes, and droughts. We have destroyed species, forests, and prairies. By setting up the earth, and asserting ourselves *against* it, we have set ourselves on a path of self-destruction. We have treated it like a mere resource that could endlessly sustain a market economy geared to consumption. Writing on the French state's selling of forests and other lands rightfully belonging to the population, Proudhon observed that

Even if the nation were proprietor, can the generation of today dispossess the generation of tomorrow? The people possess by title of usufruct; the government rules, superintends, protects them, and passes acts of distributive justice. If the nation also makes concessions of land, it concedes only their use; it has no right to sell it or to alienate them in any way whatsoever. Not being a

proprietor, how can it alienate property? . . . Destroy the land or (what is the same thing) sell it; and you not only alienate one, two, or more crops, but you annihilate all the produces that you could derive from it—you and your children and your children's children.¹⁵¹

We need to change course and envisage the earth as what we hold *in common*, as what has been entrusted to us and needs to be kept *safe*. Not availability, but habitability defines our relation to the earth and those living on it. This, in turn, orients our modes of production not toward growth (that is, accumulation and consumption), but toward sustainability. I suggest, therefore, that we recognize another kind of fetishism, or another dimension of capitalist fetishism, an unthought that has returned to haunt us: *anthropo-poiesis*, nowadays referred to as the anthropocene. Why do I call it fetishism? Because we have believed in "Man" as Master and Possessor, as Sovereign and Subject, as the Center around which the world as a whole revolves. Because, returning to Marx's own view of it, the earth reveals and conceals itself at the same time, and what it conceals coincides with a form of exploitation, and even, increasingly, devastation and extinction. What we *see* is the commodity, for example, the irresistible torn pair of jeans in a shop in a Western city, or the appealing travel package to a remote place. What we don't see, in addition to the sweatshop in which it was produced by children thousands of miles away, is its carbon footprint, the damage it causes to the atmosphere and the oceans, the abuse to the planet. What we don't see—or see too late—is the ecological devastation.

Thus far, we have seen the question of superstition in Marx played out on three different levels. The first and most obvious is that of ideology. It includes, but is not reduced to, religion, "the opium of the people." In this initial sense, superstition applies to the various surface effects, including discourses of truth, generated by the social and economic relations of capitalism. The second, less obvious level is that of the relations themselves, or the conditions of production inherent to capitalism. Marx summarizes this level in the concept of fetishism, which applies to basic (commodity) as well as more advanced (financial) forms of capitalism. I insisted that we understand it as a form of superstition, because it requires a magical kind of thinking to perceive the world as inverted, to attribute subjective traits to objects and objective traits to subjects. Commodity and financial fetishism transforms subjects into objects, and objects into subjects. The result is alienation. In both instances, superstition is opposed to critique (of ideology and political economy). The third level, both internal and external to Marx's thought, concerns the illusion of the central position occupied by

human beings in the world, and in relation to the earth. It opens up a very complex and unresolved question, which I'm not concerned to solve, but only indicate: namely, that of the "humanism" of Marxism, and how to interpret it. In the context of my discussion of superstition, I was primarily interested in raising the question of the catastrophic consequences of a rationalist anthropocentrism for which the planet is envisaged a priori as resource, and which revolves around the needs and predatory tendencies of the *Homo economicus*. I was concerned to bring out the imaginary dimension and projection inherent in the very distinction between subject and object, and the dangerous fantasy of omnipotence emanating from the subject as master, ruler, and possessor of the earth. Nature fetishism was replaced by "Man" fetishism, with devastating consequences.

In what follows, I would like to take my analysis of superstition further, and ultimately toward a skepticism in relation to the concept of ideology itself. I will do that by working through Althusser's concept of "ideological state apparatus," which will take us back to Spinoza. In the end, the concept of ideology itself will turn out to be untenable, for two reasons. First, it will be untenable as indicating merely superficial effects of an economic fundamental structure. It will turn out to be intrinsic and essential to the capitalist mode of production, for *material* through and through. At the same time, we will be forced to recognize the imaginary as constitutive of the real conditions of production: when it comes to social relations, imaginary constructions are inevitable. Second, and as a direct consequence of the first point, we will be forced to recognize the irreducible dimension of superstition and the imaginary within the Marxian discourse itself, and more specifically still within its actual, historical incarnations. This third and final part of the chapter will therefore lead me to conclude that superstition is indeed irreducible, and that, as an obstacle to thought understood as critique and to a free and democratic state, it must be placed under constant vigilance. But we must not seek to eradicate it entirely. For critique—in this instance the critique of the capitalist mode of production, and its social relations—can itself lead to the reproduction of basic superstitions.

III. Ideological State Apparatus

Althusser introduces his theory of the ideological state apparatus by focusing on a central problem of Marxist thought: namely, the reproduction of the conditions of production. How are the conditions of production—x, y, z—of capitalism reproduced? The reproduction of those conditions, Marx argues, is actually the ultimate condition of production itself. He understands

the conditions in question as being material through and through, as referring to the means of production. In order for production to continue, it is essential to foresee what has been used up or worn out in production, from raw materials to fixed installations (buildings) and instruments of production (machines). The single most important condition is labor-power. But how is the reproduction of labor ensured? Marx's answer is well known, and consists of one word: wages. Wages are indispensable to the reconstitution of the labor-power of the wage earner. It is her way of paying for housing, food, and clothing, and thus it enables her to present herself again at the factory the next day. Wages are also indispensable for raising and educating the children in whom proletarians reproduce themselves as labor-power. But is that the only and whole answer?

Althusser does not believe that it is, and his idea of the "ideological state apparatus" (ISA) is his attempt to supplement Marx's answer. This original concept, he admits, owes much to Spinoza, and in particular to his conception of superstition.

To begin with, the available labor-power must be sufficiently skilled. In a capitalist regime, the reproduction of the diversified skills of labor-power is ensured differently than in other social formations, such as slavery or serfdom: no longer, or at least less and less, "on the spot," through mechanisms of apprenticeship integrated within production itself, but increasingly outside production, and primarily in the capitalist system of education. At school, children are taught to read, write, and add. They are also taught rudimentary elements or advanced knowledge of "scientific" or "literary" culture, which are directly useful in the different jobs in production. Thus, a certain kind of instruction is required for manual workers, another for technicians, a third for engineers, another one for managers, et cetera. "Know-how" is thus a key element of the reproduction of the conditions of production. But it is not the only thing taught at school, where children also learn the "rules" of good behavior—that is, the attitude that every agent should observe in the division of labor, according to the job he or she is destined for: rules of morality and civic and professional conscience, which actually mean rules of respect for the socio-technical division of labor and ultimately for the order of class domination. They also learn to speak the "proper" version of the language in use, which also ensures that they have the tools needed to handle the workers correctly, to order them about properly, to speak to them in the right way. And the workers themselves are taught to speak and handle themselves in a certain way, and to know and remember their place. All of this is to say that the reproduction of labor-power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also (and

at the same time) a reproduction of its submission to the *rules* of the established order, formalized and perpetuated by the professional ideologists of Morality, Virtue, the Nation, et cetera.

The key question, then, becomes one of knowing what the techniques used to guarantee such a submission might be. How, Althusser asks, is the "subjection to the ruling ideology or the mastery of its 'practice'" practically ensured?¹⁵² What, to use a more Foucauldian vocabulary, are the technologies of the self through which capitalism reproduces itself? Are they themselves technologies of domination and exploitation—of "subjection"—or of what Foucault calls "subjectivation," by which he means techniques that aren't coercive and in fact require the active participation and consent of subjects? On that question, Althusser's position, summarized in his concept of the ISA, will turn out to be quite close to Foucault's own, and in particular to Foucault's understanding of the mechanics of disciplinary power.

The key word in Althusser's question regarding the "subjection to the ruling ideology" is of course "ideology." It's the word Althusser ends up enriching and expanding, in such a way that it can no longer be equated with what Marx meant by the term. His claim is that all the agents of production, exploitation, and repression must somehow be steeped in this ideology in order to perform their task the way they do, that is, "conscientiously." The exploited (the proletarians), the exploiters (the capitalists), the exploiters' auxiliaries (the managers), the high priests of the ruling ideology—all must fulfill their role, find their right place and fit in. How does ideology understood in that way work, and why does it work so well? The question concerns the concrete, actual *modus operandi* of ideology—what we could call its operationality or operativity.

To reconstruct Althusser's argument as it unfolds in "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" I will begin by identifying the nature of Althusser's disagreement with Marx (section 1), before turning to his concept of ISA (section 2), and the *modus operandi* of ideology (section 3).

1. Althusser's Disagreement with Marx

Ideology is of course a key concept for Marx, but one, as I have begun to suggest, with which Althusser isn't entirely happy. He begins by emphasizing "the positivist context" of *The German Ideology* (1845–46), in which Marx conceives ideology as a pure illusion, a pure dream, or an imaginary construction, "empty and vain."¹⁵³ It is quite literally nothing, and "all its reality is external to it."¹⁵⁴ It is, as we used to think of dreams before Freud, constituted by the "day's residues," assembled "from the only full and positive

reality, that of the concrete history of concrete material individuals materially producing their existence."¹⁵⁵

Althusser's first disagreement with Marx bears on how to interpret the "imaginary" nature of ideology, and on whether something can be declared null or nonexistent by virtue of being imaginary. Without going too far into this question at this preliminary stage, we might want to recall what Spinoza said about the role of imagination in superstition, and of superstition in the construction of the political body. But the disagreement also bears on the fact that, according to *The German Ideology*, ideology has no history, at least no history of its own. For how could there be a history of "nothingness," of a pure dream or an illusion—unless, of course, and as Freud himself showed, the illusion in question, like dreams, is actually *something*. But to say, as Marx does, that ideology has no history doesn't mean "that there is no history in it (on the contrary, for it is merely the pale, empty and inverted reflection of real, material history)."¹⁵⁶ At this point and with Foucault in mind, we might wonder whether—should a reality of ideology be recognized and not reduced to a mere surface effect of a material, social reality—a critical history of such a discourse, or set of discourses, and their relation to a range of institutions, would no longer be impossible, and would even become necessary. The sense of critique would itself need to evolve, so as to include, beyond the critique of political economy and the social relations of production constitutive of capitalism, and beyond also the critique of the state apparatus, a critique of discursive practices and discourses of truth, with a possible retro-effect on Marx's own discourse and its many appropriations, elaborations, and implementations. I will return to this point in my conclusion. But let me point out that this is not the conclusion toward which Althusser himself is working. His position is somewhere between the orthodox Marxist one and the (Foucauldian) sense of critique I have alluded to: "Now, while the thesis I wish to defend formally speaking adopts the terms of *The German Ideology* ('ideology has no history'), it is radically different from the positivist and historicist thesis of *The German Ideology*."¹⁵⁷ Althusser's position can be clarified further by turning to his views on state power and state apparatus.

The second point of disagreement with, or departure from, the Marxist analysis (still in the context of the guiding question, that of the reproduction of the conditions of production) concerns the theory of the state. This theory includes a distinction, in place since Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Class Struggles in France*, between state power and state apparatus, the latter including the government, the administration, the army, the police, the courts, the prisons, et cetera. Class struggle revolves around the possession

(that is, seizure and conservation) of state power by a certain class or by an alliance between classes or class factions. The proletariat, classical Marxists claim, must seize state power in order to destroy the existing bourgeois (repressive) state apparatus and, in a first phase, replace it with a quite different, proletarian state apparatus. It can be argued that the initial phase in question did actually happen in various countries, beginning with the USSR, and introduced a new form of violence and repression. In later phases—still according to orthodox Marxism—a more radical process is supposed to take place which leads to the end of every state apparatus and of state power as such, and thus to the destruction of the state. This later phase, as we know, never actually happened.

Althusser's disagreement bears not on the historical points I just made, but on the need to supplement the distinction between state power and state apparatus by having recourse to the concept of ideological state apparatus. It designates a reality (rather than a *mere* illusion), or the reality of an illusion. While clearly on the side of the (repressive) state apparatus, it isn't reducible to it.

2. *Ideological State Apparatuses*

Within the Marxist tradition, Althusser sees Gramsci as a precursor to his own theory: "He had the 'remarkable' idea that the state could not be reduced to the (Repressive) State Apparatus, but included, as he put it, a certain number of institutions from '*civil society*': the Church, the schools, the trade unions, etc."¹⁵⁸ Unfortunately, Althusser adds, Gramsci didn't elaborate on that idea, but left them as merely some insightful but fragmentary notes. The idea Althusser retains, though, is that those institutions, those assemblages of power and knowledge, are essential to the reproduction of the state and the conditions of production. They are not a mere and in many ways irrelevant effect of those conditions, but a key mechanism in their reproduction. Yet they need to be distinguished from the repressive side of state power. They are even—and here Althusser most certainly has Spinoza in mind—more effective than coercion, intimidation, and repression, as they constitute a form of soft power that draws on the imagination and a range of positive affects: "To my knowledge, no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the Ideological State Apparatuses."¹⁵⁹ They are a crucial element of the dispositive that allocates a place and function to everyone (the worker, the capitalist, the manager, the administrator, etc.), and convinces them to fulfill their role. This, Althusser adds, is a dimension Lenin was well aware

of when attempting to transform, indeed revolutionize the educational state apparatus: reeducation was paramount to the success of the revolution.

We need to go further, though; we need to ask about the exact function of the ISA, and to analyze how it operates. The function of the ISA is to secure the reproduction of the relations of production, behind a “shield” provided by the repressive state apparatus, whose role is to secure by force (physical or otherwise) the *political* conditions of the relations of reproduction—relations that Althusser insists are at their roots exploitative. Exploitation is therefore the founding and ultimate form of power, from which all others are derived (which, again, does not mean that those other forms are themselves relations of exploitation—at least not directly).

For the longest time the Church was the dominant ISA. It concentrated within it religious functions, but also educational ones, and a large proportion of the functions of communication and “culture.” It is no accident, then, that ideological struggles in modern times, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, took the form of anticlerical and anti-religious struggles, as was obvious in the case of the French revolution. But the dominant (which does not mean exclusive) form of the ISA in capitalist social formations is the *educational* ideological apparatus. What the bourgeoisie has installed as its dominant ISA, behind the screen of the many historical faces of its *political* ISA—parliamentary democracy, First and Second Empires in France, constitutional monarchy, parliamentary monarchy, presidential democracy (De Gaulle)—is the educational apparatus, which has taken over the functions once reserved to the Church, and has introduced a finely tuned system of reproduction:

It takes children from every class at infant-school age, and then for years, the years in which the child is most “vulnerable”, squeezed between the family state apparatus and the educational state apparatus, it drums into them, whether it uses new or old methods, a certain amount of “know-how” wrapped in the ruling ideology (French, arithmetic, natural history, the sciences, literature) or simply the ruling ideology in its pure state (ethics, civic instruction, philosophy). Somewhere around the age of sixteen, a huge mass of children is ejected “into production”: these are the workers or small peasants. Another portion of scholastically adapted youth carries on: [it] fills the posts of small and middle technicians, white-collar workers, small and middle civil servants, petty bourgeois of all kinds. A last portion reaches the summit, either to fall into intellectual semi-employment, or to provide, as well as the “intellectuals of the collective labourer,” the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers), of repression (soldiers, policemen, politicians, administrators, etc.), and the professional ideologists.¹⁶⁰

It is not just the skills necessary for the reproduction of the social order that are taught at school; it is also the virtues and values. Naturally, many of them are also taught in the family, the Church, the army (when there was, and wherever there still is, a national military service), in good books, in films, and even in sports arenas. But no other ISA can claim to hold children in its grip for so many years, and for so many hours every week.

3. *The Mechanics of Ideology*

We now arrive at Althusser's central thesis regarding ideology. Ideology, he states, "is a 'representation' of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence."¹⁶¹ This thesis unfolds in two further theses, which I'll analyze in turn. The first—very much identical to the central thesis—concerns the *object* represented in the imaginary form of ideology. The second concerns the *materiality* of ideology.

The first thesis—"Ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence"—introduces a number of terms, each of which, beginning with "imaginary," requires careful attention. Ideologies, whether religious, legal, ethical, or political, are worldviews, which critique examines "as the ethnologist examines the myths of a 'primitive society,'" and thus as imaginary constructions that don't correspond to any reality. However (and this is crucial), while admitting that they do not *correspond* to reality and thus cannot, according to the classical definition, be considered *true*, Althusser defines them as *illusions* (rather than simple errors). As such, they *allude* to reality and need only to "be 'interpreted' to discover the reality of the world behind their imaginary representation of that world (ideology = illusion/allusion)."¹⁶² If ideology is an illusion, rather than a straightforward error, it is by virtue of the fact that it alludes to—signals or signifies—the reality it represents. It is a representation, but one that functions like a *sign* of the reality it represents, and is neither true nor false. As Kant had already made clear, illusions thus understood are the domain and object of critique. A further feature of this representation is that, unlike, say, a road sign, the meaning of which is apparent to all those who can read it, the world of signs of ideology is one that covers up or veils the reality it represents. And that is why it requires interpretation.

But what is the reality in question? What, in ideology, is both revealed and concealed? The first thesis responds by saying: the real conditions of existence of individuals. To be more specific, in ideology "men represent their real conditions of existence to themselves in an imaginary form."¹⁶³ We note in passing that imagination and illusion are intimately bound up, if not

identified, with one another. Althusser seems to be suggesting that imagination (not reason, as Kant claimed) is our faculty of illusion. The trademark of illusions is that under specific conditions and circumstances, which Althusser believes are material rather than transcendental, they are spontaneously, even automatically produced. This means that a critique of illusions, and of superstitions in particular, is a critique of their conditions—not, once again, their conditions of possibility, but their real conditions of existence, or emergence. Illusions are thus also signs in the sense that they provoke critique, or tickle thought: they are the visible, tangible, yet distorted manifestation of a different kind of reality, a reality heterogeneous to, yet intimately bound up with, ideology. This in turn means that what is communicated to thought, what sets it in motion as such—not as yet another representation, as the representation of representation, or as worldview, but as critique—is something that begins in imagination, quite literally as an image, yet ends up in thought, construed not as veridiction or as a set of truth claims within a pre-established, ideological field of knowledge, but as a way of interrogating the field of material (social, of course, but I would say natural in a broader sense) relations. Illusions are food for thought; they provoke and titillate it.

In and of itself, however, this claim doesn't address the more important question of why human beings *need* this imaginary transposition—this translation and displacement—of their real conditions of existence. It is to address this question that Althusser introduces the second stage of his analysis. He begins by rejecting two types of answers, before presenting his own, very much inspired by Spinoza. The first answer, common in the eighteenth century, offers a simple solution: priests or despots forged "beautiful lies"—note, here, the use of lies, rather than illusions—to encourage men and women to obey God, when in fact they sought obedience to themselves. The *cause* for this imaginary transposition was thus "the existence of a small number of cynical men who base their domination and exploitation of the 'people' on a *falsified* representation of the world which they have *imagined* in order to enslave other minds by dominating their imagination."¹⁶⁴ The imaginary transposition would thus be a function of the imagination of singular individuals—priests and despots, for example—rather than a product of the material conditions themselves.

The second answer (that of Feuerbach, repeated by Marx word for word in his early writings) is, Althusser notes, more "profound" but just as misleading. The alienation of human beings' conditions of existence in imaginary representations is no longer attributed to priests or despots, to their active imagination and the passive imagination of their victims, but to the

actual, material alienation that characterizes those conditions. This is how, in *The Jewish Question*, for example, Marx defends the Feuerbachian idea that human beings themselves construct an alienated (or imaginary) representation of their alienating conditions of existence. In other words, material alienation (alienated labor) causes imaginary alienation.

Despite their differences, these two theories have something in common: they both claim that what is reflected in the imaginary representation of the world, and can be defined as ideology, is the conditions of existence of human beings, their *real* world. Imagination, they believe, is a reflection of reality. But reflection is different from signification, as I have begun to argue and need to explore in greater detail.

Althusser's own answer is characterized by the introduction of a single term: "relation." Ideology, he claims represents not the real conditions of existence of human beings, their real world (as Feuerbach and Marx believed), but their *relation* to those conditions:

It is this relation which is at the very centre of every ideological, i.e. imaginary, representation of the real world. It is this relation that contains the "cause" which has to explain the imaginary distortion of the ideological representation of the real world.¹⁶⁵

This, he adds (leaving aside the vocabulary of causality), is tantamount to saying that "it is the imaginary nature of this relation which underlies all the imaginary distortion that we can observe (if we do not live in its truth) in all ideology." This changes everything. For the relation, which grounds all imaginary representations, is itself imaginary. There is a reality—a relational reality—of imagination, which takes place at the level of the *material* conditions of existence of human beings, and not simply at the level of those (distorted) representations normally referred to as ideology. Our relation to our conditions of existence qua *material* is imaginary. But doesn't this also mean that imagination is itself real, and ideology material; that representation and reality are intimately, irreducibly bound up? Between the imaginary and the real, between ideology and materiality, there is not so much an opposition, or even a relation of grounding, as a relation of complementarity: they work hand in hand, and constantly transform one another, as if alchemically.

Concretely, Althusser's thesis means this: in its necessarily imaginary distortion, ideology represents not the existing relations of production (and the other relations that derive from them, such as ideologization and scientific practice), "but above all the (imaginary) relationship of

individuals to the relations of production and the relations that derived from them" (Althusser, 257). Ideology is a matter of reflecting not the relations of production, or even the relations that derive from them, but the specific, imaginary relationship that individuals have with those very conditions. The key question then becomes one of knowing *how* individuals relate to those conditions. Or, put slightly differently, the key question is no longer that of the *cause* of the imaginary distortion of the real relations in ideology, but that of knowing why the representation that individuals have of their (individual) relation to the social relations that govern their conditions of existence, as well as their collective and individual life, is *necessarily* an imaginary relation.¹⁶⁶

It's precisely to answer this question that Althusser introduces the second, subsidiary thesis, according to which "ideology has a material existence" rather than a spiritual or ideal one.¹⁶⁷ We saw how, according to Althusser, ideology always exists in an apparatus, or what Foucault would have called a *dispositif*: an assemblage of a discourse of truth and authority, and specific, often disciplinary practices through which subjects are shaped or molded. If we bring Althusser's two theses together, we can say that the imaginary relation to their conditions of existence of those who live in ideology, by which Althusser means those who live in a determinate (say, religious or ethical) and imaginary representation *and* distortion of those conditions, "is itself endowed with a material existence."¹⁶⁸

Concretely, this means that if the individual is a Christian, she goes to church to attend Mass, kneels, prays, confesses, does penance, repents, et cetera. In fact, it is perhaps those practices themselves that turn the individual into a believer in the first place. Recall Pascal's injunction, which said in substance: "Kneel down, cross yourself with holy water, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe." If she believes in Duty, she will have the corresponding attitudes, inscribed in ritual practices according to the correct norms and principles; but more significantly, the performance of such rituals will generate her commitment to Duty in the first place. If she believes in Justice, she will submit to the rules of the Law, protest when they are violated, sign petitions, demonstrate when it is under threat, et cetera. The point here is that the "ideas" of those subjects don't exist outside their actions, that is, divorced from practices governed by rituals and inscribed within the material fabric of an ideological apparatus. Salute your superiors repeatedly, and you will end up respecting them, believing in their intrinsic superiority and authority. Attend the party meetings, follow its rules and discipline, absorb its slogans, and you will believe in its mission, leaders, and commands. This, I believe, is precisely what Spinoza attempted to demonstrate when he

spoke of the widespread, indeed ineliminable presence of superstition in matters of government, by which he meant the element of servitude that is intrinsic to any power structure. And it is what, in his own way, Pascal also recognized (and defended): when it becomes a matter of persuading people and bringing them together, arguments and truth go only so far. Human beings aren't simply mindful, rational creatures; they are also "automata," creatures of habit and superstition who cannot be persuaded by demonstrations only:

Proofs only sway [*contraignent*] the mind. Custom forges [*fait*] our strongest and most believed proofs. It *bends* the automaton, and the mind follows suit, unaware [*qui entraîne l'esprit sans qu'il y pense*]. . . . It is custom that makes so many men Christians; custom that makes them Turks, heathens, artisans, soldiers, etc. . . . Finally, we must have recourse to it once the mind has seen where truth is, in order to absorb and taint ourselves with that belief [*afin de nous abreuver et nous teindre de cette créance*], which escapes us at every hour; for to always have its proofs before oneself is too much trouble [*car d'en avoir toujours les preuves présentes, c'est trop d'affaire*]. We must get an easier belief, which is that of custom. Without violence, without art, without argument, it makes us believe things and inclines [*incline*] all our powers to this belief, so that our soul falls naturally into it. It is not enough to believe only by force of conviction, when the automaton is inclined to believe the contrary. Both our parts must be made to believe, the mind by reasons which it is sufficient to have seen once in a lifetime, and the automaton by custom, and by not allowing it to incline to the contrary.¹⁶⁹

Who would have thought Pascal a (conservative) materialist? Truth, he says, is not only a matter of evidence in the Cartesian sense—that is, of clarity and distinction, of proof and demonstration, of mathematical authority. It is also a matter of inclination, for the simple reason that we always find ourselves *inclined*—to do something and think in a certain way. Only *embodied* truth is real, or effective. There is no persuasion, or faith, without discipline (religious discipline, military discipline, party discipline, union discipline, etc.)—that is, without the contraction and accumulation of habits, without a sedimentary, geological shaping of the body: without inclination. The mind follows suit. There is no truth—other, perhaps, than mathematical truth—that is not also, and necessarily, a process of subjectivation, an arbitrary yet highly effective marking of the body. Bending, pulling, inclining, without violence *or* argument—that is the function of the imaginary, indeed superstitious constructions of ideology. In the end, and on one level,

it matters little that the ideology consists in believing that the President of the United States is the only hope of the American people to combat the satanic, pedophile, anti-gun, anti-God ring growing within Democratic ranks and threatening the very existence of the nation; or that he incarnates a hope of a very different kind, based on inclusion and compassion. Of course, as Spinoza makes very clear, the politics of love are always better than the politics of fear and spite (to which I return in chapter 3), precisely because they lead not to discord and civil war but to unity and peace. At the same time, both are expressions of the same, inevitable tendency: that of bringing people together through the power of imagination—federating through superstition.

Yet if we *become* subjects, it is not as pre-subjectivated individuals. Only liberals believe that; only they think of subjects as intrinsically free or autonomous, that is, as centers of agency, authors of and responsible for their actions. Althusser, by contrast, is naturally driven to the conclusion (one that distances him even further from Marx) that we are subjects from the start, always already subjected to a form of ideology, such that to even speak of ideological subjects is a tautology: we all “live ‘spontaneously’ or ‘naturally’ in ideology in the sense in which I have said that ‘man is an ideological animal by nature.’”¹⁷⁰ But that does not mean that we are subjected, heteronomous beings who have no choice but to submit to a higher authority. That is not how ideology (qua subjectivation) works. We are all imaginary beings, whose desires are mediated by the desires of others, caught up in a process of ideological recognition and reproduction: “You and I are always already subjects, practising the rituals of ideological recognition, which guarantee for us that we are indeed concrete, distinguishable and (naturally) irreplaceable subjects.”¹⁷¹ Thus, the function of ideology is also one of recognition, in the double sense of the term: recognition of who I am, where I am, what my place and role are (“it really is me, I am here, a worker, a capitalist, a soldier!”); and recognition as repetition and confirmation, as condition of reproduction of the social order. And it’s possible that ideology begins with a moment of interpellation or hailing, as in Caravaggio’s magnificent rendering of Christ’s arm stretched out, his finger pointed toward him who is about to become his disciple, in *The Calling of St Matthew* at San Luigi dei Francesi. It’s possible that this performative locution (“You, there, come with me!”) is the very first step of ideology, the preliminary (but not only) condition of obedience, which needs to be followed by many techniques and rituals, repeated and shared. In ideology, the subject is called upon as a free subject who freely accepts his or her subjection and carries out the gestures, rituals, and actions of her subjection all by herself. They are

recognized by being called upon ("Hey, you . . ."), and end up recognizing themselves in that recognition, that is, through the mediation of that Subject (God, the Prophet, the Boss, the Nation, the Market, etc.). There is no subject without a Subject in relation to which the imaginary edifice of ideology is constructed. As Althusser puts it: "Ideology interpellates individuals as subjects"; "all ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects."¹⁷² And it does that by inventing techniques or technologies of obedience, by gently pushing individuals in a certain direction, by making them do certain things *together*, at certain times and within a certain ritual: by channeling and directing the flow of desire.

What conclusions can we draw from this analysis of superstition and its connection with ideology?

First, as with stupidity, it is necessary to be outside ideology—that is, in what Althusser calls "scientific knowledge" and I call "critique"—to be able to say "I am in ideology" or "I was in ideology" (or superstition, or stupidity). And yet, as one is always already in ideology, the standpoint of critique is not simply given, awaiting us on the other side of a line that we would simply recognize and subsequently cross. Critique needs to be wrested from ideology, and from within ideology, not once and for all, but repeatedly, as a practice. It is therefore a matter of being attuned to the signs of ideology, of developing an ear and a sense for it. The paradox of the accusation of being in ideology is that it applies only to others, and never to oneself (unless one is a Spinozist or a Marxist). This, Althusser remarks, amounts to saying that ideology has no outside, or that everything takes place in ideology. And as with stupidity, the critical philosopher is the one concerned with his or her own inclination toward superstition, his or her own blindness or shortsightedness, with all the powers that stifle or suffocate thought. At the same time, from the point of view of "science" or critique this time, ideology is nothing but outside—outside *die Sache selbst*, outside the problem at hand, which ideology signifies or signals but never thematizes. This claim is heavy with consequences that are theoretical as well as political. Theoretical, insofar as critique, as a critique of ideology, is both inside and outside its object, and thus close to the position of deconstruction. It cannot occupy a space that is outside ideology, *de jure* as it were, but must extract itself from it, time and again. And this is where the theoretical and the political connect. For the effort in question is precisely a practice, and a renewed one at that, rather than a turning point or a moment of decision. It requires work on, and constant attention to, oneself, the discourses, language, and institutions within which one lives and operates, and the social relations they both presuppose

and help reproduce. This, presumably, would apply to the elements of ideology that are not simply smuggled in or inadvertently carried over into social struggles and even revolutionary movements, but created therein. It's not just the repressive state apparatus that was transposed and even radicalized within communist state power. The ideological state apparatus, its disciplinary, ritualistic and anticritical tendencies were also transposed and reinvented at the level of the party, as Althusser himself recognizes:

It will doubtless be objected that the communist party constitutes itself the way all other parties also do: on the basis of an ideology, which the party itself calls, moreover, proletarian ideology. That is true. In the communist party as well, ideology plays the role of "cement" (Gramsci) for a particular social group, unifying it in its thinking and practices. In the communist party as well, this ideology "interpellates individuals as subjects"—to be very precise, as militant-subjects: one needs only a little concrete experience of a communist party in order to have seen this mechanism and this dynamic at work. . . .¹⁷³

There is, however, a crucial difference—at least according to Althusser—between bourgeois and proletarian ideology, and that is the way in which the latter is informed by *science* (or critique):

But what is known as proletarian ideology is not the purely "spontaneous" ideology of the proletariat, in which proletarian "elements" (Lenin) are combined with bourgeois elements and, more often than not, subordinated to them. For in order to exist as a class conscious of its unity and active in its fighting organization, the proletariat needs not just experience (that of the class struggles it has been waging for more than a century) but also *objective knowledge* [*connaissances objectives*] the principles of which Marxist theory provides it with. It is on the twofold basis of these experiences, illuminated by Marxist theory, that proletarian ideology is constituted: the mass ideology capable of unifying the avant-garde of the working class in its class-struggle organizations. It is therefore a very special kind of ideology. It is an ideology, because, at the level of the masses, it functions the way any ideology does (by interpellating individuals as subjects). It is, however, steeped in historical experiences illuminated by scientific principles of analysis.¹⁷⁴

What Althusser recognizes here is that even science-based politics requires its own ideology, its own imaginary constructions and processes of subjectivation, its own rituals, myths, and modes of interpellation. In the same way

that the French (bourgeois) Revolution, inspired by the *philosophes* and the *lumières*, triumphed in the Terror of Robespierian Virtue and the cult to the Supreme Being, the Russian (proletarian) Revolution gave birth to another Father and another cult, in addition to a new, omnipresent bureaucracy, an all-encompassing system of surveillance, and a repressive state apparatus far greater than that of any liberal bourgeois democracy. In addition, by singling out the proletariat as the empty, alienated class, and elevating it to the status of the universal, Marx ended up fetishizing it. This universalist discourse, I would claim, should apply to all groups robbed of their true, actual role, of their voice and identity: whether economic, racial, or sexual, one can write a history of the empty class, a history of alienation, without singling one out as *the* universal. Furthermore, to do so—as Marx himself did—is precisely to run the risk of fetishizing a given class or group (the proletariat, the industrial reserve army), and to fall into what Tomšič calls “scientific” or “worldview” Marxism—the very Marxism that turned the subject of truth (the proletariat, labor-power) into a subject of knowledge and universal History, the subject who is meant to reach the highest form of self- or class-consciousness through the party: in short, the *normalized* subject.¹⁷⁵ It is to turn the critique of political economy into a master discourse. There can be a *form* of the universal—one, as Rancière claims, that could be defined in terms of the *demos*, that is, the “surplus community” made up of “those who have no qualification to rule, which means at once everybody and any one at all”¹⁷⁶—without any actual instance of that form, without any particular group being elevated to the universal as such and becoming a subject of knowledge or science.

A second conclusion is that it is now possible to write a history of ideology qua superstition, one that has a reality of its own and is perhaps no longer simply (or exclusively) an effect or function of the relations of production. It means we can write a *critical* history of certain discourses and practices, and their relation to structures and relations of power, which doesn’t dismiss them as “nothingness” or false, and does not speak from a position of truth, but in the name of a certain vigilance and weariness, and a view to minimizing relations of power. It’s possible that, ultimately, they all relate back to social relations of production. But it’s also possible that they have a life of their own and, while indicative of relations of power and subjectivation, they are not relations of exploitation. It can itself become critical of those moments of imaginary construction internal to the Marxist discourse—on issues related to gender, race, or the environment, but also, and perhaps most of all, on the imaginary and accentuated role the state apparatus continued to play within revolutionary moments, and thus on the

promise of a post-state age that never came, and will never be brought about through a revolution, the aim of which, after all, is to seize power and install in its stead a different form of power. A critique of ideology, of superstition and stupidity, is intrinsically anarchist, and will seek to unmask the relations of power, and practices of subjectivation, inherent to, say, psychiatric or pedagogic discourse, as well as revolutionary discourse.

A third and final conclusion can be drawn from both the Marxist analysis of fetishism and the Althusserian analysis of ISAs: ideology and superstition are mechanisms essential not only to the *reproduction* of the relations of production, but to the *production* of those relations. The relations of production couldn't exist, couldn't get off the ground, even at their most explicitly coercive and exploitative, without some of the magic of ideology. Much of that magic is, today, in the hands of specialists in marketing and communication, influencers and gurus. Entire industries, from well-being to diet, plastic surgery, entertainment, and spiritual retreats, prop up the competitive, flexible, and resilient self. We are witnessing an extraordinary flourishing of narratives and techniques around self-esteem, even (and perhaps especially) in places of exploitation. This, I believe, means that relations of production are never just that: they are also relations of desire, and no critique of political economy can do without a critique of libidinal economy. And I wonder about the extent to which Marx himself was or was not already aware of this when he used the word "fetishism" to describe the most fundamental operation of capitalism—that is, when he tried to show how capitalism transforms a human relation into a thing, and things into animate beings and objects of desire. There is, he says in substance, magical thinking at work in the most material activity and sphere of life: namely, production. No matter how much we rationalize it, and the rationality we draw from it, or erect on it—the so-called laws of economics—it remains a function of magical thinking, which is to say, of irrational forms of desire.

THREE

On Spite

Prelude

In season 7 of *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, Larry David decides to open “Little Larry’s Café” on the doorstep of a coffee shop for which he has developed a particular dislike. Motivated by spite only, he is ready to run his operation at a loss, so long as he can take away customers from “Mocha Joe’s Café.” Larry’s initiative sets a trend: many other celebrities open their own “spite stores” (a deli, a bird store, a jewelry store, etc.) with the sole purpose of putting stores they hold a grudge against out of business, and at the risk of running their brilliant acting careers into the ground. Larry is delighted. We, the spectators, are both amused and appalled, as we can’t help but see a bit of ourselves in Larry’s spiteful enterprise.

Did Larry David have Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* in mind when writing his episodes?¹ Dostoevsky’s short book is surely less humorous, but arguably the greatest literary monument to the utterly destructive (including self-destructive) logic of spite. “I am a sick man . . . I am a spiteful man.” Thus begins the work. The narrator’s confession—that he is a spiteful man—is initially ambiguous: is he sick *and* spiteful, spiteful *because* he is sick, or sick *with* spite? The first paragraph seems to leave the matter open: “I am an unpleasant man. I think my liver is diseased.” He is not entirely certain about his liver—he has, in fact, refused to consult a doctor about the matter—but he is certain about his unpleasantness, which he also refers to throughout his confession as bitterness, hatred, resentment, wretchedness, hysterical rage, and perhaps most importantly, a deep longing for revenge: a very unpleasant character indeed, full, like Iago, of “motiveless Malignity.”² Three or four sentences into *Notes*, however, we are given a precious clue: the reason the narrator, whose name will remain unknown, refuses to treat his liver is spite itself (*zloba*). We are therefore led to believe that his real

and profound illness, which stops him from consulting a doctor about his liver, is spite: "My liver is bad, well then—let it get even worse!" This makes sense only from the standpoint of spite itself, which the narrator embodies: despite his respect, or at least lack of disdain, for the medical profession, he would rather injure himself more than run the risk of reducing his level of resentment. He would sooner die than part with his *raison d'être*. He is truly one with spite. After this initial paragraph, the matter of the narrator's liver will never again be addressed, or even alluded to. The liver, like anything in or around him, is enveloped in spite, is poisoned by it, and comes, quite literally, to embody it. At no point in the course of the confession are we led to believe that the narrator is evil, and that his spite is a matter for morality or theology. Rather, it is a sickness, and a matter for a kind of doctor unknown to the narrator.

The rest of *Notes* consists in a detailed description of the narrator's spiteful thoughts, words, and actions, as well as his attempt to identify the roots of his disease. We learn that, in the civil service, he used to be "a spiteful official" who "took pleasure in being rude" (*Notes*, 4). He speaks of the "resentment" and "hysterical rage" he feels in the presence of an officer he admires, but who barely notices him. We also learn of his even greater hatred of Zverkov, an officer in the army with whom he had been at school, and whose self-confidence and attractive physical appearance he cannot stand. In those two instances, spite takes the form of envy. Finally, and most painfully, we read about the narrator's enjoyment in humiliating a young prostitute, whose soul he turns upside down and whose heart he tears apart: for no apparent reason, "a horrible spite against her suddenly surged up in my heart; I believe I could have killed her" (*Notes*, 106). She is made to pay for all the humiliations and torment he feels he has had to endure. And yet, all along, he is lucid about his situation: while "fully conscious of the disgusting meanness of my spiteful stupidity," "I absolutely could not restrain myself" (*Notes*, 106). The juxtaposition of terms—spiteful stupidity—brings us back to a connection I have insisted on from the start of this book. The narrator's confession culminates in the following address to the poor girl, who comes to visit him in his pauper's home at his own invitation, believing him when he claimed he had spoken too harshly:

And for what I am confessing to you now, I shall never forgive *you*, either! Yes, you must answer for it all because you turned up like this, because I am a blackguard, because I am the nastiest, stupidest, pettiest, absurdest and most envious of all worms on earth. (*Notes*, 109)

This is confession turned on its head: one that leads not to atonement, forgiveness, and peace of mind, but to more torment, hatred, and spite. I will return to the question of spite and confession in a more political context at the end of this chapter.

But what *is* spite, and how does it originate? It is a dark filter through which we see the world, a somber veil thrown over it, and which deprives it of its colors. It is a force of inhibition, which only allows the saddest passions to emerge. It is the venom that poisons all. As for its origin, the narrator himself seems to locate it in what he calls "hyperconsciousness," by which he means a highly developed, yet selective form of consciousness—one that orients us in the world and retains only suffering: "to be hyperconscious is a disease . . . any consciousness is a disease" (*Notes*, 6); "suffering is the whole origin of consciousness" (*Notes*, 31). Spite is a response to the ills of unhappiness and suffering, yet one that, far from offering a cure, only aggravates them.

But the real secret of suffering, which allows us ultimately to distinguish between two types of human beings, is not *that* there is suffering in the world, or even *why* there is suffering, but that we *enjoy* suffering. The *jouissance* of our own suffering, the fact that we would rather suffer than not feel at all, is what should arrest our attention. The troubling truth is that we choose to suffer, that we slip it on like a bespoke coat that protects us from what is ultimately a more demanding, more difficult *task*: happiness. Much to his horror, the narrator realizes that the enjoyment he feels in harboring those hideous thoughts, and acting in that spiteful manner, by far surpasses the romantic joys "of all the sublime and the beautiful" and his own ability to recognize their refinement:

I reached the point of feeling a sort of secret abnormal, despicable joy in re-turning home to my corner on some disgusting Petersburg night, and being acutely conscious that that day I had again done something loathsome, that what was done could never be undone, and secretly, inwardly gnaw at myself for it, nagging and confusing myself till at last the bitterness turned into a sort of shameful accursed sweetness, and finally into real positive enjoyment! Yes, into enjoyment, into enjoyment! (*Notes*, 7)

That enjoyment, the narrator goes on to explain, consisted precisely in the hyperconsciousness of his own degradation, and the realization that even the lowest, most loathsome kind of life remains an expression of power, a type of *life*. Contrary to what utilitarianism believes, it is not just rationality and prosperity that define the meaning of advantage for human beings:

And why are you so firmly, so triumphantly convinced that only the normal and the positive—in short, only prosperity—is to the advantage of man? Is not reason mistaken about advantage? After all, perhaps man likes something besides prosperity? Perhaps he likes suffering just as much? Perhaps suffering is just as great an advantage to him as prosperity? Man is sometimes fearfully, passionately in love with suffering and that is a fact . . . man will never renounce real suffering, that is, destruction and chaos. (*Notes*, 31)

Dostoevsky knew a thing or two about suffering: eight months in Nicholas's notoriously harsh jails; a mock execution by firing squad; four years of hard labor in Siberia, followed by five years in the ranks of a disciplinary regiment, also in Siberia; a gambling addiction; regular attacks of epilepsy; insolvency and poverty. Seen in that light, it is natural to wonder whether the path of spite chosen by the narrator of *Notes from Underground* is one that Dostoevsky himself contemplated. It is tempting to read the text as the author's own temptation, and his confrontation with salvation through nihilism.

Dostoevsky opens up the underbelly and entrails of consciousness, and what does he find? Suffering, and the *enjoyment* of suffering, which manifests itself as spite. But does he go far enough? Is he aware of all the expressions, the symptoms of that enjoyment, all the manifestations of spite? What if spite and its acolytes—bitterness, resentment, revenge, hatred, malice—expressed themselves not only in the situations described in *Notes*, but in seemingly more innocent and benevolent thoughts and actions, in art and religion, morality and politics, science and philosophy?

I. From Suffering (or Sadness) to Revenge

The spirit of revenge, my friends, has so far been the subject of man's best reflection; and where there was suffering, one always wanted punishment too.

—F. Nietzsche, "On Redemption," *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

In the beginning was—*hatred*?³ Cain and Abel, Romulus and Remus, King Claudius and Hamlet, not to mention Ea and Apsu, Cronus and Uranus, Oedipus and Laius: the list of fratricides and patricides in our stories, myths and religions is long, and indicative of the feelings of envy, jealousy, aggressiveness, and cruelty we naturally harbor. Psychoanalysis sees this aggressive, even murderous impulse as constitutive of the human unconscious, which structures family and social relations: life on earth really is hell. Nietzsche went even further, suspecting hate to be behind even our so-called

noblest ideals and values. Take, for example, the idea of Paradise: "Dante made a gross error when with awe-inspiring naïveté he placed the inscription over the gateway to his hell: 'Eternal love created me as well':⁴—at any rate this inscription would have a better claim to stand over the gateway to Christian Paradise and its 'eternal bliss': 'Eternal *hate* created me as well.'"⁵

Yet Nietzsche had already cast doubt on the idea of original hatred—not because he did not see hatred as a profound tendency and serious philosophical issue (he did, perhaps more than anyone), but because he saw it as derived from a deeper, more original state: namely, suffering. Suffering is the physiological or mental condition, the basic affect that lies at the root of the range of emotions we call rancor, resentment, spite, indignation, vindictiveness, etcetera. "It is," he writes, "impossible to suffer without making someone pay for it [*ohne irgendwen es entgelten zu lassen*]; every grievance contains the seeds of revenge [*schon jede Klage enthält Rache*]."⁶ We can't help but feel "indignant" in the face of a suffering we judge to be "senseless" (*sinnlos*) and "undeserved" (*unverdient*).⁷ But how, exactly, does suffering generate those feelings? As we'll see, this generation is neither immediate nor inevitable: it is in fact an *interpretation* of this basic physiological feeling, the source of which, then, can only be attributed to something other than the suffering itself. The strange thing about pain, Nietzsche remarks in *The Gay Science*, is that it "always raises the question about its origin," whereas "pleasure is inclined to stop with itself without looking back."⁸ And if the generation of spite is neither immediate nor inevitable, it also suggests that suffering can lead to a different interpretation and response, including a *philosophical* one. But this, in turn, requires that philosophy rid itself not of suffering as such, but of nihilistic responses to suffering and the will to suffer, with which it poisons itself and others.

1. What Is Suffering?

Before I answer the genealogical question regarding the provenance of resentment, rancor, and spite, and broach the question of how it might be overcome, let me venture a definition of suffering. I will do so by drawing on Spinoza and Nietzsche, who will serve as guides throughout this chapter. Suffering—Spinoza calls it "sadness"—is the immediate reaction to, and sign of, a decrease of my power to act and think. It signals a shift from a greater to a weaker perfection, a diminishing of my own being, a drop in my own vitality, a frustration or impediment in my desire to grow: in short, an expression of impotence. Nietzsche calls it "a feeling of obstruction" (*GM 3, 17: 102*). As such, and whatever the nature of the suffering (a flesh wound,

a disease, the loss of someone we love, a hurtful comment), suffering is *always* bad. Insofar as it affects the human (or animal) body negatively, it is *necessarily* bad. Furthermore, what we call “evil” (I include quotation marks to distinguish it from any moral interpretation) is nothing other than the feeling of this onto-physiological drop in power. I call “bad” (*malum*), Spinoza writes, “every kind of sadness [*tristitia*],” and especially every force or affection of the body which “frustrates” our desire [*desiderio*]. Human desire and, more generally, the effort of every “mode” or living being to persevere in its own being, or augment its power to the maximum of its capacity, is equivalent to what Nietzsche, in a perhaps more ambiguous way, calls the will to power.

Throughout, I will refer to suffering or sadness as the generic passion that invades us when we move from a greater to a lesser perfection, when our power shrinks. It is a passion insofar as it reveals that our power to act has been affected negatively, frustrated, compromised. Insofar as this affection of the body is accompanied by an Idea that corresponds to it, it is an affect, or emotion,⁹ the range of which is broad: “sad” passions include fear, anger, hatred, cruelty, disdain, despair, envy, jealousy, spite, rancor, vengeance, et cetera.¹⁰ Nietzsche agrees, although it is precisely the passage from “weakness” to “envy” that I want to focus on and account for: “What is *bad*? . . . everything that proceeds from weakness, from envy, from revengefulness”;¹¹ everything that locks me into a passive, reactive position, frustrates my power to act, subjects me to the power of others; everything that inhibits my own vitality, my “instinct for growth, for continuance, for accumulation of forces . . . for *power*” (AC 6). This condemnation of envy (*Neid*), and of its connection with weakness, should not eclipse the passages in which Nietzsche presents a more positive picture of such a drive, one he sees at work in ancient Greek culture. In his discussion of the two Eris goddesses in “Homer’s Contest,” inspired by Hesiod’s *Works and Days*, Nietzsche contrasts the negative form of *eris* (or envy), which brings about destruction and annihilation, with the positive form, which forces human beings to better themselves and achieve excellence through ambition and competition.¹² Greek festivals, physical contests, and wrestling matches were an expression of the latter. In its positive form, Eris “as jealousy, resentment, and envy, provokes human beings to action—not to the action of fights of annihilation but rather to the action of *contests* [*Wettkämpfe*].”¹³ The difference between the two forms of envy, therefore, corresponds to the difference between a will to make the other weaker or push her down (*herabdrücken*), and a will to make oneself stronger or raise oneself up (*erheben*) to her level through healthy competition.¹⁴ Unlike the early Nietzsche, I should like

to distinguish between ambition or competition, and the affects of jealousy, envy, revengefulness, and resentment, which I see as entirely negative. Eventually, though, I will explore the exceptional situations in which those feelings ought to be recognized and integrated into political mechanisms of reconciliation and assimilation.

In addition, and as a necessary corollary, insofar as those negative, revengeful passions diminish my power while always also expressing it (that is, while also expressing a degree of the will to power and the will to live), they limit my freedom (GS 1). In their thrall, I am subjected to the power of external forces over which, I feel, I have no control, and which affect me negatively, thus generating in me thoughts of hatred and revenge, which, in turn, "like a poisonous mineral, gnaw my inwards." I am locked in a state of servitude, forced to think and act like a slave, that is, to *react*. That is all I *can* do, what I have become. Unable to act, that is, to combine my powers with those of others around me so as to increase them, and thus experience joy, I can only *suffer* life. Every form of suffering, from the most trivial to the most excruciating, is an indication of a passive or reactive life.

By contrast, anything that increases my power to act and think is necessarily good, or virtuous. And in the same way that a decrease of power or loss of vitality brings about sadness and pain, an increase of one's power, a growth in vitality brings about joy: "By 'good' [*bonum*] I understand every kind of joy [*laetitia*] and furthermore whatever is conducive thereto, and especially whatever satisfies a desire [*desiderio*] of any sort" (E 3, Prop. 39 Schol.). Philosophy itself, insofar as it is concerned with understanding the conditions under which power is increased and the ways of bringing those conditions about, is the highest expression of action and the "gay" or "joyful" science, which also acknowledges and includes the great woes and sufferings of life (GS 1). It is the science that is concerned with the creation and transmission of joyful affects, that combats the introduction, reproduction, and proliferation of sadness with all its heart. It is the struggle against the oppression of sadness and the glorification of suffering in all its forms; against those who promote it, organize it, and derive their own power from the enslavement of others; against the ethics, politics, and religion that draws on such passions and sometimes injects the social and political body with its poison. It is an antidote.

In that respect, the greatest historical *tour de force*—or should we call it *faiblesse*?—and the most unforgiveable lie has been to pretend that weakness is virtuous, that God loves weakness. What kind of God would love weakness, that is, praise us for our imperfection, for what makes us feel sad and small? A perverse God, no doubt. No, God's law, or the law of Nature,

if there is such a thing, consists only in seeking the highest perfection possible, that is, and as far as we human beings are concerned, the greatest expansion of our powers or faculties (Nietzsche calls them our “instincts”)—our powers of understanding and knowledge, imagination and recollection, sensation and intuition, socialization and love, physical strength and flexibility—through philosophy, science, art and literature, religion (yes, religion), politics, ethics, dance and gymnastics, celebrations and festivals, as well as the use of bodily pleasures. The only law or commandment is that we understand, test, and stretch our nature so as to reach the greatest possible contentment (*gaudium*); and this means to avoid everything that causes us harm, sadness, and suffering, for *tristitia* always diminishes or frustrates the power of the mind and the body, their capacity to understand (*intellegendi*) the nature of each thing, to act, and to bring our faculties to another, hitherto unknown power.

In a late note from the *Nachlass* (January–Fall 1888), Nietzsche illustrates the conception of virtue I have been sketching thus far by contrasting what he calls “the virtue of the moralists” with “true,” “moraline-free virtue.”¹⁵ The first, he claims, is “the hemiplegia of virtue,” that is, “castrated” virtue, or virtue amputated of all the instincts that allow life to struggle and grow—“those instincts with which he can be an enemy, can cause harm, can be angry, can demand revenge.”¹⁶ Revenge as such is not the issue. So long as it is swift, directed at the true culprit, and proportional, it is just, and needs to be distinguished from the revengefulness of rancor and spite. True virtue is also the rebellion and immediate revenge against everything that harms or diminishes life, the rare and often solitary impulse to transgress established norms and principles, to experiment and reveal what a body can do. What we have become used to recognizing and valuing as the “good person” is therefore incomplete virtue, virtue robbed of its power: paralyzed virtue. As Nietzsche puts it in another note (November 1887–March 1888), with virtue thus understood “one renounces power, loses the will to power.”¹⁷ One ends up celebrating one’s own weakness as a force, one’s own negativity as a positivity. That is why “one should defend virtue against the preachers of virtue.”¹⁸ Instead of making the weak stronger, of recognizing virtue as something rare, exceptional, remarkable, and hard, they seek to make virtue accessible to all, to democratize it, and therefore mistake the state of servitude or passivity into which we so easily fall as virtue itself. They condone weakness instead of promoting strength. At bottom, however, the virtue of moralists is self-interested, and thus an expression of the will to power, albeit a weak one: it is in their interest to value weakness, for the weakness of others confirms their own, miserable form of power. They lack the strength

and courage to elevate themselves, to want and to be more. And so, to those “gentlemen of virtue,” Nietzsche says:

You are not our superiors. . . . You make what you can of yourselves: partly what you must—what circumstances force you to—partly what gives you pleasure, partly what seems useful to you. . . . One is a thoroughly small type of man if one is only virtuous. . . . With your minimum amount of power, nothing can seem wiser to you than virtue.¹⁹

The disturbing truth of that virtue, and all the values it generates, is that it is not altogether different, *qualitatively* different, from spite as a supreme vice. Both are expressions of powerlessness. Those “gentlemen of virtue” fail to see—and here Nietzsche seems to depart from Spinoza—that “for every strong and natural species of man, love and hate, gratitude and revenge, good nature and anger, affirmative acts and negative acts, belong together.”²⁰ There cannot be a Yes without a No, an affirmation without a negation; sad passions themselves—hate, anger, and revenge—are often necessary to arrive at the glorious Yes to life, the life that is itself struggle and hardship. There is a Yes, a sheepish and spineless form of acceptance, that is detrimental to life. Similarly, there is a No, a form of struggle and combat, an anger and a rage that affirms life, that speaks from a desire to grow and increase one’s power. I am thinking here of the Apollonian rage of Achilles, which manages to express itself directly, by exteriorizing itself and creating havoc, and which partakes of what Sloterdijk describes as “a happy and limitless warmongering,” a free and combative energy.²¹ But I am also thinking of the constructive, transformative anger Audre Lorde feels and claims in the face of racist and sexist attitudes, and the deep, destructive hatred that animates them:

We [defined by Lorde on the same page as “women, people of Color, lesbians and gay men, poor people”—MB] cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us. . . . *This hatred and our anger are very different.* Hatred is the fury of those who do not share our goals, and its object is death and destruction. Anger is grief of distortions between peers, and its object is change.²²

This kind of rage, fury even—fury is a recurring theme in Lorde—needs to be distinguished, quite fundamentally, from the purely nihilistic hatred and

longing for revenge that characterizes *ressentiment*, and spite in particular.²³ Their difference is a temporal one: they belong to two different economies of time, as Nietzsche showed in his later writings. And it is not a coincidence that the idea of eternal recurrence acts as a test or discriminating factor between two different types of anger, and two different types of life.

From the very first line of the *Iliad*, which marks the beginning of European literature, the defining feature of Achilles and, through him, of the ancient Greek psyche, the God of the Old Testament, and the revolutionary movements of the twentieth century, anger, Sloterdijk claims, is a defining affect of European history, and possibly its engine, or, better said perhaps, its currency. If anger is indeed a specific mood or affect, it is an affect that has a very specific *economy*. With anger, it is always a question of knowing how to “manage” it. And this is where Achilles’ wrath differs from that of the God of the Old Testament, or that of the revolutionary. Whereas the first manages to express itself directly, by exteriorizing itself and creating havoc; whereas it partakes of “a happy and limitless warmongering,” of an “Apollonian” nature and a free and combative energy, of courage, dignity, honor, self-esteem, and pride—Nietzsche speaks of “the delirium of sweet revenge (Homer early on dubbed it “sweeter than honey”)—the latter are subjected to a process “of delay and deferral, of internalization, transposition, and displacement.”²⁴

The first type of economy—connected with a certain Greek, and specifically Homeric stance, the contemporary equivalent of which Peter Sloterdijk seeks to identify in a renewed concept of pride—partakes of a healthy “thymotics.” It originates from the *thymos*, or the part of the soul which, according to the early Greeks, and up until Plato, was thought to be the site of the noblest affects. The second type of economy, on the other hand, is associated with the main processes of collection or gathering of anger: namely, Judeo-Christian metaphysics and revolutionary politics. It originates from the erotic part of the soul, which defines the envious, libidinal part of the human psyche. If one can speak of anger in both instances, one also needs to emphasize the fact that they do not originate in the same part of the soul.

The price of the latter type of economy is, as I already indicated, disproportionate: lack leads to frustration, and frustration to resentment; it fuels a thirst for retribution and revenge, yet one that is immediately reinvested and internalized, for it believes that by growing it is made better, and that its time (or the time of its full release) will come. In the meantime—*our* time, the time that counts and that we count, the time that is itself a currency—anger grows, and awaits its total mobilization. It turns into a profitable bank. “Your investment is safe,” we are told—whether by a divine, political,

or metapsychological (the superego) authority. And the authority in question is right. But what is the value of such an investment, Sloterdijk asks, echoing the concern that Nietzsche raised a century before? It is the lowest value, for it is generated by the lowest and least noble human instincts, and is an expression of weakness. It is a value that is attached to, and indeed enslaved by, the part of the soul which Sloterdijk would like to see dominated by the more noble and generally healthier *thymos*, the economy of which is qualitatively different.

As soon as anger is conserved, preserved, or interiorized, as soon as it is allowed (or worse still, encouraged) to accumulate, as soon as its externalization is deferred, it enters into a different kind of economy—an economy of accumulation, growth, and interest. Like the monetary economy, the economy of anger crosses its critical threshold when anger rises and moves from a state of local accumulation and punctual expenditure—revenge—to one of a systematic investment and cyclical growth—most notably, revolution (especially in its global ambition) and the politics of spite in general.

Hatred and the desire for revenge are actually a crucial intermediary step between suffering and spite, and the necessary, natural sentiment that emerges from this basic affection. On this point Spinoza, Adam Smith, and Nietzsche agree. For Smith, the causes of pain and pleasure, whatever they are, animate or inanimate, immediately excite the two passions of “resentment” and “gratitude,” in *all* animals: “We are angry, for a moment, even at the stone that hurts us.”²⁵ Hatred can thus be described as the emotion that naturally accompanies suffering, or the spontaneous rejection of suffering insofar as it is accompanied by the idea of its cause: as my power or perfection diminishes, I develop hatred toward the idea—or, as we’ll see, toward the imaginary projection—of its cause. There is therefore nothing *morally* wrong about anger. As Spinoza puts it, insofar as it leads us to “ward off from us that which has caused us some harm” and to “avoid the thing we hate,” it isn’t bad.²⁶ It is also natural, when we hate someone and are understandably *angry*, to endeavor to cause them harm, unless we fear that we will suffer greater injury in return (*E* 3, Prop. 39). It is likewise natural, whenever we imagine the destruction [*destrui imaginatur*] of someone or something we hate, to feel joyful [*laetabitur*] (*E* 3, Prop. 20). The feelings of anger (*ira*, “the effort to harm those we hate”) and revenge (*vindicta*, “to return the harm we suffered”) are natural consequences of hatred (*E* 3, Prop. 40 Schol.), which is itself generated by the representation of the cause of our sadness. But to say that hatred, anger, and revenge are not *morally* bad does not mean that they are not *ontologically* or *ethically* bad. There is, to be sure, something intrinsically *bad* about them: they are a negative feeling,

a sad passion, indicative of a loss of power; I can't feel hatred, anger, and vindictiveness without imagining my own powerlessness, the frustration of my own essence (or perfection), the inhibition of my desire. I can't be subjected to those feelings without the representation of my own passivity and servitude, without the realization that my desire (or will to power)—that is, the force (*vis*) with which I persevere in existence (*in existendo*)—is limited, exposed to the power of external causes, which can cause it harm. This is why "hatred can never be good" (*E* 4, Prop. 45), and why "envy, derision, contempt, anger, revenge, and the other emotions related to hatred are bad" (*E* 4, Prop. 45, Cor. 1). As such, they will never match the feeling of love, and all the feelings associated with love, the joy of which stems not from the destruction or sadness of others, but from the knowledge of their well-being and their joy, and thus the increase of their own power: "Desire arising from joy is, other things being equal, stronger than desire arising from sadness" (*E* 4, Prop. 18). It is, Nietzsche says in a very similar vein, easy to imagine and share the pain of others; even the lowest animals do. "But to imagine the joy of others and to rejoice in that is the highest privilege of the highest animals and accessible even among them only to the choicest exemplars—and thus a rare *humanum*."²⁷ *Mitfreude*, not *Mitleid*, is the most arduous path and the truly ethical task. And that increase of power is also my increase, and my *interest*; that greater composition of power, that virtuous assemblage will always be better—stronger, healthier—than any relation based on sadness. It is also divine, in that it signals the transition from a lesser to a greater degree of perfection. But to say, following Spinoza, that hatred is always bad does not mean that it can be entirely eradicated. In fact, in his political writings, Spinoza sees "indignation," which is a form of hate, as the passion that is at the origin of political movements such as revolutions, but also, and more significantly still, of political formations in the most basic sense. I will return to this question.

However shameful or unjust (*E* 4, Prop. 45 Cor. 2), hatred is a feeling that can be overcome only by a stronger, more positive feeling, a better proposition, based on love and generosity (*generositas*), and not by a sense of duty or obedience, such as the command to turn the other cheek, forgive one's enemy, or love one's neighbor (especially when that neighbor causes us injury).²⁸ Spinoza understands why, given the multitude's inability to grasp the true order of Nature, the prophets had recourse to the anthropomorphic, political language of laws and commandments, as well as to parables, in order to establish a code of conduct that fits the essence or perfection of human beings. But we must not confuse this ideological order of representation, which appeals to the imagination, with the natural order,

accessible to thought. Those who live by the guidance of reason—which for Spinoza, means by the guidance of a genuine *understanding* of the order of nature as well as of my own nature, rather than by a moral imperative—endeavor as far they can to repay with love or generosity another's hatred, anger, contempt, et cetera toward them (*E* 4, Prop. 46), not because they are ordered to do so, but simply because it is in their interest to do so, because their power and self-love increase rather than decrease as a result, because their virtue, or perfection, demands it. Generosity is the necessary outcome for he or she who understands, through the sole force of "adequate ideas," that relations of love, solidarity, and friendship between human beings increase their power, and therefore their joy:

Therefore, there are many things outside ourselves which are advantageous to us and ought therefore be sought. Of these none more excellent can be discovered than those which are in complete harmony with our own nature. For example, if two individuals of completely the same nature are combined, they compose an individual twice as powerful as each one singly.

Therefore, nothing is more advantageous to man than man. (*E* 4, Prop. 18 Schol.)

The goal of life, Nietzsche claims after Spinoza, is to create "bigger units of power" (*GM* 2, 11: 54), and therefore to avoid the negative instincts that get in the way of such a goal. While the Yes to life will always be better than the No, and love better than hatred, anger, and revenge, it is virtually impossible to imagine a *human* life that would be devoid of sadness and suffering, and therefore of a form of aggressiveness toward its cause. This is what Nietzsche meant, I think, when he spoke of the hemiplegia of virtue in the hands of "the good man"; it is a virtue wholly amputated from hate, anger, and revenge, exclusively bound to love and gratitude. That virtue is still governed by self-interest and the will to power, and can triumph only by triumphing over those deeply rooted instincts. It lacks *honesty*. Honesty is "our" virtue, the virtue of "free spirits," and one that is always in danger of becoming our "vanity" and "stupidity."²⁹

Although the feelings of anger, hatred, and vindictiveness, as natural and immediate responses to suffering and sadness, bring us closer to the vices of resentment, rancor, and spite, much remains to be done to understand how the latter come about, what they entail, and ultimately how they can be overcome. For that, I will analyze three types of questions to which suffering naturally leads, and the sort of philosophical and religious answers they have received, and I will eventually focus on the question most relevant

to this investigation. This typology, drawn from Nietzsche's writings, does not aim to be exhaustive, but to introduce, as economically as possible, and by way of contrast, the (in my view wrong and unnecessary) question that generates the spiteful type.

2. *Three Attitudes toward Suffering*

(A) Assuming that nothing good can come out of suffering, and that the life of desire, governed as it is by lack, is essentially one of pain, the central question becomes that of pain's possible neutralization, or at least minimization. How can it be eliminated, or at least avoided, kept to a bare minimum? This is the *Buddhist* way, which Nietzsche also finds in Epicurus, Schopenhauer, and (to an extent) Wagner. It also coincides with the "innocent methods" of the ascetic priest. Nietzsche's view comes across most clearly in the third essay of *The Genealogy of Morality* (section 17) and in *The Anti-Christ* (section 20). In the latter text, Nietzsche describes Buddhism and Christianity as "nihilistic" or "*décadence*" religions. Yet Buddhism is far superior in that it is more *realistic*, that is, more *honest*: it is a "strict phenomenism" that is concerned not with God, the struggle against *sin*, and the afterlife, but with the physiological reality of human life and the struggle against *suffering*. As Nietzsche wittily says, Christianity promises everything and delivers nothing, whereas Buddhism promises little and delivers a great deal. The physiological reality is that of "an excessive excitability of sensibility which expresses itself as a refined capacity for pain," combined with hyper-intellectuality, "a too great preoccupation with concepts and logical procedures under which the personal instinct has sustained harm to the advantage of the 'impersonal.'" This contradictory tendency naturally leads to a state of depression, against which Buddha takes "hygienic" measures and cultivates a physical and spiritual care of the self (an "egoism"):

He opposes it with life in the open air, the wandering life; with moderation and fastidiousness as regards food; with caution towards all emotions which produce gall, which heat the blood; *no* anxiety, either for oneself or for others. He demands ideas which produce repose or cheerfulness. . . . He understands benevolence, being kind, as health-promoting. . . . In the teaching of Buddha egoism becomes a duty: the "one thing needful," the "how can you get rid of suffering" regulates and circumscribes the entire spiritual diet. (AC 20)

Unlike Christianity, Buddhism is animated not by "hatred of the *senses*, of the joy of the senses, of joy in general," (AC 21) but by a hygiene or a

discipline of the senses that leads to the absence of desire, stillness, and cheerfulness—to perfection (AC 20). In fact, “the teaching of Buddha resists nothing *more* than it resists the feeling of revengefulness, of antipathy, of *ressentiment* (‘enmity is not ended by enmity’: the moving refrain of the whole of Buddhism . . .)” (AC 20). In that respect, it is closer to Spinoza and Nietzsche, closer to all those who see in resentment, vindictiveness, rancor, and spite the most dangerous poison, and in joy the goal of the philosophical life.

In *The Genealogy of Morality*, Nietzsche brings together Indian philosophy, Christianity, and Epicureanism under the description of the “innocent methods” of the ascetic priest, whose role is more that of a “conceptual character,” to use the Deleuzian idea, than an actual historical figure (GM 3, 17). Any sage, priest, or philosopher who proposes techniques aimed at minimizing suffering falls under the description of “innocent” asceticism. If there is an innocent form of asceticism, nonetheless different from the innocence of Dionysian pessimism, which is not ascetic at all, there is also a “guilty” one. It’s the latter, as we’ll see, which Nietzsche can neither swallow nor forgive. The innocent techniques or technologies of the self vary, and new ones could be created. Nietzsche mentions three. The first aims to eradicate suffering altogether (GM 3, 17: 105) by privileging “the hypnotic dampening of sensibility, of susceptibility to pain” (GM 3, 18: 105). Those techniques require that we detach ourselves from everything that excites the body, such as sexual relationships, or strong desires and emotions such as love, hatred, or revenge; that we avoid everything that stirs the blood, such as the pursuit of material goods. The final aim? A “loss of self,” a minimum expenditure of vital energy, total hypnosis and tranquility—in short, *salvation*.

But this alleviation of suffering and depression, this hypnotizing consolation and soothing, this suspension of “the leaden fatigue and the black melancholy” (GM 3, 17: 102) of those who are weary comes at a price. Yes, we are finally rid of that deep, physiological depression, that unbearable heaviness of being and “feeling of obstruction,” but we are no longer fully *alive*. Yes, we have survived, but we are only half alive, and therefore half dead. We are zombies. We have moved beyond good and evil—but how? By removing the extremes, by forging the middle path that is the path of frozen feelings and “deep sleep,” the path that robs us of even the ability to dream. We are anesthetized. This Buddhism is analogous to “the clear, cool, Greek-cool but suffering Epicurus,” for whom this hypnotic feeling of *nothingness*, “the tranquillity of deepest sleep, in short, the absence of suffering” was the “highest good, the value of values” (GM 3, 17: 105).³⁰ It is the religion and

philosophy of asceticism, which means also that of Christianity and of the Christian priest in particular, whose price for relieving his flock of its suffering is, as we'll see, even greater and more nihilistic than that of Buddhism or Epicureanism.

But the "innocent methods" of the ascetic priest do not end with this "total dampening of sensibility." They involve other inventions, such as "the blessing of work," which distracts the sufferers from their pain. In fact, "mechanical activity" in general, which includes "absolute regularity, punctual, mindless obedience, the tedium of the life of routine, time-filling, a certain encouragement, indeed discipline, to be 'impersonal'" (GM 3, 18: 105), is a key resource of the ascetic priest—and, today, of disciplinary power, whether applied to the prison, the army, or the workplace—to govern and subdue his flock. In fact, it is through such techniques of obedience and discipline that the multitude is turned into a flock. And it is not just the priest who acts as the shepherd. Today, those (not so) innocent methods are more the prerogative of the office or factory manager. Finally, Nietzsche mentions "small pleasures," such as "the pleasure of giving pleasure (as doing good, giving gifts, bringing relief, helping, encouraging, comforting, praising)" (GM 3, 18: 106), as yet another innocent method. By giving one a sense of "even the 'smallest superiority'" (GM 3, 18: 106), those small satisfactions, already experienced in the associations for mutual support for the poor and the sick among the lower echelons of ancient Roman society, help foster a sense of "community," of "reciprocity," of "fraternity"—in short, promote a *herd* mentality. All those technologies of the self—ascetic, disciplinary, charitable—have the virtue of neutralizing one's pain and fighting depression, of soothing the body and consoling the soul, including by forging community ties. Is the alternative to the constitution of the multitude as a herd the *rebellious* multitude, or the mob? This crucial question will guide my discussion of the politics of spite at the end of this chapter.

(B) While the second reaction to suffering, and the immediate feelings it gives rise to, also and eventually lead to the question of its alleviation, it begins by asking: Who is *responsible* for my suffering? Whom can I blame? That is the *wrong*, reactive and unforgivable question, which adds cruelty to suffering, and thus ends up increasing suffering. It is the question that *moralizes* suffering, dismisses it as an onto-ethical question concerned with the *cause* of my sadness, and my ability to avoid it. It is also the question that opens the path of spite and resentment. If anything, Nietzsche, like Spinoza before him, presents this tendency to impute responsibility for suffering to something like a transcendental illusion, if not a transcendental stupidity:

For every sufferer instinctively looks for a cause of his distress; more exactly [and I think this difference is precisely that between morality and ethics], for a culprit, even more precisely for a *guilty* culprit who is receptive to distress,—in short, for a living being upon whom he can release his emotions, actually or in effigy [and this difference between actual and imaginary release is one I will be insisting on], on some pretext or other: because the release of emotions is the greatest attempt at relief, or should I say, at *anaesthetizing* on the part of the sufferer, his involuntary longed-for narcotic against pain of any kind. (GM 3, 15: 99)

What is specific about this solution to pain is its *anesthetizing* effect through the release of stronger, yet negative emotions. This is not the attempt to prevent further harm through the defensive return of a blow, or through any protective physiological measure, such as a reflex movement. It is an emotional response, which is at the same time a deflection and an interpretation, and one that needs to be more intense, deeper, and longer lasting than the suffering itself. “I feel ill, therefore someone or other must be to blame” (GM 3, 15: 99). And if someone is to blame, then I deserve my revenge. This is the origin of the emotions of revenge, rancor, and spite. For if someone is to blame for my suffering, then I deserve my revenge, and am entitled to my hatred. This is also the path, including the political path, of *ressentiment*, which I will analyze in detail shortly. And if we recall what Spinoza says about emotions—namely, that they can be fought and replaced only by stronger emotions—the question, ultimately, is that of knowing which emotions can be opposed to those deeply sad ones, and how one can dig oneself out of the nihilistic hole.

The “innocent methods” of the ascetic priest, whether Christian or Buddhist, or of the Stoic or Epicurean, consisted in dampening emotions in general so as to minimize the risk of suffering. Fair enough. The “guilty methods,” by contrast, consist in fighting a feeling (suffering) with an even stronger one, to produce an “excess of feeling” (GM 3, 20: 109), to overwhelm us with emotions. Now if that feeling were one of elation, if the ascetic priest were to combat suffering with happiness, sadness with joy, and thus move us from a lesser to a greater perfection, or increase our power, there would be no problem, and he would be a hero. But his perverse move consists in exacerbating suffering, in inventing a suffering worse than the existing one, in torturing the soul. With a view to what? To becoming the master and possessor of the sufferers, their shepherd, He who knows and understands the origin of suffering, who exercises power over, but also through,

suffering. His business is the government of suffering, in the subjective as well as objective sense of the genitive: "Already people were no longer complaining *against* pain, they *thirsted* for it; '*more pain! more pain*' screamed the desire of his disciples and initiates for centuries" (GM 3, 20: 111). He, the magician and musician of pain, knows how to pull its strings, how to extract the most heart-wrenching adagio from it, but also the hope, even the promise of a life beyond that of pure suffering, a life of bliss and happiness, an eternal life—so long as, in this life, sinners (for that is what they are, for that is the meaning of their suffering) obey, confess, make amends, self-flagellate, embrace their own sadness as their fate, their purpose, their *raison d'être*.

The guilty method of the ascetic priest is the government of the sufferers through the excessive feeling of guilt and sinfulness. Guilt *is* its method. But it is also guilty of a criminal, unforgivable solution, which locks human beings into a state of even deeper sadness and depression, subjects them to an entirely internalized suffering. The source of the suffering, the cause of their depression is—*themselves*. I therefore deserve punishment, endless punishment and torture, which no confession, no forgiveness—not even that of Christ on the cross, who only reminds me of the fact that he died for me and to save me from my own sins, of the fact that I cannot save myself, adding the burden of this sacrifice to my guilt, putting his blood on my hands, furthering this excess, this orgy of feeling—will ever erase *entirely*. My ego suffers. Let my superego make sure I am punished for it!

(C) The third and final question, which Nietzsche embraces as his own, is: how does one accept suffering, live with it, *affirm* it? Not as a curse or a punishment, not as a sign of my necessary imperfection, but as a consequence and dimension of life itself, of its unsettling, disruptive, upsetting, and even destructive force, and in the knowledge that suffering has no *meaning*, that it is gratuitous and random. This is the "Dionysian" or "tragic" way, to which I now turn.

3. The Dionysian (or "Tragic") Way

It is also important to note that, on Nietzsche's reading, those three questions coincide with two fundamental attitudes and cultures, two forms of pessimism and nihilism. The threefold typology of questions corresponds to a twofold typology of cultures, nihilisms, and pessimisms. Nietzsche describes the first as "tragic," "Dionysian," or "active nihilism"—"nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit/mind."³¹ It is tragic and active because it does not reject suffering, and therefore does not open the door to the

reactive impulses of resentment and rancor, but affirms and embraces it—not, mind you, as a *raison d'être* and a goal, as a justification, but as a dimension of life itself and a way of affirming its meaninglessness and chance, its cycle of destruction and creativity, its chaos as well as its order. In a passage from his *Notebooks*, he writes:

Creation is relief from suffering [*Schaffen ist Erlösung vom Leiden*]. But suffering is also necessary for the creators [*Aber Leiden ist nöthig für den Schaffenden*]. Suffering is self-transformation; in every rebirth there is a death [*Leiden ist sich-Verwandeln, in jedem Geborenwerden ist ein Sterben*].³²

Dionysian pessimism is also the genuine *philosophical* attitude, freed from its moralistic shackles, concerned with the creation of values and concepts, and animated by a deep, genuine love of life. It is the ultimate and unconditional Yes to life, which is not simply resigned to it, which does not simply accept it as something imposed or forced onto it, but embraces it, joyfully.

The second, which Nietzsche describes generically as “passive nihilism”—“nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit/mind”³³—and specifically as Buddhist, Christian, and romantic pessimism, is a function of the fact that it tries to find *meaning* in suffering. By that, we need to understand not simply a cause, an answer to the question of how this particular suffering came about, but a *Why*, a direction and a *raison d'être*. It involves an *interpretation* of suffering, a *moral* one in particular. Such an interpretation is wholly unnecessary and leads to further suffering.

This division comes across most clearly in a section of the second edition of *The Gay Science* (1887) titled “What is Romanticism?” (GS 370). It distinguishes between two kinds of suffering, one stemming from the “impoverishment of life” and the other from the “over-fullness of life.” Whereas “profound suffering ennobles” and “separates,” petty, self-pitying, and common suffering inhibits life and crushes the soul. Each corresponds to a different kind of pessimism and leads to a different kind of culture, and of art in particular: “romantic” (Schopenhauer, Wagner) and “Dionysian” (Rubens, Goethe). Revenge is a product of the former, abundance and generosity a product of the latter:

What is romanticism?—Every art, every philosophy may be viewed as a remedy and an aid in the service of growing and struggling life; they always presuppose suffering and sufferer. But there are two kinds of sufferers: first, those who suffer from the *over-fullness of life* [*die Ueberfülle des Lebens*]*—they want a Dionysian art and likewise a tragic view of life—and then those who suffer*

from the *impoverishment of life* [*die Verarmung des Lebens*] and seek rest, stillness, calm seas, redemption from themselves through art and knowledge [The changes in NCW at this point include the insertion: "Revenge against life itself—the most voluptuous kind of frenzy for those so impoverished!"]. All romanticism in art and insight corresponds to the dual needs of the latter type, and that included (and includes) Schopenhauer as well as Richard Wagner. . . . He that is richest in the fullness of life, the Dionysian god and man, cannot only afford the sight of the terrible and questionable but even the terrible deed and any luxury of destruction, decomposition, and negation [*Zerstörung, Zersetzung, Verneinung*]. . . . Conversely, those who suffer most and are poorest in life would need above all mildness, peacefulness, and goodness in thought as well as deed—if possible, also a god who would be truly a god for the sick, a healer and saviour; also logic, the conceptual understandability of existence—for logic calms and gives confidence—in short, a certain warm narrowness that keeps away fear and encloses one in optimistic horizons. (GS 370)

Suffering is often creative. The question, in every instance, is: "Is it hunger or superabundance [*der Hunger oder der Ueberfluss*] that has become here creative?" (GS 370). All creation is therefore pessimistic. The question is: is the pessimism Dionysian or Romantic (or Christian, or Buddhist, or Platonic)? Is it born of the desire to fix, to immortalize, to *be*? Or is it born of the desire to create *and* destroy, to change, to *become*—of "the triumphant Yes to life beyond change and death?"³⁴ Is it a love or a hatred of *time*?³⁵ But even that alternative is somewhat reductive and ultimately illusory. For being and becoming, immortality and destruction can themselves be understood in opposed ways, as an expression of either Dionysian or Romantic pessimism:

The desire for *destruction*, change, and becoming can be the expression of an overflowing energy that is pregnant with future [*der übervollen zukunftsschwangeren Kraft*] (my term for this is, as is known, "Dionysian"); but it can also be the hatred of the ill-constituted, disinherited, and underprivileged [*der Hass des Missrathenen, Entbehrenden, Schlechtweggekommenen*] who destroy, must destroy, because what exists, indeed all existence, all being, outrages and provokes them. (GS 370)

There is no limit to the destructive rage of this type, which will rather see the entire world perish than try to overcome its own torture, its own suffering, born of the inability to accept, let alone affirm, *this* world as a world of fleeting and deceiving appearances, of change, becoming, contradiction,

and war between opposed and irreconcilable forces. Nietzsche goes so far as to denounce the faith in *truth*, and the *will to truth*, as an expression of such a fear and trembling, as a way out of the essentially chaotic, destructive, and constructive—in a word, artistic—nature of life. “Plato *versus* Homer: that is complete, genuine antagonism” (GM 3, 25: 121). Even science, which privileges the search for truth over the creation of values, is rooted in the same soil as the ascetic ideal. Both presuppose “a certain impoverishment of life,—the affects grown cool, the tempo of life slowed down, dialectics in place of instinct” (GM 3, 25: 121).

The Dionysian type, by contrast, is characterized by its ability to sustain upheaval, chaos, and destruction as a way toward a better future and as a necessary moment in a process of creation. The iconoclastic drive of the unidentifiable, unrecognizable Dionysian type is with a view to dreaming up new values and divinities. It is not as a result of feeling deprived or diminished that he or she embraces the way of destruction and negation, but from a position of excess and abundance, which is that of life itself:

We are misidentified—because we ourselves keep growing [*wachsen*], keep changing [*wechseln*], we shed our old bark, we shed our skins every spring, we keep becoming younger, fuller of future [*zukünftiger*], taller, stronger, we push our roots ever more powerfully into the depths—into evil—while at the same time we embrace the heavens more lovingly, more broadly, imbibing their light ever more thirstily with all our twigs and leaves. (GS 371)

The Dionysian, tragic type stands for, withstands, and embraces the *Ueberfülle* and *Ueberfluss* of life. *Pace* Aristotle, the tragic poet seeks not to purify one of a dangerous feeling—pity and terror—“through its vehement discharge,” but “to realize in oneself the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses joy in destruction.”³⁶ Tragic suffering is joyful, gay, and has nothing to do with the decadent and perverse *jouissance* of the reactive, romantic type, which is animated by a desire for revenge that can even, as the (Buddhist, Brahminic, or Schopenhauerian) case may be, take the form of a *liberation* from desire and life altogether:

I assess a man by the quantum of power and abundance of his will: not by its enfeeblement and extinction; I regard a philosophy which teaches denial of the will as a teaching of defamation and slander—I assess the *power* of a *will* by how much resistance, pain, torture it endures and knows how to turn it to its advantage; I do not account the evil and painful character of existence a reproach to it. . . .³⁷

Because our desires often produce great misfortune and misery, the pessimist argument goes, we must free ourselves from them, from that evil, from life itself.

In a fragment from 1885, Nietzsche speaks of *laughter* as the counterpart to extreme, Schopenhauerian pessimism:

Perhaps I know best why man alone laughs: he alone suffers so deeply that he had to *invent* laughter. The unhappiest and most melancholy is, as fitting, the most cheerful.³⁸

The laughter of the Dionysian pessimist is noble, “golden” (BGE 294), and thus the opposite of the laughter and sadistic enjoyment of the narrator of *Notes from Underground*, or even, as Spinoza noted, of the laughter of mockery, which involves a joy associated with the idea of another’s sadness. Dionysian laughter, or *hilaritas*—here one need only picture Frans Hal’s *The Merry Drinker*, *The Merry Lute Player*, or *The Laughing Cavalier*—stems from a love of life, even in its hardships and moments of pain; from “richness in personality, abundance in oneself, overflowing and bestowing”³⁹—in short, from *generosity*. Generosity is the enemy of spite and revengefulness, and a necessary condition for the flourishing of thought. It is, I would argue, the founding philosophical virtue. It informs *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* at a very deep level, which Nietzsche presents as a “gift” to humanity and as his most generous book.⁴⁰ I will return to this connection in my conclusion. Let me simply note, at this stage, that generosity is a necessary condition for the expansion of all the faculties or powers of thought.

The desire to immortalize requires a similar dual interpretation:

It can be prompted, first, by gratitude and love; art with this origin will always be an art of apotheoses, perhaps dithyrambic like Rubens, or blissfully mocking like Hafiz, or bright and gracious like Goethe, spreading a Homeric light and glory over all things. But it can also be the tyrannic will of one who suffers deeply, who struggles, is tormented, and would like to turn what is most personal, singular, and narrow, the real idiosyncrasy of his suffering, into a binding law and compulsion—one who, as it were, revenges himself on all things [*der an allen Dingen gleichsam Rache nimmt*] by forcing his own image, the image of his torture, on them, branding them with it. This last version is *romantic pessimism* in its most expressive form. . . . (GS 370)

Earlier in *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche dismisses Schopenhauer’s pessimism as “lacking in great and terrible misery” and being “poor in real experiences

of pain" (GS 48). It mistakes "*painful general ideas*" for real suffering, such as that endured by Nietzsche himself (BGE 186). Real misery, Nietzsche adds, is the antidote to the romantic and especially *moral* pessimism of our time, to "the misery of the present age." It is not, however, incompatible with happiness. "Homeric happiness," Nietzsche writes in a section titled "The Danger of the Happiest," is "more capable of suffering than any other creature under the sun" (GS 302). Suffering is "the only price for which one can buy the most precious shell that the waves of existence have ever yet washed on the shore" (GS 302). This is how Nietzsche sketches the noble, strong, adventurous, and sensitive Homeric soul:

To have refined senses, including the sense of taste; to be accustomed to the most exquisite things of the spirit as if they were simply the right and most convenient nourishment; to enjoy a strong, bold, audacious soul; to go through life with a calm eye and a firm step, always prepared to risk all—festively, impelled by the longing for undiscovered world and seas, people and gods; to harken to all cheerful music as if it were a sign that bold men, soldiers seafarers were probably seeking their brief rest and pleasure there—and in the most profound enjoyment of the moment, to be overcome by tears and the whole crimson melancholy of the happy: who would not wish that all this might be *his* possession, his state! This was the *happiness of Homer!* (GS 302)

But at no point should we mistake the tears and crimson melancholy of the happy for the tears of frustration and rage of the spiteful. The truly Dionysian philosopher will turn away from the temptation of skepticism and its fear of an unconditional Yes or No, and embrace instead the way of the *creation* of values and laws, which alone will bring tears of joy to his eyes and provoke laughter.

To the romantic pessimist, as well as the utilitarian or eudaimonist, Nietzsche says:

You want if possible—and there is no madder "if possible"—to *abolish suffering*; and we?—it really does seem that we would rather increase it and make it worse than it has ever been! Wellbeing as you understand it—that is no goal, that seems to us an *end* [*ein Ende*]! A state which soon renders man ludicrous and contemptible—which makes it desirable that he should perish! The discipline of suffering, of great suffering—do you know that it is this discipline alone which has created elevation of man hitherto? That tension of the soul in misfortune which cultivates its strength, its terror at the sight of

great destruction, its inventiveness and bravery in undergoing, enduring, interpreting, exploiting misfortune, and whatever of depth, mystery, mask, spirit, cunning and greatness has been bestowed upon it—has it not been bestowed through suffering, through the discipline of great suffering? (BGE 225)

The greatest happiness is, for him, not the “comfortable” (GS 338) or soothing kind, which shies away from pain and suffering, but that which looks it in the eye and even embraces it, *homerically, tragically*:

But if one endured, if one *could* endure the immense sum of grief of all kinds while yet being the hero who, . . . This godlike feeling would then be called—humanness. (GS 337)

Suffering calls not for *pity*, whether from oneself or others, but for *understanding*. If we adhere to the “religion of pity,” to the *help* and *comfort* it is supposed to bring, we fail to see “the personal necessity of distress,” that is, the extent to which “terrors, deprivations, impoverishments, midnights, adventures, risks, and blunders are as necessary for me and for you as their opposites” (GS 338):

[I]f you refuse to let your own suffering lie upon you even for an hour and if you constantly try to prevent and forestall all possible distress way ahead of time; if you experience suffering and displeasure as evil, hateful, worthy of annihilation, and as a defect of existence, then it is clear . . . how little you know of human *happiness*, you comfortable and benevolent people, for happiness and unhappiness are sisters and even twins that either grow up together or, as in your case, *remain small* together. (GS 338)

Nietzsche holds on to the aesthetic contrast between Dionysian and romantic pessimism until the very end. In a note from the Spring–Fall of 1887, revised in 1888, he speaks of them as stemming from the “ills” and “evil” we have to endure. By which he means: the chance, uncertainty, and suddenness which the world and life constantly throw at us. But whereas the first type of pessimism tries initially to *justify* those ills, through morality and religion, which interpret them as *punishment*; whereas it tries, subsequently, in what corresponds to a different stage of the development of our culture, to reduce and even *abolish* “this fear of chance, the uncertain, the sudden” through more rational instruments—through the belief in law, calculability, and necessity, and by learning to think causally—Dionysian pessimism,

which Nietzsche also calls "the pessimism of strength," no longer needs such justifications and reassurances:

Man no longer needs a "justification of ills"; justification is precisely what he abhors: he enjoys ills, *pur, cru*; he finds senseless ills the most interesting. If he formerly had a need of a god, he now takes delight in a world disorder without God, a world of chance, to whose essence belong the terrible, the ambiguous, the seductive.⁴¹

In both instances, he writes in another note from the same period, "the problem is that of the meaning of suffering: whether a Christian meaning or a tragic meaning."⁴² The first type *suffers* from life and seeks redemption from it:

"Suffering for *what*?" Man, the bravest animal and most prone to suffer, does not deny suffering as such: he *wills* it, he even seeks it out, provided he is shown a *meaning* for it, a *purpose* of suffering. (GM 3, 28: 127)

The second, tragic type "affirms even the harshest suffering" and is thus committed to *this* life, in all its transience, torment, and destruction, but also, and at the same time, "its eternal fruitfulness and recurrence" from destruction, its *mixed* fate, its endless circle of creation and destruction, of becoming—its *lack of meaning*.

Throughout his later writings, Nietzsche retains the idea of two forms of pessimism borne by suffering, and, more importantly still, the opposition between the resentful, vengeful type and the creative, forgetting type, which he develops at length in *Genealogy*. In a note from January–Fall 1888, for example, he speaks of the "pessimism of indignation," which is the mark of those who seek to make a person or group *responsible* for their own suffering and impotence.⁴³ This scapegoat can be the Jews, the nobility, the Capitalist, or even God, as visible in the atheism of *ressentiment* of Russian authors. The pessimism of indignation is animated by the "instinct" and "*pleasant feeling*" of revenge.⁴⁴ By contrast, art, insofar as it "intoxicates," "increases strength," and "inflames desire," is the antidote or countermovement to decadence, to the "impoverishment," "impotence," and "degeneration" of life.⁴⁵ As such it is not, *cannot* be pessimistic: "There is no such thing as pessimistic art," he writes in a note from March–June 1888.⁴⁶ At the same time, Nietzsche continues to see in "the tragic artist" a form of *affirmative* pessimism—that is, the strength of character and will to life that translates into a "*preference*

for questionable and terrifying things," for what is "cruel" and "evil": he is "hard enough to experience suffering as a *pleasure*."⁴⁷

4. The Way of Ressentiment

In order to close in on spite as possibly the deepest threat to thought, and the greatest poison, let me explore further the nihilistic or pessimistic reaction to suffering, and specifically the way of reactive revenge and cruelty, the way of *ressentiment*. The (moral) question of responsibility and the tendency to ascribe blame leads to two possible answers. The first is that I declare that You, who are not suffering, You who are strong, powerful, and happy, are the cause of my suffering and the object of my vindictiveness. But then, what form can this vengeance take? How can the sufferer, the impotent, the sad person get back at the strong, the powerful, the happy person? The second is that through a remarkable and perverse twist, through a cunning reorientation of hatred and anger, I come to the conclusion that *I* am responsible for my own suffering, and therefore I, and I alone, deserve to be punished. There again, we need to ask: what form can the vengeance of impotence on itself take? And can it ever help me to move from a lesser to a greater degree of perfection, power, virtue, or happiness? Or does it lock me into greater impotence and passivity, deeper suffering, frustration, and vindictiveness? Those questions point in the direction of what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*. It is, once again, of the utmost importance to emphasize that *ressentiment* is not merely a feeling, or a combination of feelings. Rather, it designates a specific response to certain feelings, a way of addressing and processing them, one that requires the creation of a *system* in which they acquire a meaning and a purpose. As such, *ressentiment* signals a certain organization of the will to power, a specific regime of desire. It is a genealogical and critical concept, and not just a moral or psychological trait. And that is the extent to which it escapes the objection of the genetic fallacy: in tracing a given cultural phenomenon back to its physiological origin and, more specifically, back to the manner in which it has been interpreted, inserted within structures of power, and justified as "good," genealogy also questions the type of will or force that generated this system, the life forces it inhibits, the type of human beings it represses. In other words, it exposes it as a system of repression (in every sense of the word) that often speaks in the name of Freedom and for the sake of Humanity (GM 3, 20). For all those reasons, it is important to resist translating that French word back into a more familiar German or English equivalent, such as resentment, which designates a feeling that we have all experienced, directly or indirectly. It is

important to allow it to resonate as a foreign word and as the placeholder for a philosophical problem. But it is also a matter of understanding how *ressentiment* throws philosophical thought off track by chaining it to a certain kind of question—that of blame—and a certain kind of life—that of rancor and revengefulness. It is, therefore, a matter of understanding how *ressentiment*, and spite in particular, harms thought.

As we know, Nietzsche devoted much of his work and energy to understanding and taking apart the mechanics of *ressentiment*, which he exposed most systematically in *The Genealogy of Morality*.

Thus far, I have been insisting that the representation of the *cause* of my suffering, the rightful rejection of it, and the strategy I am able to put in place in order to become strong, powerful, and joyful again is qualitatively or ethically different from the *blame* that I tend to ascribe to others for my own weakness. The latter encourages self-victimization, in which I find a reason to live and the meaning of my existence. My self-representation or identification as a victim locks me into a state of passivity and servitude, and therefore sadness. In the final section of this chapter, I will analyze forms of *ressentiment* that are understandable, and perhaps even legitimate from a political and historical perspective, in that they may eventually lead to a new, better configuration of power, in the ontological as well as the political sense. I have in mind situations of systematic exploitation, abuse, and persecution; racial segregation and sectarian violence; and genocide. And I will argue that those legitimate forms of resentment—legitimate in that they end up or need to end up as political claims, and lead to the mutual recognition of systemic abuses of power—need to be distinguished from those others forms of resentment, which are the result of deep personal, existential, or social frustrations, and lead to an endless, unrealizable (because entirely *imaginary*) desire for revenge, aimed at groups, classes, or individuals which do not *actually* cause any suffering or sadness.

It is the latter which Nietzsche targets as a *system* of revenge. “I suffer: someone must be to blame for it” inevitably leads to: “You, the strong and powerful, are to blame for my own weakness, sadness, and suffering; and I shall have my revenge.” But what form can this vengeance take? It can’t take the Homeric form of open combat, since the weak are weak, and the strong are strong. It can only take an indirect, mostly invisible form: “I will poison your life with my own spite; I will give you a taste of my own medicine; I will bring you down with me.” Here, Nietzsche writes, “the worms of revenge and rancour teem all round; here, the air stinks of things unrevealed and unconfessed; here, the web of the most wicked conspiracy is constantly being spun,—the conspiracy of those who suffer against those who

are successful and victorious, here, the sight of the victorious man is *hated*" (GM 3, 14: 95). The "worms of rancor and misery" shove their own misery, in fact all misery, onto the conscience of the happy; they poison them with their own spite and desire for revenge, until they deprive them of their right to happiness, until the strong and virtuous (the healthy, the fortunate, the talented and successful) cease to be happy and join the "vengeance-seekers disguised as judges" in saying: "It's a disgrace to be happy!" "I don't *deserve* to be happy." "Only the unhappy are deserving, righteous—*virtuous*." Their hatred and tyranny over the healthy spreads like venom; they manage to convince others that "health, success, strength, pride and the feeling of power" are "depravities for which penance, bitter penance will one day be exacted" (GM 3, 14: 95). Anti-Semites, racists, xenophobes, misogynists, haters of all kinds—"they are all men of *ressentiment*, a whole, vibrating realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in its eruptions against the happy, and like wise in masquerades of revenge and pretexts for revenge: when will they actually achieve their ultimate, finest, most sublime triumph of revenge?" (GM 3, 14: 96).

This, I believe, is the source of *ressentiment* as well as what I call spite, in which I see a pure form of resentment that cannot even lead to the creation of values. Spite is not just a desire for revenge, which as we saw follows naturally from the representation (through actual thought or imaginary projection) and hatred of the cause of our suffering, but a "masquerade" of and "pretext" for revenge. A masquerade, first of all, because the revenge doesn't actually take place, but is postponed, endlessly postponed, and grows in that deferral. It feeds on itself, on its own destructive rage, which latches onto just about anything and anyone, turns every object into an object of resentment. What characterizes spite as the most extreme form of resentment is that the moment of revenge and reckoning—the "ultimate, finest, most sublime triumph of revenge"—will *never* take place, *mustn't* take place. The Final Judgment is always, necessarily to come for the spiteful. Its taking place would mean the possibility of moving on, of coming out of this state of passivity and servitude and into more joyful affects. But the spiteful type is not capable of such a becoming: he *is* his spite, and spitefulness is his *raison d'être*. His life is entirely defined by the *possibility* of revenge, a possibility that is not one possibility among many, but his ownmost and uttermost possibility, the possibility of all possibilities, and the possibility that must remain as such. He is bent on spreading his poison as widely as he can, on infecting as many as possible. He cannot bear the happiness of others, or even the idea of their happiness. His only enjoyment is a perverse one, which consists in witnessing or, better still, provoking the sadness or disempowerment of others, as

well as his own. And for that, he is willing to go to the greatest lengths, to pillage his own past as well as project himself into an imaginary, impossible future. Thus, the sufferers “enjoy” dwelling on “imagined slights” and effigies; they “rummage through the bowels of their past and present for obscure, questionable stories which will allow them to wallow in tortured suspicion, and intoxicate themselves with their own poisonous wickedness—they rip open the oldest wounds and make themselves bleed to death from scars long-since healed, they make evil-doers out of friend, wife, child and anyone else near to them” (GM 3, 15: 99–100).

We are indeed confronted with a type of life, yet one that is so powerless that its only recourse is to bring everyone down with its sickness, compulsively contaminating the healthy with no regard for the consequences. It is a life without joy and with no way out; but one that manages, in spite of itself, to find comfort in the powerlessness and misfortune of others. It is a life so sad that its only power over others is that of sadness itself, and whose only ambition is to provoke it; a life that has turned so bitterly against living that it has eroded all of its natural defenses and destroyed its immune system. No one has described this *contradiction* better than Nietzsche:

here an unparalleled *ressentiment* rules, that of an unfulfilled instinct and power-will which wants to be master, not over something in life, but over life itself and its deepest, strongest, most profound conditions; here, an attempt is made to use force [*Kraft*] to block the sources of force; here, the green eye of spite [*der Blick grün und hämisch*] turns on physiological growth itself, in particular the manifestation of this in beauty and joy; while satisfaction [*ein Wohlgefallen*] is looked for and found in failure, decay, pain, misfortune, ugliness, voluntary deprivation, destruction of selfhood [*Entselbstung*], self-flagellation and self-sacrifice. (GM 3, 11: 91)

To use force to block the sources of force: this is the paradox of a form of life that turns against life and finds its purpose and enjoyment therein, of a life that grows more confident and triumphant as its own physiological condition, its own power, *decreases*, of a sadness, and thus an impotence, which renders joy and power shameful, blameworthy, odious. Green with envy and the will to eradicate virtue and happiness wherever it finds it, it reveals how base, how ugly, how destructive human life can be. But this low form of life remains an expression of the will to power, of the will that can only poison. It is a desire, but the desire to reduce everything and everyone to the lowest possible degree of power. It conquers not by increasing its own power to act and think, but by making those around it weaker.

Alternatively, the blame can be redirected and turned inward: what if *I* were responsible for my own suffering? What if the hatred, anger and vindictiveness that I feel were directed at myself? Then guilt and self-loathing would be the dominant feelings. When turned inward, the instincts of revenge, animosity, and cruelty produce a remarkable phenomenon, known as conscience, or the soul. When the external discharge of those aggressive instincts is obstructed, they do not disappear so much as change course, and end up punishing . . . *me*. This, of course, generates greater misery, for I am now split between my original suffering and the realization that I am responsible for it, and therefore deserve this cruelty, this punishment (and the satisfaction, the enjoyment even, that goes with it) that I inflict on myself: I suffer from—*myself*. My suffering is elevated to the second power, while a secret part of me—the aggressive, dominating, cruel part—enjoys and applauds the spectacle of this internal tearing apart:

Lacking external enemies and obstacles, and forced into the oppressive narrowness and conformity of custom, man impatiently ripped himself apart, persecuted himself, gnawed at himself, gave himself no peace and abused himself, this animal who battered himself raw on the bars of his cage and who is supposed to be “tamed” . . . became the inventor of “bad conscience.” With it, however, the worst and most insidious illness was introduced, one from which mankind has not recovered, man’s sickness of man, of himself. (GM 2, 16: 61–62)

“Man” has therefore become this animal that is sick of itself, that is, sick from the poison that he administered himself, sick not so much of his own suffering (his decrease of power), but of the *interpretation* of his suffering, one that turned out to be far more damaging, destructive, disempowering than his original suffering, whatever that may have been. For there is no recovering from the sickness of sinfulness, that is, from the original or a priori form of sickness. *Another* life, after this one, which bears the *promise* of happiness, had to be invented to bear this one, the sick, unhappy life. A range of consolations, alleviations of suffering, and narcotics—from salvation to confession, penance, and forgiveness—were invented to manage (but never cure) the sick.

The dimension and role of interpretation in *ressentiment* is one that Nietzsche insists on: sinfulness, he claims, is not a fact, but the *religious* interpretation of a fact, namely, “a physiological upset” (GM 3, 16: 100). As we saw, suffering (or sadness) is a fact, or the feeling generated by a decrease of power. The interpretation, as we also saw, begins with the (illusory, stupid)

question of *meaning* of suffering. And the (moral, religious) interpretation within the interpretation, the question within the question, is about who is *responsible* for my suffering. To come to the conclusion, as some religions do, that *I* am responsible for my own suffering requires yet another level, an entire construction, a moral and religious fiction—one, Nietzsche believes, which we owe to the ascetic priests and their own power game, their own self-interest, their own plan to turn wolves into sheep and themselves into shepherds:

"I suffer: someone or other must be guilty"—and every sick sheep thinks the same. But his shepherd, the ascetic priest, says to him, "Quite right, my sheep! Somebody must be to blame: but you yourself are this somebody, you yourself alone are to blame for it, you yourself alone are to blame for yourself." . . . That is bold enough, wrong enough: but at least one thing has been achieved by it, the direction of *ressentiment* is, as I said—*changed*. (GM 2, 15: 100)

The mission of the priest, therefore, is to channel, tame, and redirect *ressentiment*, to govern the weak and the sick. To govern in this instance means to exercise power or "rule over the suffering" (GM 3, 15: 98), and to protect them at the same time, to "defend his herd" (GM 3, 15: 98). This the ascetic priest achieves by being "a close relative of the sick and the destitute" (GM 3, 15: 98), by understanding or feeling their pain, and thus acquiring their trust and loyalty. In exchange, he promises that he will defend them against the strong and healthy (as if one needed to defend oneself against health), but also—and this, according to Nietzsche, is arguably the height of perversion, of the sinister cunning of the priest—the *desire* to be healthy. For in the inverted world of the priest, in his absurd yet power-driven system of values, health and strength are bad, and weakness and sickness are good. And so he protects the herd by infecting the strong, by spreading the word that health is against the will of God, that God loves the weak and destitute.⁴⁸ But he also protects the herd from any longing to be healthy again. He feels, understands and soothes their pain, but has no intention of healing it. He is therefore closer to a perverse pharmacist than a real doctor, in that he administers the *pharmakon* that is at once remedy and poison: "He brings ointments and balms with him, of course; but first he has to wound so he can be the doctor; and whilst he soothes the pain caused by the wound, *he poisons the wound at the same time*" (GM 3, 15: 98).

But the real genius of the priest, his masterful interpretation, consists in redirecting *ressentiment*. Why is that necessary? Because, as we know, resentment, rancor, vindictiveness are emotions that build up, accumulate, and

are potentially explosive. They are an unstable compound that threatens to blow up the social fabric, bring about anarchy and revolution (and this means that those political “solutions” are for Nietzsche themselves expressions of resentment—I will return to the politics of resentment later on). How does the priest change the direction of those forces, and ensure social peace? By making the sufferer the cause of his own suffering, by providing a simple and definitive answer to the question: whom can I blame for my suffering? The sufferer finally has a clear culprit and person to loathe, a clear object of resentment—namely, himself. The priest understands and uses what Spinoza expressed in his *Ethics*: that an affect can be replaced only by a stronger affect, whether joyful or sad; the sad emotions of the sufferer are overcome, “anesthetized” through the strongest emotion, guilt, original sinfulness. “Look into your past, for as far back as you can, and even beyond, to an original, transcendental event, and you will find the source of your pain, the reason of your suffering: *yourself*.”

5. The Creativity of the Spirit of Revenge

As we have seen, revenge as resentment functions as an endogenous poison: nothing good comes out of it, even though it has the appearance of a remedy, of alleviating suffering, through the identification of its origin. Its soothing, anesthetizing quality comes at a considerable price, since it universalizes and justifies suffering, turns it into a moral value, and ultimately generates further suffering, whether through blame or self-loathing.

Another key insight of Nietzsche’s, which I have only alluded to thus far, concerns the *creative* dimension of *ressentiment*. Passive nihilism, or reactive pessimism, whether religious, artistic, or philosophical, is not simply destructive. In order to triumph and impose its worldview, “to turn the earth into the distinctively *ascetic planet*, into an outpost of disgruntled, arrogant and nasty creatures who harboured a deep disgust for themselves, for the world, for all life and hurt themselves as much as possible out of pleasure in hurting” (GM 3, 11: 90), it needs to invent norms and values, construct an entire spiritual or cultural edifice, radically transform life as a whole, including in its social and political dimension. In other words, it is a technology of the self, a mode of subjectivation, as well as a form of government. This creative dimension of resentment was already and perhaps most obviously visible in the idea of guilt and sinfulness, which locates the origin of suffering in the sufferers themselves, and turns spite, rancor, and vindictiveness *against* those who suffer. Suffering is turned into the *meaning* of life. What Nietzsche calls the “slave revolt” is therefore the insurgence and triumph of

a specific type and view of life, an essentially passive, reactive one, which values sadness over joy, weakness over power, morality over ethics, servitude over freedom, and ends up constructing a world that reflects it. His account of the slave revolt in morality turns precisely on his recognition of the creative potential of resentment, rooted in *imaginary* revenge:

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of those beings who, being denied the proper response of action, compensate for it only with imaginary revenge. Whereas all noble morality develops from a triumphant saying "yes" to itself [*einem triumphierenden Ja-sagen zu sich selber*], slave morality says "no" on principle to everything that is "outside," "other" than itself, "not-itself"; and *this* "no" is its creative deed. (GM 1, 10: 21)

An imaginary revenge does not simply dream its revenge, without doing anything (although it can be that too). It is imaginative: it represents its own revenge, projects it, and organizes it, brings it about.

Now if guilt and sinfulness are essential values, and possibly the founding ones of the Christian ascetic ideal, they are not the only ones. And many of the values generated by passive, reactive nihilism are not exclusive to Christianity, or even exclusively religious. They are also political, and include the political affects of indignation and outrage, as well as the desire for recognition, bound up with the liberal values of dignity, self-respect, and self-confidence. I will deal with this political aspect in the second part of this chapter.

Imaginary revenge selects, fosters, and values the psychological traits or dispositions that will help its cause. In the process, those qualities become *virtues*. For instance, insofar as it is reactive—that is, unable to act, or assert its own power, and able only to react, or oppose—it will favor qualities necessary for a delayed response, or a deferred revenge, such as restraint, remembrance, patience, biding one's time, prudence, and circumspection (*Klugheit*). In addition, it will encourage passivity over activity by valuing rest, peace, relaxation, *ataraxia*, idleness, Sabbath, humility—in short, those virtues and "innocent methods" produced and used by the ascetic priest, those technologies of the self that tranquilize the mind and dampen emotions. But all those virtues are an expression of impotence. The altruistic, and especially Christian mode of valuation, is the consequence of an ill-constituted, decaying instinct. It stems from "a merely physiological value judgement," that is, from a "feeling of impotence" and "the absence of the great affirmative feelings of power."⁴⁹ Thus, the technique of remembrance,

or not forgetting, is in reality the inability on the part of the injured person not "to take his enemies, his misfortunes and even his misdeeds seriously for too long." That ability, Nietzsche adds, "is the sign of the strong, rounded natures with a superabundance of a power which is flexible, formative, healing and can make one forget" (GM 1, 10: 23–24). Where there is forgetting, Mirabeau famously claimed, there is no need to forgive.

This in turn suggests that remembrance, or at least not forgetting, is a necessary condition of forgiveness, one that requires training. It also means that forgiveness reveals the inability to take immediate action (or revenge), and thus the delaying of the moment of revenge, and possibly its sublimation, justification, or rationalization through commands such as "love your enemy" and "live in hope," or the further delaying of the moment of action, the ultimate procrastination, during which the need for revenge grows, along with the expectation of "the triumph of God's Justice," which is nothing other than the "sanctification of revenge" (GM 2, 11: 52).

In the first essay of the *Genealogy*, Nietzsche claims that the reinterpretation and revaluation of the vengefulness of *ressentiment* as a call and hope for justice is precisely the slaves' "masterpiece" of "black magic" (GM 1, 14: 31). As we saw, the slave revolt in morality involves an operation of self-deception, which leads the slavish subject to value traits once considered degrading, such as patience, humility, restraint, altruism, et cetera. But "the most ingenious, most mendacious artistic stroke" of "these cellar rodents full of vengefulness" is to have turned "revenge and hatred" into "the triumph of justice":

Now I can really hear what they have been saying all along: "We good men—we are the just"—what they desire they call, not retaliation [*Vergeltung*], but "the triumph of justice"; what they hate is not their enemy, no! they hate "*injustice*" . . . what they believe in and hope for is not the hope of revenge, the intoxication of sweet revenge . . . but the victory of God, of the *just* God. (GM 1, 14: 31)

The stroke of genius of the slaves is to disguise their real motivation (namely, revenge) as something quite different, and indeed opposed: "a virtue (a sense for justice)."⁵⁰ Or, as Elgat puts it in his illuminating commentary of those pages: "It is not merely the case that while they talk about or demand justice their true motivation is that of revenge, but that they *make* something out of (*machen sie aus*) their motivation of revenge: they rebrand it and present it as a call and hope for justice,"⁵¹ one that, in the age of liberalism, has evolved into a desire and demand for "recognition." The slaves are creative; they are the artists of rancor and vindictiveness, the heroes of *ressentiment*.

"The slaves thus view and present themselves as not interested in taking revenge on the masters but in correcting the injustices the latter have perpetrated: they are not intoxicated by the desire for revenge, but rather are driven by the hope for divine justice."⁵² This, in turn, means that the magic trick or wizardry of the slaves, and the reason why it is unequalled, consists in the revaluation not only of their own position, but of *all* values. They who suffer, the weak and powerless, are superior and just; and their call for justice is their displaced and disguised act of vengeance. Their limited capacity and worldview, the little that they are capable of, is now presented as good, as virtuous, and their effort to shape the world and life of others after them as *justice* or what is *right*. Justice is the metonymy of vengeance.

To live in faith, in hope, awaiting all the while the kingdom of God, the Final Judgment, which is the moment of salvation but also of punishment, of the final reckoning and revenge, is far worse than any *human* punishment. Prudence is a nice name and virtue that replaces and devalues insouciance and innocence. Restraint disguises the impossibility of retaliation, and humility is a cover-up for baseness and impotence. Obedience demonstrates a weakness: namely, the inability to lead. Pity, as a virtue, is nothing but the *contagion of suffering*, the "depressive and contagious instinct" that "thwarts those instincts bent on preserving and enhancing the value of life" (AC 7), and decreases one's power. As such, it should not be encouraged. What should be encouraged, precisely as a result of feeling the suffering of others, is ways of helping them to become strong again, to preserve and enhance their nature, or the vitality of which they are capable.

And the "*new love*," the "deepest and most sublime kind of love," the crowning achievement of Christianity? It too grew "from the tree of revenge and hatred" (GM 1, 8: 19). For the love in question is not for the whole of humanity: it is the love that the weak and powerless, those who live in servitude, invent for themselves, and from which they exclude the strong and powerful, the free, the happy and virtuous. "God loves *us*" and we hate *them* with that new love, the instrument of our delayed revenge. Unable to respond, to take revenge, to act, we claim to love the whole of humanity. We respond to aggression through love, as Christ did to those who persecuted him: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34). God on the cross, at the moment of his death, is the pinnacle of this new, supposedly universal kind of love: absolute, unconditional forgiveness toward his enemies.

But there is more. In its effort to supersede and realize God's law as a human feeling, to shift the emphasis from obedience to love, Christianity seemed to bring God closer to man, and to elevate mankind at the same time. A bridge, a mediation between God and humankind was introduced.

But let us take a closer look at how this came about. God did the very thing that he had ordered Abraham to do, but then stopped him from doing: he *willed* his son to die, to *sacrifice* him. For what? To *redeem* our sins, to *save* us from all the evil committed on earth. But such a gift is quite literally unacceptable: we all know, without having to read Mauss, that every gift brings with it a sense of obligation and indebtedness, that we feel ambivalent about gifts, as they combine generosity and domination.⁵³ How are we to feel about God sacrificing Himself for our own failures? Grateful and joyful, or guilty, sad, and even angry? God therefore ended up doing the opposite of what he meant to do (but this, of course, was no mistake): he burdened us with a debt that we will never be able to repay, and forever chained us to his gift; we will forever have to *remember* what he did for us, beat our chest while uttering the words "*mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa.*" In a remarkable inversion of the traditional religious practice, in which human beings sacrifice something precious to the gods or the totem in order to obtain from them a favor, protection, the power of social cohesion, or the ability to predict the future, God decided to sacrifice Himself—out of love. In doing so, he introduced within each and every one of us an internal weakness and sadness (which, somehow, we are to experience as joyful gratitude), a debt that a lifetime of contrition will not suffice to pay back, an anxiety we will never be able to shake off. This, the "crucifixion of God for the salvation of mankind" (GM 1, 8: 20), Nietzsche concludes, is the pinnacle of cruelty.

Without wanting to go into too much detail, let me simply note that Nietzsche is in agreement with a certain strand of anthropology when, in the second essay of *On the Genealogy of Morality*, he traces the origin of the primal tribe back to the juridical link that binds it with the previous generations, and with the figure of the ancestor, represented in the figure of the totem.⁵⁴ The totem is identified with the founding fathers of the group and is given those attributes traditionally associated with the father figure: power and might, protection and authority, but also, for this very reason, fear, envy, and rivalry. The totem thus guarantees the cohesion of the community by binding all the members of the community in the same way, by subjecting them to the same obligations and prohibitions. In exchange for his protection and cohesive power, one sacrifices to the totem. Thus, a debt is acknowledged, yet a debt that can be paid back in different ways, even if, generation after generation, it is felt that the debt increases, and that the sacrifices need to be greater and greater: food, animals, celebrations, feasts, dances, human lives.⁵⁵

Similarly, Nietzsche is in agreement with Freud's *Totem and Taboo* when he traces the origin of the god back to this indebtedness: the ancestors are

progressively endowed with supernatural powers as their distance from us increases with every generation. The divinity itself becomes more distant, and so the debt increases, and becomes more and more difficult to pay back, until this logic—or rather, this economy—reaches its absolute peak with the Christian God. Why? Because the Christian God brings about the very cancellation of the debt by the creditor himself, but in such a way that the debt is now in reality raised to the infinite power: a God who sacrifices himself for the sacrifice that we were not able to provide in compensation for our indebtedness. We are now forever indebted, for we have sacrificed this God in the figure of his son—the God has decided to die at our own hands in order to save us from our indebtedness. Surely, this is the maximal degree of cruelty, the ultimate and inescapable form of guilt:

Christianity's stroke of genius: none other than God sacrificing himself for man's guilt, none other than God paying himself back, God as the only one able to redeem man from what, to man himself has become irredeemable—the creditor sacrificing himself for the debtor, out of love (would you credit it?—), out of love for the debtor! (GM 2, 21: 68)

This means that the economy has now gone into overdrive. It has *aneconomized* itself, moved beyond a debt economy and into a purely symbolic or spiritual one, for which there is no end in sight. One is simply left with a debt that one cannot and will never be able to repay. The will has become delirious and turned itself completely against man, who now wallows and revels in this despair:

We have here a sort of madness of the will showing itself in mental cruelty which is absolutely unparalleled: man's *will* to find himself guilty and condemned without hope of reprieve, his *will* to think of himself as punished, without the punishment ever measuring up to the crime, his *will* to infect and poison the fundamentals of things with the problem of punishment and guilt in order to cut himself off, once and for all, from the way out of his labyrinth of "fixed ideas," this *will* to set up an ideal—that of a "holy God"—, in order to be palpably convinced of his own absolute worthlessness in the face of this deal. . . . Here is *sickness*, without a doubt, the most terrible sickness ever to rage in man. . . . (GM 2, 22: 68–69)

Christian love *is* that sickness, the absolute despair in man, the most desperate and poorest interpretation of man.

II. The Spirit of Revenge and Its Political Destiny

The feelings of resentment, rancor, and spite, and the longing for revenge they generate, are not limited to the religious or spiritual domain. They also play an important (some argue even positive) role in the social and political sphere. Clinical psychologists, neuropsychologists, and evolutionary theorists agree that spite, which they attribute to a combination of genetic inheritance and historical-cultural environments, may enforce social norms, drive protest movements, and ultimately lead to greater fairness (or “social leveling”).⁵⁶ Those of us who are curious to find out how spiteful we are can turn to the 17-point spitefulness scale designed by psychologist David Marcus and his team at Washington State University.⁵⁷

1. *The Politics of Spite, Indignation, and Outrage*

Nietzsche’s views on this question are ultimately more measured and nuanced than it seems, and more than he is generally given credit for: while openly and all too hastily critical of the “decadent” ideals of socialism and anarchism, he also recognizes political institutions, and especially legal systems, as necessary vehicles for the mediation and resolution of political grievances, many of which find their origin in those negative feelings. He even speaks of “rebellion” as “the slave’s noblest attitude.”⁵⁸ The question, then, becomes one of knowing whether one can distinguish between various politics of resentment, and whether some, while not desirable, may turn out to be acceptable, if not legitimate, under very specific historical conditions. In what follows, I’ll try to clarify Nietzsche’s position, before moving to various, more recent examples, with a view to taking his analysis further and distinguishing between the politics of spite, or pure resentment, and the politics of *ressentiment*. The possibility of such a distinction, to which I’ll return in the following section, has been the object of much debate recently, within and beyond the realm of Nietzsche studies.⁵⁹

On the more negative, critical side of his assessment, Nietzsche sees various political movements and trends as animated by the kind of *ressentiment* that fuels the Christian ascetic ideal, despite, at times, their incompatibility with, or even rejection of, religion and the Church as structures of power and domination. Thus, Nietzsche criticizes the militant atheism of the French Revolution, or the ideals of socialism and anarchism, as pursuing Christian values under a different guise, given their promise of “the eventual triumph of truth, love and justice” on earth and their emphasis on “equal rights.”⁶⁰ Such ideals, he claims, stem from the belief that human beings are

morally equal and therefore entitled to the same treatment, irrespective of their position, capacities, or achievements. The “democratic movement” as a whole is “the heir to the Christian movement,” and “fraternity” is *salvation* for the secular herd (BGE 202):

The socialist, the anarchist, the nihilist—in as much as they find in their existence something of which someone must be *guilty*, they are still the closest relations of the Christian, who also believes he can better endure his sense of sickness and ill-constitutedness by finding someone whom he can make responsible for it. The instinct of revenge and *ressentiment* appears here in both cases as a means of enduring, as the instinct of self-preservation: just as is the preference for altruistic theory and practice.⁶¹

Clearly, Nietzsche is bent on condemning and rejecting any politics based on blame, vindictiveness, and the desire to deprive groups or individuals of their power. Any attempt to define such politics as “justice,” or to call “equality” the separation of the powerful from their power, ought to be met with the strongest resistance. Thus, the seemingly noble ideals of justice and equality stem in reality from a position of impotence and revengefulness, embodied by the sinister tarantulas of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*:

But, naturally, the tarantulas would have it differently. “That the world may become full of the storms of our revenge, let precisely that be called justice by us”—thus they talk together.

“We shall practice revenge and outrage against all who are not as we are”—thus the tarantula-hearts promise themselves.

“And ‘will to equality’—that itself shall henceforth be the name of virtue; and we shall raise outcry against everything that has power!”

You preachers of equality, thus from you the tyrant-madness of impotence cries for “equality”: thus your most secret tyrant-appetite disguises itself in words of virtue. (TSZ 2: 123)

The specifically political movements, or tendencies within such movements, which Nietzsche targets are symptoms of a form of powerlessness that reacts to its own situation by blaming and *opposing* the powerful, and by wanting to bring them down, to lower them to their own, base level. The power in question can be that of the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, or the state. And the latter can of course be the capitalist-bourgeois state or the communist-bureaucratic state, both of which are the targets of anarchism. The state, anarchists argue, is wholly unnecessary and intrinsically oppressive. It is

external to the human subject, whose essentially good and cooperative nature will be fully revealed when finally freed from the iron grip and structures of domination of the state.⁶²

Nietzsche is dismissive of the politics of resentment in general, but he is particularly harsh toward the “anarchist dogs” (BGE 202), probably because they truly believe or pretend truly to believe in a world devoid of power relations, and of the form of the state in particular.⁶³ For Nietzsche, any politics rooted in resentment, rancor, or indignation will signify the triumph of powerlessness, and still be an expression of the will to power. In fact, the attempt to deny power is itself an expression of resentment. This means that, contrary to what anarchists believe, social and political relations are necessarily relations of power and amount to struggles that inevitably include mechanisms of revenge and compensation. The state of anarchy will therefore translate not into social relations uncontaminated by power, but into a different way of exercising power, a different *potestas* or *imperium*. Politics is necessarily and irreducibly rooted in sad passions and forms of hatred. The multitude is first and foremost the mob. It is animated by a feeling of “indignation,” which is a form of hatred oriented toward revenge. Nietzsche, as we saw, condemns what he calls the “pessimism of indignation.” He is even more explicit on the topic of the politics of indignation in a note from the spring of 1883.⁶⁴ Since everything can be paid for, and there is an equivalent for everything, one assumes that there ought to be an equivalent for one’s suffering, and that retribution of some kind is in order. Again, I see this as being about the tendency to raise the wrong kind of question: namely, how do we pay back a harm or injury? Retribution, revenge is the answer. But that is just the “hypocrisy” of the revengeful, and the delusional “whitewashing” or “laundering” of their spirit of revenge [*Vergeltung ist nur eine Heuchelei und Schönfärberei des sich Rächenden*]. Their sense of indignation is a product of their desire for revenge:

Indignation originates not in the confrontation with the enemy, but in the injury caused by his victory [*Die Empörung entsteht über die Schädigung also über den Erfolg des Feindes, nicht über die Feindseligkeit*]. It is the feeling of the vanquished, the longing for revenge—not the feeling that an injustice has been committed [*Es ist das Gefühl des Besiegten—das Verlangen nach Vergeltung: nicht das Gefühl, daß Unrecht geschehen sei*].⁶⁵

Indignation and outrage as political affects, and as constitutive of a political agenda, are inevitably the result of a lost battle, disguised as injustice.

Nietzsche formulates a very similar view in the following passage from *Twilight of the Idols*, written at the same time as the note from 1888 I quoted:

A cause-creating drive is powerful within [the anarchist]: someone must be to blame for his feeling vile. . . . there is a small dose of revenge in every complaint, one reproaches those who are different for one's feeling vile, sometimes even with one's being vile, as if they had perpetrated an injustice. . . .—Complaining is never of any use: it comes from weakness. Whether one attributes one's feeling vile to others or to *oneself*—the Socialist does the former, the Christian for example the latter—makes no essential difference. What is common to both, and *unworthy* in both, is that someone has to be to blame for the fact that one suffers—in short, that the sufferer prescribes for himself the honey of revenge as a medicine for his suffering. . . . The Christian and the anarchist—both are *décadents*.—And when the Christian condemns, calumniates and befouls the “*world*,” he does so from the same instinct from which the Socialist worker condemns, calumniates and befouls *society*. (TI 97)

Nietzsche's critique of those political stances, then, is rooted in their reaction to, and their condemnation of, state or capitalist power and of the powerful in the name of the powerless, who do not recognize themselves as animated by a will to power, and believe in a state of the world in which power relations would be abolished. To be fair to the anarchist discourse, the lust for power in every individual is one that Bakunin himself recognizes explicitly: “Every man carries within himself the germs of the lust for power, and every germ, as we know, because of a basic law of life, necessarily must develop and grow.”⁶⁶ In doing so, according to one commentator, Bakunin exposes “the hidden contradiction that lies at the heart of anarchist discourse: namely, that while anarchism bases itself upon a notion of an essential human subjectivity uncontaminated by power, this subjectivity is ultimately impossible.” Newman's further conclusion is that this contradiction, while not necessarily discrediting anarchism altogether, “forces one to question anarchism's notion of a revolution of humanity against power: if humans have an essential desire for power, then how can one be sure that a revolution aimed at destroying power will not turn it into a revolution aimed at capturing power,” and even consolidating it?⁶⁷

We would like to think that the politics of spite and resentment is something of the past, and the prerogative of the non-democratic, especially fascist state. Today, however, Western democracies seem particularly prone to such a disease. Political leaders themselves, in their effort to rally votes,

to sully their opponents, and to stay in power, spread the poison of spite. The politics of blame and vindictiveness seem to have reached new heights with the recent election of populist leaders across the world who promise to “clean the swamp,” take on “the establishment,” and “take back control,” who lash out at technocrats and the urban elite, the media, the judiciary, and the civil service, all the while claiming to feel the pain of those who suffer, and telling them who is responsible for it, who deserves to pay, and against whom they should turn their anger and hatred. It is a rebellion not of the *people*, but of the mob, which is a mob not simply because it feels powerless, but because it would sooner bring down the powerful and the structures of power than see their own power increase. Political campaigns and decisions are carried out in the name of a struggle against a more or less visible enemy, whether external or internal. The *demos* is reduced to the *genos* or the *ethnos*, and “democracy” to the struggle for the recovery of its power and former glory. Nationalism is an expression not of true love and generosity, but of fear and therefore hatred—of anything and everything that does not conform to its view of nationhood, which often combines theological and ethnocentric elements (white, male, and Christian; or male and Hindu; or male and Muslim; or white, male, and Jewish).

But I would go further and argue that all politics, including democratic politics, is rooted in hatred of one form or another. This is the difficult, even shocking reality that Nietzsche, like Spinoza before him, tried to confront. In an illuminating article, the Spinoza scholar Matheron focuses on the discreet but crucial role that “indignation” plays in Spinoza’s political writings.⁶⁸ Since the publication of Stéphane Hessel’s thirty-two-page-long essay *Indignez-vous!*, which sold over four million copies worldwide in just one year and was translated into thirty-four languages, we have become accustomed to seeing indignation as a positive political affect.⁶⁹ In his opus-cule, Hessel, a hero of the French Resistance who had been deported to Buchenwald, celebrates indignation as the ferment of political resistance. His brief call to indignation, in reaction to the treatment of the *sans papiers* and migrant workers in France, the fate of Palestinians in the occupied territories, the victims of inequality, and France’s politics of immigration, as well as the place of financial capitalism in today’s world, clearly resonated with a large section of the population. Soon after the publication of Hessel’s bestseller, Spain saw the formation and rise of the anti-austerity movement *Movimiento 15-M*, also known as “*movimiento de los indignados*,” which eventually led to the formation of political parties such as Partido X and Podemos. Spinoza’s take on indignation is singular in that he recognizes it as the political affect *par excellence*, and would therefore claim that there is

nothing new in Hessel's pamphlet, or the formation of *M-15*, while insisting that indignation is a form of hatred, namely, "hatred towards one who has injured another" (*E* 3, Prop. 22 Schol.), and who is like me (*E* 3, Prop. 27 Cor. 1). If I feel indignant, it is because of the injury caused to someone with whom I identify, whose hatred and resentment I therefore share, and the cause or origin of which I want to destroy. And since hatred is always bad (*E* 4, Prop. 45), indignation is also "necessarily bad" (*E* 4, Prop. 51 Schol.). It is bad because it is contrary to reason, which causes us to desire for others what we desire for ourselves (*E* 4, Prop. 37).

While we might naturally grant Spinoza the idea that indignation fuels revolutions, we might be less inclined to agree with him that it also accounts for the emergence and existence of any state (*imperium*). In his eyes, though, the connection is a matter of certainty: indignation generates the state in exactly the same way that it causes revolutions. Why is that? How, exactly, does indignation work?

The first thing to recall is that "insofar as men are assailed by anger, envy, or any emotion deriving from hatred, they are drawn apart and are contrary to one another." And "since men are by nature especially subject to these emotions," they "are therefore by nature enemies" (*TP* 2: 14). As such, they have less power, and therefore less right, than when they come together and join forces. Yet, insofar as they are also prone to mimetic affects, and feel closer to those whom they think are like them than to those who aren't, they tend to associate and join forces with those who are like them, and rise against those who are not. This is what happens with indignation. It is contagious. In a dispute or struggle involving two parties, a third party identifies with the feeling of the adversary who is most like him or her. Similarly, she will feel indignation toward the adversary who is less like her, and will fight against her. And the person who most resembles her is of course the person with whom she shares desires and values, and who possesses the same sort of things. As a result, the outcome and victory will tend to favor the adversary who most conforms to the model in place, and the adversary who is most remote from it will be defeated. A *consensus* eventually emerges, with norms designating what people can desire and possess without feeling endangered or threatened. A collective power or commonwealth begins to take shape, guaranteeing the safety and security of the conformists, and repressing the deviant elements of the multitude. This, in effect, accounts for the emergence, however informal and embryonic, of an *imperium democraticum*. For according to Spinoza's definition, a democratic state is "right defined by the power of the multitude [*potentia multitudinis*]" (*TP* 2: 17).

We can draw several conclusions from Spinoza's account of indignation.

The first, more general conclusion is that the political order, or *imperium*, exists as a result of human passions rather than of reason or interest. Furthermore, the passions in question are not joyful, but sad, and rooted in forms of hatred: my indignation is rooted not in a feeling of love toward those who suffer in the hands of political power, but in the fact that I identify with them in one way or another. Which, after all, is what Nietzsche himself argues, even though, like Spinoza, he raises the question of the conditions under which the multitude could be the expression of not weakness but strength, not impotence but power. And both agree that this requires a political order based not on morality, but on ethics, not on a plane of transcendence, but on one of immanence. Nietzsche, for example, remains attached to the notion of a “people,” and especially what he calls “new peoples” in the section of *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* titled “Of Old and New Law-Tables.” In his early writings he draws a contrast between a mere *peuple* (or mob) and what he calls a genuine people, or *publicum*.⁷⁰ And he speaks of the need to “learn to love” and become kind: “We must learn to love, learn to be kind, from our youth on up; if education and chance provide us with no opportunity for practising these feelings, then our souls will dry out and become incapable of even understanding those tender inventions of loving people” (HH 601).

The second conclusion is that, since indignation is intrinsically and necessarily bad—unlike, say, humility or shame, which are bad in themselves yet can be good indirectly (E 4, Prop. 54 Schol.)—it is impossible to distinguish between forms of indignation, some of which (for example, revolutionary indignation against tyranny, or moral indignation before genocides) could be good, while others would be necessarily bad. The same applies to Nietzsche’s view of rancor and spite, and to the politics of *ressentiment*. Even if we admit that indignation can be good for society in general, in that it signals the crossing of an affective threshold, the sense that a situation has become unbearable, thus causing the multitude to move against the power in place, it can never be good for the person who feels it. In addition, it inevitably introduces elements of discord within the *imperium*, which is another way of saying that it is bad for the state. Spinoza’s uncomfortable if not shocking conclusion, then, is that something irremediably bad lies at the root of the commonwealth. As Matheron puts it, “the elementary form of democracy, according to Spinoza, is lynching [*le lynchage*].”⁷¹ The elementary form of democracy is the hate-driven, bloodthirsty mob. Is the choice then between the violent mob and the obedient herd? In the absence of a political order governed entirely by the knowledge of adequate ideas, and given the fact that the multitude is naturally governed by negative passions such as fear, hatred, envy, and indignation, a big question mark remains the

possibility of ever overcoming such a pessimistic, if not nihilistic horizon.⁷² I will return to the Spinozist, or at least a Spinoza-inspired, account of what a better democratic order could look like in the conclusion of this chapter. The key question, and the point of bifurcation, lies in the possibility of shifting the political organization of the multitude away from the *conformist*, imitative consensus and toward a *dissensual* consensus, which involves the power of thought, and thought as power. This, in turn, requires an image of thought that is itself rooted not in conformity, resemblance, agreement, recognition, and reproduction—in short, identity—but in divergence and dissonance, disharmony and disagreement—in short, difference.

Similarly, Nietzsche looks beyond the openly, unashamedly spiteful politics of his time, and ours. He does so by calling into question the origin of, and reality behind, progressive politics, the values and principles of which derive from the ascetic and specifically Christian ideals of justice and equality. His distrust regarding so-called progressive politics has to do with its origin, namely, *ressentiment*, which it manages to cover up and present as a desire and passion for justice. When it comes to the connection between justice and politics, the crucial issue is not the connection itself, or its legitimacy, but its specificity. The specific connection that Nietzsche criticizes is that which emerges as a product of the slave—specifically Christian—revolt, and provides a moral interpretation of justice that marks a crucial departure from previous conceptions of justice. According to this interpretation, “there is a certain *universal* moral order constituted by certain moral principles that equally govern relations between human beings as such, such that whoever flouts these and thus acts unjustly will be regarded as liable to certain morally justifiable sanctions, sanctions that set out to re-establish justice and are thus to be considered just in themselves.”⁷³ But the question, as I have begun to show, is whether all revolts or revolutions aren’t necessarily slave revolts, that is, animated by a form of hatred that constitutes the multitude as a mob; and whether the truly political question doesn’t consist in knowing how to minimize hatred and encourage the love of power as *potentia*, and establish the conditions under which it can be established. The political task is the same as the ethical task—namely, to encourage love of power and freedom—with the difference that the multitude remains necessarily attached to passions, and to sad passions in particular. As a result, politics can never go as far as ethics, and rid itself entirely of imaginary constructions, illusions, and affects rooted in hatred. Nietzsche’s quarrel with Christianity and the politics it gave birth to is that they pretend this is *not* the case. They disguise hatred as love, resentment as generosity, and will to power as will to absolute equality.

However, Nietzsche also seems to allow for a more ambiguous, perhaps nuanced conception of justice as a mechanism to compensate for wrongs or injuries, to absorb appetites for revenge, and to guarantee social order and peace.⁷⁴ This, however, does not mean, as some have argued (e.g., Solomon, Fassin), that Nietzsche concludes that there is a necessary connection between justice and *ressentiment*, although he is of course of the opinion that under the reactive, moral, and especially Christian-derived system of justice, it is indeed the case. On that question, I side with Elgat.⁷⁵ At the same time, my primary concern in this chapter (and more generally this book) is not exegetical and scholarly. It is not to arrive at a definitive view regarding Nietzsche's position, but to analyze the connections and differences between revengefulness, resentment, and spite, and their role in the current social, political, and legal context. Therefore, I will feel free to deviate from Nietzsche's position as I understand it. Independent of the question of whether or not we should attribute to Nietzsche the view that justice originally grew out of acts of revenge and *ressentiment*, the question I want to raise is that of the place of resentment, rancor, and spite in today's social and political landscape, and especially the value and mechanism of recognition.

Let me begin by laying out what I take to be Nietzsche's nuanced position on the question, and one that, I believe, remains open to interpretation (and my own will ultimately differ from both Solomon's and Elgat's). On the one hand, Nietzsche unambiguously rejects previous attempts, such as Dühring's, to "seek the origin of justice [*Ursprung der Gerechtigkeit*]" in *ressentiment*, "to sanctify revenge under the name of justice," and to derive justice from "the feeling of having been wronged [*vom Gefühle des Verletztseins*]" (GM 2, 11: 52). Justice, whether considered historically or normatively, as a right or as an ideal, is simply not reducible to this reactive, moral interpretation, and there is no question that Nietzsche defends a conception of right that is not rooted in negative feelings and sad passions:

one only needs to look at history: in which sphere, up till now, has the entire administration of justice [*Recht*], and the actual need for justice, hitherto been at home? In the sphere of reactive men, perhaps? By no means. . . . (GM 2, 11: 53)

I wonder how closely Nietzsche looked at history, though, and I want to argue that justice is *in fact* rooted in *ressentiment*, or at least in the form of hatred that Spinoza defines as "indignation."⁷⁶ It is possible to follow Nietzsche and argue that, in an ideal world, justice would follow entirely from right, or power, and leave no room for the politics of spite and *ressentiment*.

But were justice and right ever perfectly aligned? None of the examples that Nietzsche provides seem to provide solid evidence. What they do point to are tendencies and moments which, were they to be cultivated, would bring us closer to justice. The active, aggressive, stronger man is and will always be “a hundred steps closer to justice than the reactive man” (GM 2, 11: 53), simply by virtue of being more powerful and closer to exercising his natural right. “Historically speaking,” then, “justice [*Recht*] on earth represents . . . the struggle *against* reactive feelings [*der Kampf wider die reaktiven Gefühle*], the war [*Krieg*] against them on the part of the active and aggressive forces [*Kräfte*],” and “the effort to keep them in check and within bounds” (GM 2, 11: 53). If anything, the law originated in an effort to protect power from impotence, strength from weakness, action from reaction. It is rooted in natural right.

This view comes across most clearly in a section of *Human, All Too Human* devoted to the “Origin of Justice” (HH 92). This is a crucial piece of textual evidence, as it provides a genealogy of justice (*Gerechtigkeit*) and fairness (*Billigkeit*) that disputes and rejects the view that justice is born of the desire to protect the weak from the strong, redress inequalities, and prevent all struggle in general. Instead, it argues for a conception of justice originating in the power struggles *between equals*:

Origin of Justice.—Justice (fairness) originates among approximately equal powers, as Thucydides (in the horrifying conversation between the Athenian and Melian envoys) rightly understood. When there is no clearly recognizable superiority of force and a battle would lead to fruitless and mutual injury, one begins to think of reaching an understanding and negotiating the claims on both sides: the initial character of justice is *exchange* [*Tausches*]. Each satisfies the other in that each gets what he values more than the other. Each man gives the other what he wants, to keep henceforth, and receives in turn that which he wishes. Thus justice is retribution and exchange [*Vergeltung und Austausch*] on the assumption of approximately equal power position. Revenge [*Rache*] therefore belongs originally [*ursprünglich*] to the realm of justice: it is an exchange.⁷⁷

I wish to extract the following key ideas from that passage. The first, already mentioned, concerns the origin of justice as law (and Nietzsche’s point, as I take it, is that there is no justice outside this negotiated construction). The need for, and *raison d’être* of, justice resides in a dispute not between *moral persons*, regardless of their power, but between roughly equal powers, which, were it to go on, would most likely lead to mutual destruction or at least

injury. A settlement or compromise is therefore preferable. The second point concerns the nature of the settlement, namely, exchange: something that one possesses is given in exchange for something else, and this in such a way that the sacrifice is viewed as mutually equivalent. An equivalent is and can be found only because the powers in question were roughly equivalent to begin with. My third point concerns the place and transformation of revenge in the process.⁷⁸ Justice, Nietzsche says, is *Vergeltung*: retaliation, retribution, vengeance, payback, requital, *in the form of exchange*. This, Nietzsche concludes, means that “revenge” (*Rache*) belongs “originally” (*ursprünglich*) to the realm of justice. This, I believe, is an unproblematic claim, as I take revenge *not* to derive from *ressentiment*, and therefore as not bound to it in any necessary form, but the other way round: *ressentiment* is, if not revenge as such, at least a delayed or postponed revenge, as well as a mediated one, which generates reactive, pessimistic, and life-negating values. Revenge *through* exchange is itself mediated revenge, but the mediation in question is between equal powers, and does not translate into any *loss* of power on either side. That is why it is not simply right (from a natural perspective), but also *fair*.

Naturally, this passage leaves various questions unresolved, and arguably the most important ones. For example: Can there be justice and fairness in the case of a dispute or struggle between unequal powers? Isn't the situation of inequality the very point of departure of all politics? Or can there be only right, natural right, the right of the stronger party to impose its will on the weaker? Following Nietzsche's lead (*HH* 92), Elgat provides the following answer to those questions: “In his reference to Thucydides, it is clear that Nietzsche has in mind the Athenian's view (expressed in the Melian Dialogue) that ‘decisions about justice are made in human discussions only when both sides are under equal compulsion, but when one side is stronger, it gets as much as it can, and the weak must accept that.’”⁷⁹ As the Thucydides passage suggests, equality of power in ancient Athens is taken to be a necessary presupposition or *condition* for the very appearance and applicability of justice. It is not, therefore, the *goal* of justice. Likewise, in the absence of relations of (recognized) equal power, any talk of justice is nonsensical, and any demand for justice is bound to remain unanswered. Justice claims *begin* with equality of power (and not of persons).

I now wish to circle back to Nietzsche's discussion of justice and *ressentiment* in the *Genealogy*. In addition to its original purpose of exchange between equal powers, justice can also be achieved by *compelling* “parties of lesser power to reach a settlement among themselves” (*GM* 2, 8: 49). In this case, the “stronger power” is “seeking a means of putting an end to the senseless raging of *ressentiment* among the weaker powers that stand under

it (whether they be groups or individuals)" (GM 2, 11: 53). As Elgat puts it: "As a result of this violent intervention and the equality it imposes on the two sides, the participants—in light of the futility of cultivating them—might restrain their vindictive desires, keep the senselessness and blindness of *ressentiment* in check, and be in a position to reach a solution of the conflict on their own."⁸⁰ But does this solve anything? Will the weak, who have been *forced* into this situation, not feel resentful toward the sovereign authority, and inclined to rebel against it? But, more broadly, justice (or the rule of the powerful) will involve any attempt "to enforce some kind of *settlement* [*einen Vergleich zu erzwingen*]" among the weaker powers, whether "by taking the object of *ressentiment* out of the hands of revenge," "substituting, for revenge, a struggle against the enemies of peace and order," "working out compensation [*Ausgleiche*]," or "elevating [*erhebt*] certain equivalences for wrongs into norms which *ressentiment*, from now on, has to take into account" (GM 2, 11: 53). This seems to suggest that while it does not originate in the reactive feelings of blame and vindictiveness generated by suffering and injury, and in fact battles against them, justice on earth also needs to "compromise" with them by taking them into account, specifically by diverting and elevating them. Which is, after all, exactly what Spinoza meant when he claimed that the democratic consensus and state stems from "indignation."⁸¹ As a result, the "the most decisive thing [*das Entscheidenste*] that the higher authorities can invent and enforce against the even greater power of hostile and spiteful feeling [*gegen die Übermacht der Gegen- und Nachgefühle*]," as a way of addressing and neutralizing it, "is the setting up of a legal system [*die Aufrichtung des Gesetzes*], the imperative declaration of what counts as permissible in their eyes, as right or just [*als recht*], and what counts as forbidden, as unjust [*als verboten, als unrecht*]" (GM 2, 11: 53–54). This is the institutional moment of the Law, the moment in which the consensus of indignation is inscribed legally. The law is therefore a protection against *ressentiment*, yet one that somehow takes *ressentiment* and revengefulness into consideration by diverting and redirecting it, by elevating and sublimating it; it distracts the attention of those who suffered the injury and ultimately achieves "the opposite of what revenge sets out to do, which just sees and regards as valid the injured part's point of view" (GM 2, 11: 54).⁸² In other words, the law helps to shift the focus of attention away from the exclusive perspective of the injured, and to introduce an "impersonal" interpretation or evaluation of the injury, which takes into account the needs and survival of society as a whole.

This, in turn, means that the expressions "just" and "unjust" make no sense outside the legal system, and need to be distinguished from the question of (natural) right, as well as the *moral* interpretation of justice.

Like Spinoza, Nietzsche believes that everything that is in my power is by definition right, and everything that obstructs it is wrong. And this is a right that I will never choose to relinquish. As a result, injury, violence, destruction, and exploitation aren't in themselves or naturally unjust, "because *life* functions essentially in an injurious, violent, exploitative and destructive manner" (GM 2, 11: 54). That they are "right" makes them neither just nor unjust; and the slave fallacy and self-deception consists precisely in turning the question of right into a question of (moral) justice, based on a dubious claim regarding the equality of all. Nietzsche goes even further: "Viewed from the highest biological point of view, states of legality can never be anything but *exceptional states*, since they are partial restrictions of the true will of life, which is bent upon power" (GM 2, 11: 54). But their exceptional status does not make them illegitimate. On the contrary, once the question of right (or power) has been acknowledged as the unsurpassable and inalienable individual dimension, the truly political question becomes one of knowing how to combine individual powers into greater units of power, how to establish the social conditions under which the many will become more powerful, and therefore more joyful. I will provide an answer to this question in my conclusion to this chapter.

A preliminary conclusion, drawn from my reading of Nietzsche, concerns the need for a political space in which grievances, resentments and even the desire for revenge can be voiced, heard, and resolved, without violating the principles of natural right and without paving the way for a system of justice rooted in *ressentiment*. Since any legal system means the frustration or decrease of the will to power, or the desire of certain human beings to persevere in and increase their own power, how can such limits be justified? Here again, Nietzsche's answer is very close to Spinoza's: it is only with a view to fulfilling its ultimate goal, which is to create "bigger units of power" (GM 2, 11: 54), that life encourages the constitution of organized groups subjected to the rule of law. The purpose of the law, then, is not (*pace* Dühring) to eradicate fighting in general, but to mediate fights or disputes between groups, to transform the desire for revenge into a desire for mutual growth through which the power and joy of each group will be increased. This means that legal or otherwise political processes which have the means to overcome resentment and revenge—without, as we'll see in a moment, falling back into the alternative of forgiving or forgetting—are necessarily good. By contrast, the vice and extreme form of resentment I am most concerned about, and have identified as spite, is characterized by its inability to engage in such a process, and therefore by an entrapment

within a purely negative and destructive affectivity, absolute passivity and reaction, total servitude. The republican or democratic political task consists in producing and educating free men and women—that is, men and women whose perfection and power involve the cultivation of joyful affects and the combination of their own nature (and power) with those of other human beings. In the absence of such a state of freedom, however, one has to distinguish between sad (and therefore destructive) passions, and this means between types of indignation or resentment.

Despite his critique of *ressentiment*, Nietzsche recognizes its need and purpose under certain historical conditions, in a way that brings him somewhat close to Adam Smith's view of "resentment" in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Resentment, Smith claims, is evidently an "unsocial" (MS 1.2.3.1) and most "disagreeable" (1.2.3.4) passion, far removed from love and joy, and rooted in revenge (1.1.2.5). As such, it is "the greatest poison to the happiness of a good mind" (1.2.3.7). At the same time, it is both natural and inevitable (1.2.3.3): pain spontaneously produces anger and hatred of the person, the situation, or even the object that causes it. Yet even when hatred and resentment "are most justly provoked, there is still something about them which disgusts us," and with which we can never sympathize: "Mere expressions of spite inspire it against nobody, but the man who uses them" (1.2.3.5). Resentment is unsociable, and a source of discord among human beings: "It was, it seems, the intention of Nature, that those regular and more unamiable emotions, which drive men from one another, should be less easily and more rarely communicated" (1.2.3.5). The voice of anger, hatred, and of all the passions that stem from them is "harsh and discordant" (1.2.3.6), and less conducive to sympathy. Spinoza said the same thing about indignation: even though it is a mimetic affect, and thus brings people together in hatred, it is also, for that very reason, a source of discord, and one that a truly democratic state seeks to minimize. Similarly, Smith acknowledges that resentment is a natural response to a wrong or injury committed by a person, and one that society recognizes through a fair punishment of the perpetrator, which will dissolve the rancor. But he does so reluctantly, and by subjecting this acknowledgment to a range of conditions:

How many things are requisite to render the gratification of resentment completely agreeable, and to make the spectator thoroughly sympathize with our revenge? The provocation must first of all be such that we should become contemptible, and be exposed to perpetual insults, if we did not in some measure, resent it. (MS 1.2.3.8)

In other words, resentment can only be a last resort, and applies to situations that are so extreme that it becomes a matter of necessity. It is only when we have no choice, and feel drawn into a state very similar to indignation, that we should cede to resentment: "We should resent more from a sense of the propriety of resentment, from a sense that mankind expect and require it of us, than because we feel in ourselves *the furies of that disagreeable passion*" (1.2.3.8; my emphasis). Indignation is indeed resentment by proxy. Yet because it is so disagreeable a passion, so destructive an emotion, it must be subjected to the greatest caution:

[I]f we yield to the dictates of revenge, it is with reluctance, from necessity, and in consequence of great and repeated provocations. When resentment is guarded and qualified in this manner, it may be admitted to be even generous and noble. (MS 1.2.3.8)

Smaller offenses, by contrast, "are always better neglected," and should be met with magnanimity and generosity, not spite (1.2.3.8). The generosity and nobility of resentment, in those exceptional cases, stem not from the furies of that hateful passion, but from the sense of outrage and indignation caused by the unjust and cruel treatment of a fellow human being, for example, one reduced to slavery.⁸³

Nietzsche's position on the politics of revenge is equally nuanced, and perhaps even more qualified. In a note from March–June 1888, Nietzsche suggests that in periods of decadence, when the individual is chronically weak and sick, and thus not very valuable, egoism—which, under normal circumstances, should be encouraged, insofar as it coincides with the increase of power, and with the cultivation of virtue as the ability to love and to hate, to affirm and to negate, to protect and to harm—should be suppressed, and give way to "the cult of altruism," which is "a specific form of egoism."⁸⁴ Under those physiological and historical circumstances, self-affirmation through "love," helpfulness, and cooperation, in word and deed, can be "of the highest value," "even from the point of view of the rulers." For then the all too natural feelings of rivalry, envy, and resentment, which are all feelings of *revenge*, are at least suppressed, or perhaps sublimated, *aufgehoben*. Christianity and its political offspring—socialism, anarchism—stem from a spirit of revenge, but that spirit is channeled and kept in check, contained and redirected:

Hatred of egoism, whether it be one's own (as with Christians) or another's (as with socialists), is thus revealed as a value judgement under the

predominating influence of revenge; on the other hand, as an act of prudence for the self-preservation of the suffering by an enhancement of their feelings of cooperation and solidarity.⁸⁵

When socialists demand “justice” and “equal rights,” they are merely expressing the inadequacy of their culture, which can’t explain why they are suffering, and, as we saw, seeking someone to *blame*. The recognition that they are seeking is the recognition of their own weakness, or the weakness of others. And recognition makes them *feel* better, reduces the pain. Solidarity does help. While not the highest expression of virtue, or power, it does allow one to live with and even overcome one’s suffering. As such, it is not without value. It is the consensus of indignation, or hatred, of which I have spoken.

Nietzsche’s claims in those pages, I believe, should nuance the following critique, which Robert Solomon formulates in an article on the meaning of *ressentiment* (a term which he insists, wrongly in my view, we should translate as “resentment”) in Nietzsche:

What Nietzsche ignores . . . is the legitimacy of the sense of oppression, the proper resentment toward an unjust world and the full need to change it. The sentiment of resentment is not the voice of mediocrity or incompetence but the passion of justice denied.⁸⁶

The key terms here concern the “legitimacy” of resentment and the “passion of justice.” As we saw, any power that limits or diminishes my power to think and act according to my nature is a limitation of my natural right, and therefore bad. But it is not unjust, and my desire for this right exercised to the maximum of its capacity is not equivalent to a passion for justice. Justice is an institution driven not by a quest for the common good, but by indignation or outrage, which is a form of hatred. As such, it is bad. Yet it can’t be ignored. Both Spinoza and Nietzsche ask about the historical conditions under which indignation, hatred, and revenge are institutionalized (and can be overcome). This does not mean that justice is necessarily driven by such passions. On the contrary: ideally, justice would be the necessary manifestation of the most powerful assemblage of individual powers, and the greatest expression of natural right.

Solomon is emphasizing in his critique what he considers to be the legitimate role of resentment in social struggles, especially those animated by a demand for justice. The fact, as we saw, that Nietzsche cannot see *ressentiment* as either the origin of, or a vehicle for, justice is irrelevant, if a strong argument can be made in favor of such a connection. But can it? Before I answer

the question, I'd like to make two preliminary but crucial remarks. The first is that, contrary to what Solomon suggests, we need to distinguish between resentment and *ressentiment*—that is, between a psychological state and a philosophical concept often associated with a conceptual character (the “man of *ressentiment*,” the ascetic type, the priest, etc.). Resentment is closely related to feelings such as rancor, spite, or envy, which all originate in the hatred I feel toward the person or system I blame for my own relative powerlessness, and translate into hopes and fantasies of revenge. *Ressentiment* is, I believe, rooted in resentment and its related negative states. Its origin is psychological; but it also and above all designates a historical and cultural phenomenon, a becoming, a force that shaped and continues to shape our view of the world, our social and political existence, our *life*, and one that includes social relations and political functions, including that of the state. It calls for its own genealogical critique, by which we need to understand not only the lucid analysis of its psychological origin, the sadness from which it springs, but also the *struggle* to which it led, the values it generated, the forms of life it created, all of which define who we are today. The reason Nietzsche uses the French word (besides his admiration for Latin-derived words and the French *moralistes*) is to flag the philosophical—that is, critical and genealogical—significance of that word. It is a *concept*, and not simply a psychological trait or moral fault. This means that the phenomenon in question, which can be brought to light only through philosophical means, is itself an obstacle to thought, to genealogy as concerned with its hidden, complex, and shameful origin, but also to the *power* of thought, that is, to its ability to see *beyond resentment* and overcome nihilism, to create new values and forge alternative ways of relating to oneself and others. The “vices” I have been focusing on in this work are vices because of the way they intoxicate and stifle thought. They trap us in forms of sadness that limit the power of thought, and this means the power of life. At the same time, they want to convince us that their way is the only way, their impotence all we are really capable of. They are a clear and present danger insofar as they operate not simply at the individual, but also at the collective level; they find relays and amplifiers in institutions, norms, and “leaders” of various kinds; they infiltrate structures of power, and at times generate their own. They become part of our landscape, our daily lives. We take them for granted and find them normal.

Insofar as they generate suffering, regimes of oppression and coercion—which are themselves often the product of the spirit of revenge, and are animated by hatred toward specific groups or classes—cannot be met with love and generosity. They can only be met with hatred and resentment. Yet the hatred in question can take two very different forms: one form can set

the groups or classes in question on the path of healing, peace, and reconciliation, and eventually lead to a *kind* of consensus; the other leads to an entirely sterile, destructive form of rancor that remains trapped within hatred, and poisons the poisoned even further, as well as the innocent. The first aims to overcome suffering through concrete actions, and especially through justice and recognition. The second perpetuates hatred indiscriminately, randomly, and solidifies as spite. Spite is the spirit of revenge that never manages to become anything—not even a claim for justice, a social struggle, a longing for recognition through rights or symbolic visibility. It is vindictiveness without a process, rancor and hatred without mediation. It is suffering or sadness that feeds on itself and contaminates everything around it. It is the rage that blurs one's vision, the purely negative affectivity that only allows stupidity and superstition to surface, that smothers critical thinking and its joyful potential.

There is, as I argued before, such a thing as the politics of spite. There always have been, and always will be, forms of power that capitalize on and encourage this purely negative affectivity. There will always be forms of power that rule over others by appealing to their vindictiveness, their accumulated frustration and powerlessness, forms of power that promise power to the people, but offer only servitude in the form of sad passions and thus a decrease of power. In the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche saw the ascetic priest as the greatest danger, as the figure—the “conceptual character”—who organizes this revolt of the rancorous and the spiteful, who comforts them by stroking them with one hand while poisoning them with the other. Today, however, the greatest danger comes not from religion in general, or even from specific religions, but from political leaders, and specifically the populist—xenophobic, racist, anti-establishment, anti-technocratic, anti-scientific, anti-intellectual, anti-immigration, *anti* as such—tendencies within our “democracies,” echoed and fueled by the anonymity and immediacy of social media. We are witnessing an extraordinary resurgence of the politics of immediacy, based on negative affects—affects of hatred, revenge, rancor, frustration, et cetera—which the “leader” amplifies and exacerbates, all the while casting doubt on the legitimacy and value of institutions erected over centuries. I have in mind the institutions through which wrongs, injuries, and injustices are normally processed: courts, the civil service, the media, teaching and research bodies, trade unions, et cetera. The only (illusory) solution or salvation offered here is the thought that, finally, those groups and classes will suffer, will know what suffering is like, even if they are in no way the cause of my own suffering. The only promise of joy is the vicious delight, the *jouissance* in other people's misfortunes.

Therefore, we need to distinguish the life and politics of spite, or con summated nihilism, guided by indiscriminate, unfounded hatred—hatred of Jews, Muslims, women, the healthy and the wealthy, the establishment, foreigners, intellectuals, the poor, et cetera—from what we could call a genuine politics of *ressentiment*. The term may seem inadequate, given its close association with Nietzsche, and the way I have used it thus far. But, as I just alluded to, Nietzsche himself seems to use it in that more positive way, under very specific conditions. Those are perhaps the conditions that Jean Améry (born Hans Mayer) had in mind when, in what seems like a direct rebuttal of Nietzsche's critique of morality, he spoke of the "moral value" and "historical validity" of his "*ressentiment*" as a Resistance fighter and Holocaust survivor.⁸⁷ In that respect, in the context of a traumatic event such as the Holocaust or the apartheid regime, the desire *not* to forget or move on, not to turn the page, while no doubt bad for the person concerned, may appear as legitimate, that is, as a call to, and grounds for, a new consensus. The healing process, if at all possible, demands justice, reparation, as perhaps the only possible collective solution to, and overcoming of, hatred and revenge. In this instance, the *ressentiment* that takes the form of justice designates the only "closure" possible: that is, the redressing of a wrong, or the moral injury of being abused without, *at the time*, the ability to respond, to defend oneself. This delayed response will, in principle, if not settle the matter, at least reopen the possibility of a life, of an increase of power, a reintegration within the polity, and therefore a feeling of joy, albeit a rare and fragile one. It will allow victims *not* to continue to perceive themselves as such, to identify with their victimhood and servitude, and embrace it as who and what they *are*.

2. *Living (on) with Rancor*

In a recent article, Didier Fassin explores moral sentiments such as "rancor, bitterness, acrimony, anger, ire, and indignation"⁸⁸ to assess a range of political situations. Those affects, he claims, belong to a grey territory that escapes the alternative between good and evil. They are all "a response to what is experienced or imagined as an injury or injustice" (Fassin, 249), the key difference here being between the imaginary and the real. Fassin focuses specifically on resentment, and suggests, somewhat arbitrarily in my view, that we distinguish the French *ressentiment* from the English "resentment." The man (or woman) of *ressentiment*, such as the Holocaust survivor, the victim of racial segregation in South Africa or the United States, he claims, "may have been directly exposed to oppression and domination,

or indirectly, through the narratives of his parents or grand-parents, for instance." *Ressentiment* thus results from *real*, "historical alienation": something happened, "which had tragic consequences in the past and often causes continuing hardship in the present" (Fassin, 260). It calls for recognition, not revenge. It signifies the impossibility of forgetting and the senselessness of forgiving for some. Recognition, in that respect, requires a process that does not erase the injury, but transforms social and historical relations for the better—and this means with a view to increasing the power and freedom of the multitude.

Now recognition for Nietzsche is an indication of weakness: true, "moraline-free virtue" is not for everyone. It is rare and exceptional. As such, "it does not desire to be recognised."⁸⁹ But this does not render all processes of recognition null and void. In a certain regime of weakness, such as the *imperium democraticum*, recognition can and should play a certain role: namely, that of a transformer of resentment and an overcoming of revengefulness. Elsewhere, I claimed that recognition has been and continues to be a pillar of liberal governmentality and the liberal state.⁹⁰ A recent and philosophical formulation of the idea, according to which all human beings are animated by a desire for recognition, can be found in Kojève's interpretation of the reality and unfolding of self-consciousness in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*.⁹¹ Ultimately, Hegel claims, this longing for recognition can only be realized in the ethical and juridical sphere of the modern, rational state. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama and Charles Taylor each came up with their own formulation of Hegel's insight, the first claiming that "the desire for recognition is the most fundamental longing,"⁹² and the second that "due recognition is . . . a vital human need."⁹³ At stake, in claims such as those, is the idea that a society remains normatively deficient so long as its members are systematically denied the recognition they seek and deserve. This is a position that, still in 1992, Axel Honneth formulated in his influential *Struggle for Recognition*: the possibility of realizing one's needs and desires as a fully autonomous subject—in other words, the very possibility of identity formation—depends on the development of three modes of relating to oneself: self-confidence (through love), self-respect (through rights), and self-esteem (through solidarity)—which can be acquired and maintained only intersubjectively, that is, through mutual recognition, and not solely through the pursuit of individual, economic interests.⁹⁴ For Honneth, social struggles of the modern age find their point of departure in "moral feelings of indignation, rather than pre-given interests."⁹⁵ To be sure, Honneth argues further, it cannot be a matter of denying that some social struggles follow a logic of collective interests, and that massive protests and revolts

are launched to secure economic survival. But it is a matter of recognizing that other struggles stem “from collective feelings of having been unjustly treated” and denied legal or social recognition.⁹⁶ It is only because social theory—including, if not primarily, that of the Frankfurt School itself—has been fixated on the dimension of interests for so long that it has remained blind to the political affectivity Honneth seeks to formalize. Thus, “unlike all utilitarian models of explanation,” the concept of social struggle to which his normatively substantive social theory is committed suggests the view that “motives for social resistance and rebellion are formed in the context of moral experiences stemming from the violation of deeply rooted expectations regarding recognition.”⁹⁷ Fukuyama is also explicit about this point when he claims that the desire for recognition is the “missing link between liberal economics and liberal politics,” that is, between the rationality of self-interest and that of the struggle for self-esteem, self-worth, and dignity.⁹⁸

Let me circle back to Fassin’s discussion of *ressentiment*, which he introduces through the writings of Jean Améry. Originally published in 1966, Améry’s *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne* (*Beyond Guilt and Atonement*) was translated in 1980 as *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*.⁹⁹ Written in the first person, the series of essays consists of a description of Améry’s experience, during and after the war, as a victim of the Nazi regime. The key essay, for our purposes, is titled “*Ressentiments*” and is translated (regrettably, given its obvious and ultimately critical reference to Nietzsche) as “Resentments.” The issue of *ressentiment* already appears in the very last page of the second essay, which is devoted to Améry’s experience of torture in the hands of the Gestapo in the Belgian prison of Breendonk, and in those of a regime, the Third Reich, for which torture “was not an accidental quality . . . but its essence” (Améry, 24). In just about everyone’s mind, torture is the extreme form if not the very definition of pain, and is thus legitimate grounds for the most radical form of hatred and desire for revenge. Améry’s description of the pain he experienced is vivid and unforgettable. And the point is precisely the unforgettable nature of that pain and the insurmountable effects of that trauma: “Whoever was tortured, stays tortured” (34). While the tortures he had to endure were not, on his account, of the worst kind, he can say with confidence, twenty-two years after they occurred, that “torture is the most horrible event a human being can retain within himself” (22). It is not just the severity of the pain, which is impossible to quantify and varies significantly from one subject to another; it is the nature of it. When tortured, and from the very *first blow*, which announces all the others, potentially infinite in number, one feels

helpless and *alone*. The torturers will do what they want, and no one will come to the prisoner's aid to assist him, or relieve him of his pain. The help from others that we normally expect can no longer be expected. With the first blow, the victim loses "trust in the world" (27), that is, the trust that his physical and metaphysical being will be respected. The body of the victim is invaded, taken over. It is like rape. After those initial blows by the Gestapo, Améry was handed over to the SS. His hands cuffed behind his back, he was hooked to a chain that hung from the vaulted ceiling and lifted from the ground, until, exhausted from the muscular effort to hold himself at a half-oblique, barely able to breath, he felt a crackling and splintering in his shoulders, a sound and a feeling he can still hear twenty-two years later:

The balls sprang from their sockets. My own body weight caused luxation; I fell into a void and now hung by my dislocated arms, which had been torn high from behind and were now twisted over my head . . . At the same time, the blows from the horsewhip showered down on my body. . . . (Améry, 32)

In torture, the body is experienced as never before: as pure flesh and a total reality from which there is no escape. Riveted to her own body, reduced to her suffering, the victim experiences the loneliest agony: "Amazed, the tortured person experienced that in this world there can be the other as absolute sovereign, and sovereignty revealed itself as the power to inflict suffering and to destroy" (39). With the cracking and splintering of the shoulder joints, all the things that one may, according to inclination, call the soul, or the mind, or consciousness, or personal identity, are also destroyed. Torture makes feeling "at home in the world" (40) no longer possible. It leaves one broken, physically and mentally. It is the experience of total disempowerment, of absolute powerlessness. In that sense, it is the experience of death. In *Ideas II*, Husserl suggests that, instead of the Cartesian "I think," and by virtue of its embodied nature, consciousness may be thought of us as an "I can."¹⁰⁰ My body, he argues, is the vehicle of my power and my freedom. In torture, this power is negated, reduced to nothingness. I can *no longer*. The experience is thus one of total alienation from the world, and from others in the world. One remains forever distrustful, afraid, and, yes, resentful. Fear and *ressentiment*, Améry concludes, "remain, and have scarcely a chance to concentrate into a seething, purifying thirst for revenge" (40).

How, then, could they possibly be integrated into a historical and political process? What sort of claim or reparation can come out of that experience of brokenness? How do we respond to those who, like Améry, wonder "whether one can live humanly in the tension between fear and anger," and

whose “bitterness” comes from having been robbed of their “trust in the world” (100)?

Those are the questions Améry addresses in the essay titled “*Ressentiments*.” There, he offers a kind of confession, but one that not does not and, he claims, should not lead to atonement: I, a survivor, he says in substance, harbor a rancor, a deep grudge and *ressentiment*, which I feel entitled to and want to live by, as well as *understand*. The *ressentiment* in question, it is crucial to note, is toward not only his torturers and those directly responsible for his suffering, but toward the German people and postwar Germany as a whole, this “thriving land” along with its “idyllic towns and villages,” “the quality of its goods” and “unfailing perfection of its handicrafts,” its “impressive combination of cosmopolitan modernity and wistful historical consciousness” (62). The guilt, he says, is a collective one, and needs to be acknowledged as such by the very people who seem to have moved on and done so well for themselves, who are *happy*.

I leave aside the question of whether this process is one that Germany (or Austria, for that matter) actually engaged in since the publication of Améry’s book. There is evidence that it has. But one can also point to contrary evidence. The production and reception of Thomas Bernhard’s *Heldenplatz* is a case in point.¹⁰¹ In 1998, Thomas Bernhard, Austria’s most important postwar writer and playwright, was commissioned by Claus Peymann, the politically controversial German director, to write a play to commemorate the Anschluss of 1938 as well as the hundredth anniversary of Vienna’s famous Burgtheater. Bernhard is also known in his country as a *Nestbeschmutzer*, or someone who defiles the nest, Austria. In *Heldenplatz*, he directed his ferocious and unapologetically resentful pen at what he perceived to be the collective amnesia, denial and revisionism of his *Heimat*. As Malkin puts it, “unlike most post-Shoah plays written in German or Austria, anger, hatred and bile are unmitigated in Bernhard’s play by any agenda of forgiveness or reconciliation, or by any metaphysical appeal to higher meanings.”¹⁰² His line is, in that respect, very similar to Améry’s, whose life inspired the main character of the play, Josef Schuster. Before it was even performed, and following leaks to the media, the play caused a scandal. Most felt that its focus—the memory of Austria’s Jews and Austria’s responsibility for their persecution and extermination—was not fitting for the occasion, which they wanted to be a celebration of Vienna’s contribution to the arts over a century. As Malkin puts it:

Heldenplatz erupted in an Austria still bruised by the campaign surrounding the election of Nazi collaborator (and two-time UN secretary general) Kurt

Waldheim to the Presidency. Waldheim, in his victory, proved Austria's determination not to see itself as anything other than "Hitler's first victim," an epithet long cherished in Bernhard's homeland.¹⁰³

Unsurprisingly, Waldheim called the play an insult to all Austrians. He was joined by ex-Chancellor Bruno Kreisky, among others, in calling for the play's removal from the National Theatre.

Josef Schuster is the central character of the play. A mathematics professor and a Jew forced into exile in 1938, he returns to Austria with his wife long after the war, only to jump out of his third-floor window on the eve of the fiftieth anniversary of the Anschluss. Robert Schuster, his brother, provides a pessimistic explanation: "The Austrians after the war/had become much more hateful and even more Jew hating/than before the war/no one could have foreseen that."¹⁰⁴ Malkin's own reading of Josef Schuster is that resentment "cannot be cured. It can only be overcome (if at all) through death."¹⁰⁵ She ends her article by pointing to Bernhard's own resentment, which he tried to extend beyond his death by demanding in his will that nothing he had ever written was to be published or performed "within the borders of the Austrian state, however that state describes itself . . . for all time to come."¹⁰⁶ In addition, he forbade his own commemoration by Austria, or by any country supported by Austrian money. Thus, "his rancor and resentment lived on after him in an act which continues to express his will to remember and, in a typical Bernhardian paradox, his refusal to *be* remembered in a country whose betrayals he could not forget."¹⁰⁷

Beyond the strictly historical question of whether nations that participated in the persecution and extermination of Jews under Nazism have sought genuine atonement since the publication of Améry's book, or Bernhard's play, what matters is Améry's principled position, that is, his claim to a right to *ressentiment*, and its moral significance and superiority. In an explicit rebuttal of Nietzsche, he ends his essay by voicing his skepticism regarding Germany's ability properly to atone and offer what he calls "a settlement in the field of historical practice" (Améry, 77). By that, he means the nation's desire not to allow the reality of the camps to be neutralized by time; to weave it into the collective memory of the country in such a way that it becomes, to use Magnus Engensberger's words, Germany's past, present, and future—another, negative yet perhaps necessary experience of the eternal recurrence, one oriented toward not innocence, but guilt, or at least toward something like an open wound; to *own* this "realized negation of the world and its self, as its own negative possession" (78). Only then would "the overpowered and those who overpowered them" join "in the

desire that time be turned back and with it, that history become moral" (78). Only then would "the German revolution be made good, Hitler disowned" (78). Yet the pacification of the victims' *ressentiment*, their ability to overcome their own subjective condition—one that, once again, Améry sees not as psychological or clinical, but as moral—and become "objectively unnecessary" would require a final step, namely, "the spiritual reduction to pulp by the German people, not only of the books" printed between 1933 and 1945, as Thomas Mann had suggested in a letter to Walter von Molo, "but of everything that was carried out in those twelve years," in such a way that nothing could be rescued from that period, not even the Autobahn. This would amount to "a highly positive, a redeeming act" that would signal the end of the dialectical process, "the negation of the negation" (78–79). But this outcome is unlikely: "Our slave morality will not triumph" (81). The hatred, rancor, and indignation of those who suffered the atrocities of Nazism will not find a place in the consensus of postwar Germany (or Austria). *Ressentiment*, as the inability to forget, to rise above, or to avenge an injury, is unsurpassable in the case of an injury like the Shoah. To forget, as the only possibility open to the victims (in the absence of rising above and avenging), is precisely what Améry, Josef Schuster, and Bernhard refuse to do. Instead, they prefer the self-harm of memory to what Améry calls "the anti-moral natural process of healing." But, taken to its logical conclusion, this decision leads to suicide, or an equivalent death wish:

We victims must finish with our retroactive rancor, in the sense that the KZ [concentration camp] argot once gave to the word "finish"; it meant as much as "to kill." Soon we must and will be finished. Until that time has come, we request of those whose peace is disturbed by our grudge that they be patient.¹⁰⁸

Naturally, Améry's provocation, and his claim to be on the side of slave morality, is profoundly ironic and a deliberate misreading, or at least an ambiguous reading, of Nietzsche. For were revengefulness and *ressentiment* ever more visibly, triumphantly displayed than in the Nazi ideal of the pure race, its unlimited and infinitely creative cruelty, and its unquenchable thirst for blood—for the blood of those blamed for all the ills of Germany and the attacks on the superior race? Surely, Améry had it the wrong way around when, ironically of course, he identified his fate with that of slave morality, and the Nazis with the noble race. He must have forgotten the following passage from the very end of the *Genealogy*:

I also dislike the latest speculators in idealism, the anti-Semites, who nowadays roll their Christian-Aryan-bourgeois eyes [*ihre Augen christlich-arisch-biedermännisch*] and try to stir up the bovine elements in the population [*alle Hornvieh-Elemente des Volkes*] by a brazen abuse of the cheapest and most tedious of all agitators' tricks, namely, the moralizing attitude [*der moralischen Attitüde*]¹⁰⁹—the fact that every type of charlatanism in today's Germany is rewarded with success is related to the practically undeniable, already palpable *desolation* [*Verödung*] of the German spirit; and the cause of that I seek in a too exclusive diet of newspapers, politics, beer and Wagnerian music, together with the presuppositions of such a diet: the constriction and vanity of an entire nation [*die nationale Einklemmung und Eitelkeit*], the strong but narrow [*enge*] principle "*Deutschland, Deutschland über alles.*" (GM 3, 26: 124–25; translation modified)¹⁰⁹

To those who claim that one should look not to the past but to the future ("the genuine human dimension") (Améry, 68); to those who, even among Jews like Victor Golloncz and Martin Buber, "tremble with the pathos of forgiveness and reconciliation" (65), Améry opposes a right to harbor the hard feelings that are "condemned by moralists and psychologists alike," the first regarding those emotions as "a taint" and the second as "a form of sickness" (64):

Stubbornly, I held against Germany its twelve years under Hitler. I bore this grudge into the industrial paradise of the new Europe and into the majestic halls of the West. I "stuck out" . . . I attracted the disapproving attention no less of my former fellows in battle and suffering, who were now gushing over about reconciliation, than of my enemies, who had just been converted to tolerance. I preserved my resentments. And since I neither can nor want to get rid of them, I must live with them. (Améry, 67)

It is this historically and politically generated form of *ressentiment* that Fassin explores in his piece:

Remembrance and rancor have, in Améry's view (70), the moral function of keeping alive for the perpetrators the meaning of what they have done: "My *ressentiment* is there in order that the crime become a moral reality for the criminal, in order that he be swept into the truth of his atrocity."¹¹⁰

This, in turn, suggests that the *ressentiment* in question is not reducible to a desire for vengeance or a longing to inflict suffering on the perpetrators.

Instead, and beyond the (essentially Christian) ethics and psychotherapy of “healing” and “closure,” of the need for reconciliation and forgiveness, it calls for the right, and even the need, *not* to obliterate the past and “move on,” “turn the page,” as if nothing had happened—the need to allow the past to continue to define the present, to keep the wound open, to remind ourselves, and especially the perpetrators, of what took place, at least as long as the victims of the Holocaust, and perhaps their children, remain alive. For Améry’s *ressentiment* also applies to the younger generation of Germans, although to a lesser extent, given their lack of direct involvement. But he doesn’t feel they can claim their innocence, so long as they feel “German” in any way, so long as they claim to relate to their own past and history: “German youth cannot cite Goethe, Mörike, and Baron von Stein, and ignore Blunck, Wilhelm Schäfer, and Heinrich Himmler” (Améry, 76). It would seem, then, that in addition to calling into question the Judeo-Christian ethics of forgiveness and reconciliation, or the ability to respond to hatred and extermination with love (if not of the perpetrators, of humanity in general, or one’s country, or the future, or God), Améry also calls into question the Nietzschean way of forgetting, and embraces slave morality. It is as if he were saying: “Like many before us”—and here one can only think of the enslavement of Africans by European powers—“we have been forced into slavery, and thus reduced to feel and think like slaves.” And in the same way that the slave mentality did not end with the end of apartheid in South Africa, or the end of colonialism in Africa, slavery does not end with the freeing of the camps. For slavery created *ressentiment*, and perhaps a hitherto unknown form of *ressentiment*. It simply cannot be a matter of asking the (former) slaves to move on, forget or forgive, look toward the future. It cannot be a matter of adding that burden onto their shoulders, of asking them to lick their own wounds and heal their own scars. It is, instead, a matter of asking at what cost, through what collective process, the creation of what norms and institutions, *ressentiment* can be overcome and indignation included in the democratic state. And that involves even the right to question the very Christian values of “truth” (as the truth that liberates) and “reconciliation,” as much as the desire for revenge. The “loudly proclaimed readiness for reconciliation by Nazi victims” strikes Améry as “either insanity and indifference to life or the masochistic conversion of a suppressed genuine demand for revenge” (71). Similarly, what we normally call forgiveness may be possible, but only at the cost of de-moralizing the deed, that is, of moving the subjective experience out of the moral sphere and into the social sphere. In other words, the traumatized or “distorted,” “warped” subject can forgive, but only as a de-individualized,

interchangeable part of the social mechanism. And that is why not just forgiving, but also forgetting, when induced by social pressure, is *immoral* for Améry. The healing process involves instead a recognition that culminates in the idea of settlement, ways of paying a debt and of putting the overpowered back on the path of empowerment, of making them strong again. Ultimately, I believe it is a question of overcoming slave morality not by ignoring and dismissing it, but by overturning it, by working with it and through it. Spite is and always will remain a sad passion and a poison, one that, Améry agrees, “blocks the exit to the genuine human dimension, the future” (68), and locks one into a state of powerlessness. *Ressentiment*, in the Nietzschean, technical sense, is a historical and cultural construction that processes and transforms this sadness. But one can imagine other such processes, which don’t so much capitalize on spite, or transform its formula so as to better disseminate it in the social and political body, as create the conditions under which joyful affects, and generosity in particular, can thrive.

Take the example of CAConrad’s dreams of revenge after the homophobic murder of his lover. In the following poem,¹¹¹ the last two lines reveal the possibility of a future beyond the rage and sadness of the rest of the poem, and of a happiness based on the memory of tender embrace:

the men who killed you
 justify your abbreviated breath
 hold this bristling maw open
 a place where I will
 not allow infringements to proliferate
 yelling *FUCK FORGIVENESS* in
 my first revenge dream
 punching their faces
 harder then harder
 smashing their
 god-fearing
 sense of
 entitlement
 licking blood
 off my knuckles
 I woke the
 happiest faggot but
 these days am happier
 dreaming I’m holding you

It is possible to extend Améry's or Bernhard's militant and historically specific *ressentiment* to other situations, and to that of post-apartheid South Africa in particular. Fassin draws our attention to two different strategies the Black leaders of that country developed during that period. Whereas the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as envisioned by Mandela and Tutu, emphasized forgiveness and generosity, Thabo Mbeki's 1998 "Two Nations" speech emphasized the deep and structural divisions between Black and white, which required greater recognition and economic redistribution. One nation, "white, relatively prosperous," lives alongside the other, "black and poor." The situation, he adds, is "underwritten by the perpetuation of the racial, gender and spatial disparities born of a very long period of colonial and apartheid white domination."¹¹² In that same speech, and four years into the process of reconciliation, Mbeki presents the fundamental question that will allow for a true reconciliation and the overcoming of the Blacks' *ressentiment*, in the following straightforward terms: "Are the relatively rich who, as a result of an apartheid definition, are white, prepared to underwrite the upliftment of the poor who, as a result of an apartheid definition, are black?" It is only at that cost, that is, at the cost of an economic sacrifice and a loss of economic power similar to that accepted by Germany at the time of its reunification, rather than as a result of a process of symbolic recognition and reconciliation, that the suffering inflicted on Black South Africans can be alleviated.

According to Fassin, the dispositions of reconciliation and national unity inscribed in the constitution of South Africa "were definitely not accessible to the majority of Africans living in townships and homelands," whose contacts with whites were limited to "the uncontrolled brutality of the security forces or the distant contempt of their employer." This, he goes on to observe, accounted for "the banality of bitterness and animosity" toward the former oppressor he encountered among those who had been subjected to the violence, fear, and humiliation of the apartheid regime.¹¹³ Hence the victims' reluctance to pardon, which Fassin witnessed in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: "Desmond Tutu himself tried to convince those who presented their harrowing cases in the hearings to forgive their perpetrators" (Fassin, 255). The forgiveness the archbishop called for was a huge price for the victims to pay, since it meant that they would have to renounce revenge. This was particularly difficult when the perpetrators showed no or very little sign of remorse or repentance. In addition, the principle of amnesty built into the process required that the victims abandon potential legal procedures, which would have helped redress the wrong and injury

they had suffered as well as their wish to see the perpetrators prosecuted and punished. As a result, they were trapped in a form of forced *ressentiment*—the very form that Améry described in his book, and feared would not lead to a proper “settlement in the field of historical practice”—unable and perhaps unwilling to move on. The victims thus felt the chasm between what was demanded of them—forgiveness and forgetting—and the attitude and experience of their white oppressors, which reinforced the sense of injury and indignity that had defined them for so long. Hence Fassin’s conclusion: “*Ressentiment* is more than an affect: it is an anthropological condition related to a historical situation of victim.”¹¹⁴

I agree with Fassin that, in this instance, *ressentiment* needs to be distinguished from resentment as a mere negative feeling. This, as we saw, is a distinction that Nietzsche himself drew implicitly, making it impossible for us to reduce genealogy to either psychology or moral philosophy. It is *ressentiment* insofar as it is caught up in a specific historical situation, in which power relations divided the entire population along racial lines, and race defined power. Yet we can speak of *ressentiment*, rather than resentment, only insofar as those who were deprived of power now have some power, however minimal, and can do something with their own rancor, spite, or revengefulness. *Ressentiment* is never entirely negative, and never expresses a total lack of power. It is *ressentiment* precisely to the extent that, and at the point at which, it can respond or react. Torture, slavery, or quasi-slavery might breed hatred, rancor, or fantasies of revenge, but not *ressentiment*. In the case of post-apartheid South Africa, *ressentiment* is already a process, a historical claim, a demand, as exemplified by Thabo Mbeki (and, before him and in a different context, Améry), and one that can be addressed.

By contrast, what Fassin calls resentment, and which I have been referring to as spite, “involves diffuse animosity and tends towards vindictiveness. It shifts its focus of discontent from specific actors towards society at large and vulnerable groups in particular, via *imaginary* projection.”¹¹⁵ The injury or hatred felt is, for example, that of the white police officer in the presence of Black people, whether in apartheid South Africa or the American South. In the case of France, the perceived injury is that of the police officers deployed in the *banlieues*, those poor suburbs largely populated by Arab and sub-Saharan minorities, which themselves carry *la haine*.¹¹⁶ Often recruited from the deindustrialized and mostly destitute northern part of the country, the police refer to those urban areas as “the jungle.”¹¹⁷ This same perceived injury is also the condition of far-Right constituents, whose social malaise takes the form of xenophobia, racism, and the rejection of the “system.” In

each case, we have “a reaction to a relational situation, which results from a sociological position,” and translates into an imaginary, almost random projection: the origin and cause of their injury and rancor, they feel, include “the poor, immigrants, minorities, magistrates, superiors, and society at large.”¹¹⁸ Here, the situation is one of *ideological alienation*: “The reality is blurred, leading to frequently misdirected rancor.”¹¹⁹ Unlike the man of *ressentiment*, the man of resentment is not directly or indirectly exposed to oppression and domination, to historical or objective alienation. Yet he expresses discontent about a state of affairs, about his situation and condition, and feels wronged. His alienation, Fassin concludes, is *sociological*. I would extend the affect of resentment, or spite, to include the attitude of all those whose hatred, born of a sense of being ignored or not recognized, can’t find a way out or forward, and who are thus trapped in an endless deferral of revenge, which takes the form, in their daily lives, of a constant vindictiveness and indiscriminate rage. Spite is not only sociological. It can also be a function of a toxic family dynamic, fueled by jealousy, or even, as Nietzsche saw clearly, a function of, and a response to, a purely physiological form of suffering. What distinguishes it from *ressentiment* is its inability to evolve into a process, a claim, or a demand, and therefore its inability to create any norms or values. Spite is purely destructive, purely negative, and lacks mediation. It lashes out at just about anything and anyone, without being able to formulate a demand and enter a process of recognition, however fragile or tenuous. Unlike *ressentiment*, it lacks the minimal self-awareness that would allow it to set a course, however oppositional and conflictual. It is pure reactivity, raw negative emotion. As such, the only thoughts it can give rise to are thoughts—fantasies—of revenge, and the only actions it is capable of are those that will inflict pain and suffering on others, and rejoice in seeing their power diminish and their sadness increase. It is indignation at its worst, and leads to the formation of the multitude as mob. If the type in question occupies, as Fassin claims (rightly, I believe), a sociological position, I don’t believe there is a collective responsibility toward it: the racist, and especially the racist and murderous police officer, should not be understood; the petty and envious neighbor who hates your success should not be understood. That politicians of today or yesterday use and capitalize on that energy, claim that they are on the side of those who feel disempowered, and promise to bring them back to the time of their (imaginary) grandeur and glory is of no consequence. The politics of the mob, which is of, by, and for the spiteful, should not be confused with the politics of the people. The people, as a political entity motivated by the quest for the common good and the increase of power of the many, is neither the mob nor the flock. It

seeks to be governed not by weakness (and hatred and vindictiveness are weaknesses) but by strength (and generosity), by which, following Spinoza, I mean the ability to move from a lesser to a greater state of perfection. As such, it is not mere obedience. Knowledge, thought, acumen, and generosity, which contribute to understanding the origin and causes of situations, and the effort to improve them, are all necessary to reach such a state.

CONCLUSION

The time has come to take stock of what I have argued thus far, and to draw a series of conclusions. I will do this by moving backward, from chapter 3. In that third and final chapter, I traced the origin of spite back to suffering, and analyzed the manner in which, individually and collectively, we address and respond to it. Following Nietzsche, I distinguished between the powerful, free, or virtuous type, which is able to live with and through his suffering, and the servile, reactive type, which seeks someone or something to blame for his pain. I indicated that the path of philosophy, understood as the love of freedom and power, corresponds to the former, while the path of nihilism—of rancor, spite, and revengefulness—corresponds to the latter and can take a variety of forms (religious, philosophical, political, etc.). Somewhere between freedom and servitude, action and reaction, innocence and vindictiveness, figures yet a different type, which is nihilistic yet not steeped in the spirit of revenge. It is the path of Buddhism and various schools of philosophy, and it seeks to distance subjects from their suffering by anesthetizing their sensibility, without hatred or rancor.

I also emphasized the creative and normative dimension of *ressentiment*, and thus distinguished it from a mere feeling or combination of feelings. *Ressentiment* is systemic. It grows out of hatred and revengefulness, but produces values, shapes subjects, and structures the way we think, act, and relate to ourselves as well as others. It governs suffering: it manages and controls it, justifies it, and makes it bearable. But it also governs *through* suffering: that is, it attaches subjects to their own suffering, and finds ways of making them identify with it and find in it a reason to live. Following indications by Nietzsche, as well as examples from our recent history, I went as far as to suggest that, while always “bad” in an onto-ethical sense, *ressentiment* can also lead to dynamics of political recognition and collective healing, and

thus increase the power of the multitude. Following Fassin, I suggested that we distinguish *ressentiment* as originating in torture, trauma, and systematic discrimination, or in what Fassin calls “historical alienation,” from resentment (or, as I prefer to call it, spite) as the expression of an open-ended, unmediated, and unmediatable form of hatred, rancor, and vindictiveness.

Throughout, I referred to various aspects of spite, and worked my way toward a definition of it, which I shall give after I gather its distinctive features into a coherent portrait.

I have called spite the desire for revenge born of the sense of having lost out and being left behind, of feeling disempowered, dispossessed, and disinherited—the suffering and desire for revenge that can *only* destroy, that is incapable of *creating* anything, of somehow *sublimating* its hatred and longing for revenge, whether that be in a claim for justice, a social struggle, or a longing for recognition. It is the hatred of, and revenge against, life itself and as a whole, and thus of all those who love it, those for whom the whole of life on earth is a goal—hatred turned into the unsurpassable horizon of one’s existence and one’s *raison d’être*. To demean and diminish—that is the sole purpose of spite. Spite is therefore the deepest form of resentment and the triumph of impotence—“motiveless malignity.” It is the type of desire in which *nihilism* finds its most extreme, consummate form.

Spite is hatred and revenge run amok, without a clear origin or end; or if there is an origin, it is one so remote, so buried in the depths of the spiteful man’s past, that neither he nor anyone else remembers it; it has become a kind of transcendental, a condition of possibility, a definite way of being-in-the-world, a *style*. It is always already there, the condition *sine qua non* of existence. But it is also imaginary, deferred revenge. More importantly still, it is *endlessly* deferred revenge—a revenge that wants to be so deep, so definitive, so all-encompassing that it never actually takes place, and finds its *jouissance* in this promise, this future that will never actually come, this final judgment. Spite takes up all of time, fills it and robs it at the same time—fills it with poison and robs it of its innocence and creativity. Spite is a crime against time, as well as life. It is its own goal, the poison that keeps on giving. It is vindictiveness without a process, rancor and hatred without mediation. It is suffering or sadness that feeds on itself and contaminates everything around it. It is the rage that blurs one’s vision, the purely negative affectivity that only allows stupidity and superstition to surface, that smothers critical thinking and its joyful potential. Green with envy and the will to eradicate virtue and happiness wherever it finds it, it reveals how base, how ugly, how destructive human life can be. But this low form of life remains

an expression of the will to power, of the will that can only poison. It is a desire, but the desire to reduce everything and everyone to the lowest possible degree of power. It conquers not by increasing its own power to act and think, but by making those around it weaker.

I also ended this section of the book with remarks on the politics of spite, indignation, and *ressentiment*, while postponing the discussion of their possible overcoming, and this means of the concept of *dissensus*. It is to this question that I now wish to turn. For while I agree that those sad passions will always play a role in politics; while I agree with those who see *ressentiment*, indignation, and outrage as sometimes legitimate or as the only possible response to a situation of indignity, I cannot see them as paving the way for the true democratic state.

There always have been, and always will be, forms of power that capitalize on and fuel the purely negative affectivity of spite. There will always be forms of power that rule over others by appealing to their vindictiveness, their accumulated frustration and powerlessness; forms of power that promise power to the multitude, but offer only servitude in the form of sad passions and thus a decrease of power. In the late nineteenth century, Nietzsche saw the ascetic priest as the greatest danger, as the figure—the “conceptual character”—who organizes this revolt of the rancorous and the spiteful, who comforts them by stroking them with one hand while poisoning them with the other hand. Mostly, the ascetic priest’s genius consists in turning the multitude into an obedient and harmless herd, and asserting his pastoral power. Today, however, and very much as in the case of superstition, the greatest danger comes not from religion in general, or even from specific religions, but from political leaders and “influencers,” as well as the anonymity and algorithmic power provided by social media. They promote and amplify the populist—xenophobic, racist, anti-establishment, anti-technocratic, anti-scientific, anti-intellectual, anti-immigration, *anti* as such—tendencies within our so-called democracies. We are witnessing an extraordinary resurgence of the politics of immediacy, based on negative affects—affects of hatred, revenge, rancor, frustration, et cetera—which the “leader” feeds and exacerbates, all the while casting doubt on the legitimacy and value of institutions erected over centuries. I have in mind the institutions through which wrongs, injuries, and injustices are normally processed, and through which a *demos* is defined: courts, the civil service, the media, teaching and research bodies, trade unions, et cetera. The only (illusory) solution or salvation offered here is the thought that, finally, those groups and classes will suffer, will know what suffering is like, even if they are in no way the cause of my

own suffering. The only promise of joy is the vicious delight, the *jouissance* in other people's misfortunes. The only form that the multitude can take is that of the lynching mob.

Following Matheron's reading of the role of indignation in Spinoza's account of the constitution of the democratic state, I raised the question of a possible overcoming of the politics of the mob, and of hatred more generally. The truly democratic question is one of knowing how the multitude can constitute itself as a body without becoming a mass—as a people (*demos*), rather than an obedient and servile herd or an angry pack. That question, I argued, requires a shift of the political organization of the multitude away from the *conformist*, imitative consensus and toward what I call a *dissensual* consensus, which involves the power of thought (and this means, at the same time, an image of thought that is itself rooted not in conformity, resemblance, agreement, recognition, and reproduction—in short, identity—but in divergence and dissonance, disharmony and disagreement—in short, difference). It is that possibility that I now wish to explore by following and extending the Spinozist line of thought.

According to Spinoza, all societies, however evolved, retain the trace of their hateful, rancorous origin. Even in the case of the states Spinoza considers in the *Political Treatise*, which tend to cultivate and encourage positive affects, indignation remains in the background. To be sure, Spinoza argues that the sovereign who condemns a citizen—and no doubt the judge who condemns him on his behalf—acts not out of indignation, but out of *pietas* (E 4, Prop. 51). Yet in this context (TP 2: 21), *pietas* cannot designate the virtue which, earlier on in the *Ethics*, Spinoza defined as “the desire to do good which derives from our living by the guidance of reason” (E 4, Prop. 37, Schol. 1). For, on the whole, sovereigns and judges are also passionate human beings. *Pietas*, in the context that concerns us, is to be understood in the traditional sense of “patriotism” and “reverence or respect for law.”¹ Matheron's point is that those who, prone to passions, love their country and as a consequence their fellow citizens, precisely feel outraged by those who cause them harm by disrupting civil peace. Indignation may become more abstract and impersonal, but it hasn't disappeared. And it *cannot* disappear. There cannot be an *imperium*, even a democratic one, which does not involve some form of repression, however minimal. Equally, it is impossible to desire this repression without feeling, at least virtually, indignant toward those who deserve to experience it. Even in states endowed with a good constitution and largely favorable to the development of reason, there is something that is intrinsically bad.

To be sure, Spinoza's own effort in his attempt to draw up plans for a constitution consisted in reducing the trace of indignation as much as possible. For us, it means extending this to what I have called the politics of spite and *ressentiment*. This means conceiving institutional mechanisms that made possible the self-regulation of the body politic by drawing on positive affects, rather than hatred. This is the point of bifurcation, which is not a point of dialectical inversion: how can the multitude shift from a consensus of hatred to a consensus of love (or *concord*), and even from a passionate consensus to one based if not on thought and reason alone—for that would mean the disappearance of the state as such—at least on more thought, and less affectivity? To put it differently, how can the multitude be encouraged and persuaded to love power and freedom, rather than to desire its own servitude? How can citizens be taught that the exercise of their freedom requires and even coincides with their ability to think critically and for themselves, that is, not to allow others to decide for them, especially through the manipulation of their affects, what the real problems are, and how to solve them? Far from being an elitist position, the one that consists in saying that it is in the interest of every nation to educate a population of thinkers is the most democratic, since thought is the instrument of our liberation and the highest expression of our power. Freedom is something we live and experience in the formation of problems.

Ultimately, at stake is the possibility of replacing the (conformist) consensus with the (problematizing, questioning) *dissensus*. Politics is the extension of ethics through other means: the love and cultivation of power through the constitution of the multitude (*potentia multitudinis*), rather than the love and cultivation of power through joyful encounters. Rooted in *dissensus*, this constitution avoids reducing the multitude to either the mob or the herd, to a flock of sheep or a colony of tarantulas. Through it, the multitude becomes a people (*demos*), itself reducible to neither the *genos* nor the *ethnos*.

The true question of the *imperium democraticum*, as we saw, is that of the power of the multitude (*potentia multitudinis*). If sociability is the faculty of the multitude, the fundamental political question (by which I mean the question of democracy) consists in identifying, or better still, creating the conditions under which this faculty can flourish, or be taken to the *n*th power. Given the fact that human beings are naturally opposed to one another, and are animated by feelings of envy and indignation that divide and unite them continually, how can the right, power, and freedom of the multitude be increased? How can the power of each subject, which is limited only by its own nature, or right, and which can never be relinquished

voluntarily, be combined with the nature and right of others, so as to create a greater perfection or power-assemblage? This requires that we understand the natures in question, and wrest our fate from the state of servitude in which the regime of the imagination, and the forces of oppression that draw on it, leave us. By the same token, it requires that we think of the power of the multitude not as the obedient herd under the spell of superstition, nor as the lynching, revolutionary mob that simply reacts to external forces, but by the knowledge of its own interest. And that, I want to argue, is where thought and *dissensus* come into play: for the knowledge in question is one that no one particular individual can discover. It can only result from a joint effort, rooted in the dispute around its nature, the problems it faces, and the rules according to which a common decision can emerge. *Dissensus* involves negotiation. Democracy is the institution of the multitude as a collective subject able to decide about the nature of problems and their solution. As I indicated in my discussion of stupidity as the faculty of false problems, problems are never simply given: they are constructions, or at least require a construction within which they acquire a certain meaning, and from which the possibility of solutions emerges. Furthermore, problems are nothing like the solutions to which they give rise. In any event, democracy as *dissensus*, to the extent that this is possible, requires that the multitude no longer be governed by passions, especially sad ones, which force it to advance and conduct its affairs as if it were blind, but instead institute itself as a mature political subject, which means as an instance of reflection, confrontation of opinions, dialogue, and (eventually) decision: as a power of problematization. It is the endless and constantly renewed effort to wrest itself from the state of servitude—dominated by affects and illusions—into which it tends to fall naturally, and to reach a greater state of perfection.

But the actualization of the power of the multitude thus understood will never be complete. As we saw, the multitude will always be governed by the unconscious mechanisms of the imagination and affectivity. Society as a whole will never think or act as a philosopher, or be a society of philosophers. Never will the *imperium democraticum* manage to translate the power of the imagination into a purely rational or thoughtful strategy, one that would eliminate its superstitions, prejudices, and habits.² The political subject cannot and will not become a fully rational subject. To think otherwise, once again, is “to dream of the poet’s golden age or of a fairy tale” (*TP* 1: 5). This also means that any talk of the end of history, understood as the realization and triumph of reason in the form of the modern state, the classless society, or liberal democracy, is illusory: the task is endless and necessarily imperfect. But to say that it is endless and imperfect does not mean that we

should not seek the greatest perfection possible, or the increase of our sovereignty and autonomy as a political body. It means, to begin with, that the question of sovereignty is no longer that of the domination of the unruly multitude by the political sovereign, but that of the multitude itself insofar as it is able to organize itself as an autonomous collective. This (endless) task, which consists in the multitude's ability to liberate itself from domination and servitude—of its own sad passions, as well as the powers that exploit it—is the truly democratic task, and the very exercise of democracy. To be sure, it can't be realized without solid institutions and the rule of law. Yet, no matter how solid these may be—and we are currently seeing in a number of so-called democracies that they are of little effect when social passions are unleashed—the real danger comes not from the threat to those institutions, but from the ability of the multitude to defend them in the face of anti-democratic forces. Over and beyond the law, as Spinoza and Nietzsche saw, there is natural right as the power of the multitude, or the right to exercise power (*potentia*) over political power (*potestas*): democracy is also the dispute or contradiction between a given, established authority or power and the right of the multitude. Law and justice can only be an expression of that right, which, in the *imperium democraticum*, is exercised through critical thought. This is why thought needs to be recognized as intrinsically valuable, encouraged, and taught. For, as I showed in my opening chapter, thought is a craft that requires apprenticeship and training. Like playing violin or gymnastics, it requires practice. Thinking is as much a demand or exigency as it is a right or freedom. Thinking is demanding, in every sense. It demands a lot from us, especially by way of the formulation of, and dispute around, problems, as well as the continual struggle against prejudice, intolerance, ignorance, spite, and stupidity. But it is also the source of the greatest demand, which refuses to be taken for a ride and renders those in power accountable. Through education, and from the youngest age, the love of freedom and power, which is the goal of democratic politics, is instilled. To say that the aim of democratic politics is to instill a love of power or freedom is, it seems, to fall back on affectivity, albeit of the highest kind. But we need to bear in mind that the love in question is not blind. It is the love of that which enables us to see clearly and act accordingly, and this in such a way that we will not turn against others and blame them for our woes, react more or less violently, and fall back into servitude; rather, we will understand their causes and what is possible. It is love as empowerment.

Dissensus requires that we change not only our conception of democracy (and consider dissensus its foundation), but also our conception of what it means to think, our image of thought. One of Deleuze's most significant

contributions is to have shown that, on the whole, and for most of its history, philosophy has been concerned with the question of knowledge as one of recognition, representation, and common sense. As a theory of the faculties or powers of representation, it has been concerned with finding the conditions under which I can recognize something as X, the manner in which the faculties can work together and in harmony in order to produce an object of knowledge. But, Deleuze argues, the advances of thought, like those of art, are take place now and always in the margins of common sense: they will always involve a dysfunctional moment, a point at which the harmonization of the faculties no longer works, a threshold signaling a new, hitherto unknown regime of, say, the imagination, or memory, or sensibility. That, I would claim, is the democratic moment within thought, the moment at which the consensus is questioned and thrown into the air, and the call is raised for a new form of organization, a new way of feeling or remembering or imagining. In this context, thought operates not as conformity and convergence, resemblance and recognition, accord and harmony, in short, as consensus; but as disagreement, divergence, dissemblance, and discord, in short, as *dissensus*. It is oriented not toward identity, the identification of common traits between faculties or situations, but toward difference, the singular traits or points that constitute a given faculty or situation, yet that are for the most covered up or ignored. The consensual, harmonious image of thought is a narrow and average one. It is the thought of the middle of the road. Difference, not identity, is the key to understanding the high regime and extreme power of thought. It is also the key to understanding democratic politics. In other words, there is no fundamental difference between the way we need to think about the exercise of thought and the exercise of democracy. We need to think about the true power of thought not on the basis of its ability to mobilize the various human faculties (of sensibility, perception, imagination, memory, etc.) in order to recognize and represent an ordinary state of affairs—not, therefore, as common sense—but on the basis of its ability to bring those faculties to their greatest intensity and creative potential, through dissonance and discord. Similarly, we need to think of the power of the democratic multitude as stemming not from a consensus reached through a lowest common denominator, but from a healthy *dissensus*, or the dispute around the nature of problems. Real democracy involves the assemblage of singularities, or the manner in which they can be connected with one another in order to generate a higher regime of power and increase the perfection of the multitude. The combination of singularities through dissensus, rather than the harmonization of particularities through consensus, is the hallmark of a genuine polity, and thus the

expression of the common good. It produces the multitude as a *multiplicity*, animated by differences of intensity. The ability of the democratic state to combine its differences and share in the construction of problems, rather than identify its lowest common denominator, is what defines it as such. This, in turn, means that there is nothing “common” about dissensus as an ongoing process and task. To keep this space open is the task of the *imperium democraticum*—one that simultaneously presupposes and generates a true *demos*, rather than an obedient and compliant herd, or a mob motivated by hatred and the desire for revenge. To close it down or neutralize it is the goal of all the forces—spiritual, political, economic—that want to trap us in servitude. Indignation and spite, as well as stupidity and superstition, are inherent tendencies, passions and forces at the service of such a harmful purpose. They limit or inhibit thought and, as a result, our power and freedom, our ability to live as free agents. Stupidity stops thought in its tracks. Superstition inhibits it by locking it into the cage of fear and/or hope. Spite poisons it, and everything around it. It brings about “the corruption of all social relations” as the desire to know, act, and live together, and of all the affects that correspond to those relations (benevolence, love, good faith, freedom of speech—*TTP* 20). *Ressentiment*, I would argue, is slightly different, in that it is born of the experience of the failure of the constitution of the multitude as either herd or mob, and feels thrown from one to the other, or from fear to hatred, without ever being able to see the alternative—without, that is, ever being able to constitute itself as a genuine people, or *demos*.

Finally, I referred to the opposite of the spirit of hatred, revengefulness, and spite as *generosity*, and argued for a conception of philosophy as stemming from such a virtue. I call it a virtue, once again, in not a moral but an ethical sense, that is, as arising not from a sense of duty, but from an understanding of the powers (the faculties or capacities) that correspond to human beings. Spite restricts the possibilities of life, shortens the horizon, smothers the love of life. Philosophy, by contrast, signifies the growth and expansion of life, its *affirmation*. It opens up possibilities, creates bigger, more joyful assemblages of power. It is an antidote. Not truth, then, but growth (and joy) is the goal of thought. Truth and, more generally and adequately, our search for knowledge are valuable only insofar as they increase our power. To avoid mediocrity, to combat everything that is low and base, especially the harmful, spiteful stupidity I have analyzed—this is the goal of philosophy. To seek the expansion of life by way of stretching our faculties to their limit, and thus increasing our powers—this is the goal of the “gay science.” Philosophy is not alone in this role. What we ordinarily call science can itself contribute to such an expansion, so long as it engages in the

critical self-examination I have spoken of throughout. But art, which calls upon and stretches our powers of imagination, sensation, memory, and thought—in short, our *desire*—goes further still. What those various strands and manifestations of the gay science share, their source as it were, is *generosity*, or *love*—not the love of wisdom, or knowledge, but the wisdom of love, the knowledge and truths that stem from generosity. From its inception, philosophy has understood itself as a form of love or friendship, the object of which would be wisdom as well as knowledge. While connected to such positive affects, generosity is not reducible to them. For there are trivial, unremarkable or common truths, which philosophy is infatuated with: $2 + 3 = 5$; the cat is on the mat; there really is a head, and a body attached to it, under the hat. Philosophy is not infatuated with, and not even interested in, such truths. It is more concerned with the questions behind them, and the type of person that generates them. It believes that we have the truths we deserve according to the questions we are able to raise and the problems we are able to construct. Of a given power or faculty, it does not ask “how can it mediate between this and that other faculty, and find their lowest common denominator, their common ground, their point of agreement?” Instead it asks “What is it capable of? How far can it go? How can it be unhinged and set loose, create new norms and a new reality?” It wants it to take it as far as it can, to raise it to another power and an as yet unknown joyfulness.

We know from Spinoza that sadness diminishes or inhibits the mind’s power of thinking (*E* 3, Prop. 59). When sad, its power to understand (*intellegendi*), equivalent to its power to act, is frustrated. By contrast, only emotions of “joy and desire” can be related to the mind when it is active, or when its faculties move from a lesser to a greater degree of perfection. Generosity is “the desire whereby every individual, according to the dictates of reason alone, endeavours to assist others and make friends of them” (*E* 3, Prop. 59 Schol.). It is a philosophical virtue in that it desires for others what it desires for itself, and therefore sees them as friends. But this friendship is based on the power of thought itself, without which others can only be enemies. As we saw in connection with the role of indignation (and more generally, hatred) in politics, which can never be entirely eradicated, human beings, unable as they are to overcome their passions, remain rivals and enemies as a multitude. But this situation does not exclude the possibility of generosity, nor of efforts to cultivate it. Generosity, or love, is in fact the only desire that is able to overcome enmity and hatred, by identifying the conditions under which natures are compatible and bringing about their assemblage. In addition, the friendship in question is, I believe, the most demanding one, since it is rooted in thought, and requires not an

immediate, purely affective relation (which would necessarily be passive), but a mediated and often agonistic one, rooted in *dissensus*. In other words, generosity is not to be understood as a one-way, unconditional disposition. The highest generosity is that which helps others to be all that they can be, and does not hesitate to make the process of empowerment difficult. In that respect, it is closer to the Heideggerian *Fürsorge* than to the Christian *cari-tas*.³ To be more specific, “solicitude,” as the disposition that characterizes the *being-with-others* of existence, unfolds according to two modalities. On the one hand, we can be merely indifferent (*gleichgültig*) to others, in which case solicitude is purely negative. On the other hand, solicitude can be understood and experienced more positively, either through a form of “domination” (*Beherrschen*)—which, I would claim, is the root of undemocratic politics—or through “liberation” (*Befreien*). Far from relieving others of their concerns and responsibilities, and in particular of the greatest responsibility of all (namely, freedom), this type of solicitude frees others *for* their own freedom. It forces them out of their passivity and relative servitude, and brings them face to face with the demanding task of *exercising* their freedom. Far from doing for them, or telling them what to do, it creates the conditions for their own emancipation and empowerment. That freeing of the mind as well as the body, of thought as well as action, is true generosity. It is identical with love, understood not as pathological love or even charity, but as the kind that dares to ask: “This is *my way*; where is yours?”⁴ And how can we combine them to go further, *together*?

When I started writing this book, very much as a response to recent developments in our political life and the perhaps deeper, disturbing and somewhat neglected vices they reveal, I wanted to think of ways of counter-ing them. I wanted not only to analyze and understand them, but also to think of ways of increasing the chances of emergence and survival of critical thinking. By the end of this journey, I had realized the extent to which, precisely because we are dealing with vices that are not mere accidents of history or contingent and empirical obstacles (which we could by rights overcome), but transcendental vicissitudes, they can only be *contained*. In many ways, whether individually or collectively, we need to learn to live with our own stupidity, our own forms of superstition, our own spite and rancor. But we need not live *by* or *for* them. Yes, they are ineradicable, and can even play a positive role in social dynamics. But we need to learn to develop an ear or eye to detect and diffuse them, limit the harm they can cause, and promote more virtuous noetic attitudes, rooted in generosity. I have in mind attitudes such as honesty, frank speech, trustworthiness, open-mindedness, and lucidity. These virtues were cultivated in Greek and Roman antiquity,

and subsequently championed by Montaigne, Nietzsche, Hadot, Foucault, and Putnam. They have also become central to recent debates in virtue epistemology.⁵ The cultivation of such virtues not only leads to knowledge, but also shapes social and political attitudes, and prepares the ground for the exercise of thought and action as *dissensus*. The latter is a social and political task as well as a thinking attitude. This point also brings me back to what I was saying in the introduction about the task—or, to use again Foucault's expression, the "real"—of philosophy. The task is not simply to think the real, or the real (rather than merely possible) conditions of experience; nor is it to construct itself as an *analytic* of truth. Rather, it is to retain a *certain* relation to truth nonetheless, one that we can characterize as an *ethics* of truth. Its virtues implicate the subject of truth; they presuppose a certain type of relation to oneself and to others, a form of openness to the world, such that what is said about the world also and immediately says something about the one who says it. One's utterances, even of the most abstract cognitive type, are so intimately, entirely, and absolutely bound up with one's existence that they are also ethical utterances. For that reason, they are also most capable of minimizing the relations of power and authority that are inevitably generated by discourses of truth.

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NOTES

INTRODUCTION

1. Spinoza, *Ethics* 5, Prop. 42, Schol.
2. I borrow the term “transcendental delusion” from Linda Martín Alcoff, “Philosophy and Philosophical Practice: Eurocentrism as an Epistemology of Ignorance,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian James Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 397–400.
3. In his drama *De Beneficiis*, Seneca consistently opposes the *sapiens* and the *stultus*, the wise man and the stupid or foolish man. See Gerard B. Lavery, “The Adversarius in Seneca’s *De Beneficiis*,” *Mnemosyne*, 4th ser., 40, nos. 1/2 (1987): 97–106.
4. T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 214; T. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 2005), § 79.
5. A. Smith, *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 1, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), I.ii.3.7.
6. F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3, § 11.
7. F. Nietzsche, “Mixed Opinions and Maxims,” in *Human, All Too Human II*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), 62. Hereafter cited as *HH2*.
8. Quassim Cassam, *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 2.
9. Cassam, 2.
10. Cassam, 56.
11. Cassam, 3.
12. The relatively new field of epistemic vices, concerned with how we can *fail* to know certain things, is expanding rapidly. In addition to Cassam’s *Vices of the Mind*, the following books and articles are particularly relevant for the vices (and some of the virtues) I will be discussing: Heather Battaly, “Varieties of Epistemic Vice,” in *The Ethics of Belief: Individual and Social*, ed. Jonathan Matheson and Rico Vitz (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 51–76; Quassim Cassam, “Vice Ontology,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6 (2017): 20–27; Ian Kidd, “Capital Epistemic Vices,” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6 (2017): 11–16; Brent J. C. Madison,

- "On the Nature of Intellectual Vice," *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 6 (2017): 1–6; José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Kevin Mulligan, "Foolishness, Stupidity, and Cognitive Value," *The Monist* 97, no. 1 (1994): 65–85.
13. Cassam, *Vices of the Mind*, 2. I have to agree with Cassam that if we define stupidity as "foolishness or lack of common sense" (4), then it can be seen as an intellectual vice. But I will try to argue for stupidity as a force that blocks or inhibits the power of thought; and I will resist the temptation to identify thought with common sense. In the end, what matters is not whether we identify those vices as intellectual (spite, rancor, and resentment are certainly not intellectual, at least not in any obvious way), but how we define them, and we think of the faculty we call "intellect."
 14. M. Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: the Function of Avowal in Justice*, ed. Fabienne Brion and Bernard E. Harcourt, trans. Stephen W. Sawyer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 21.
 15. F. Nietzsche, "Schopenhauer as Educator," in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 137. Volume cited hereafter as *UM*.
 16. M. Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended." *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 25.
 17. M. Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms," in *Essential Works of Michel Foucault*, vol. 3, *Power*, ed. James. D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 2000), 13; Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Essential Works: Power*, 131.
 18. Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Essential Works: Power*, 133.
 19. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Medina, *Epistemology of Resistance*.
 20. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1988).
 21. See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971). The concept of hegemony is the unifying thread of Antonio Gramsci's four-volume *Prison Notebooks*, or *Quaderni del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 2014). Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," trans. Ben Brewster, in *Lenin and Philosophy, and other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127–86.
 22. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* [1903], in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1986), 364.
 23. Tommie Shelby, "Is Racism in the 'Heart'?" *Journal of Social Philosophy* 33, no. 3 (2002): 411–20; "Ideology, Racism, and Critical Social Theory," *The Philosophical Forum* 34, no. 2 (2003): 153–88; "Racism, Moralism, and Social Criticism," *Du Bois Review: Social Science Research on Race* 11, no. 1 (2014): 54–74; Charles W. Mills, "Ideology," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 100–112.
 24. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, chapter 7; Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007), 110–13; Luvell Anderson, "Epistemic Injustice and the philosophy of race," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 139–48; Mills, "Ideology," 104–10.

25. Michael Brownstein and Jennifer Saul, "Introduction," in *Implicit Bias and Philosophy, Volume 1*, ed. Brownstein and Saul (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–19; Jennifer Saul, "Implicit Bias, Stereotype Threat, and Epistemic Injustice," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017).
26. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), chapters 6 and 8; Nancy Fraser, "Social Justice in the Age of Identity Politics: Redistribution, Recognition, and Participation," in *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange*, ed. Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (London: Verso, 2003), 11–12; Matthew Congdon, "What's Wrong with Epistemic Injustice? Harm, Vice, Objectification, Misrecognition," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 243–53.
27. Cassam, *Vices of the Mind*, 81–87; Haekwon Kim, "Contempt and Ordinary Inequality," in *Racism and Philosophy*, ed. Susan E. Babbitt and Sue Campbell (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1999), 108–23. But contempt is also a fitting emotional response to oppression, and even a moral and political stance. On the same page of the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois mentions his own contempt for the veil of ignorance and prejudice to which he and his kind are subjected, and the contempt visible in the white gaze (Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, 364). Contempt is also claimed by contemporary moral and/or feminist philosophers. See Michelle Mason, "Contempt as a Moral Attitude," *Ethics* 113, no. 2 (2003): 234–72; Macalester Bell, "A Woman's Scorn: Toward a Feminist Defense of Contempt as a Moral Emotion," *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (Autumn, 2005): 80–93.
28. Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18; Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007); Nancy Tuana, "Feminist Epistemology: The Subject of Knowledge," in *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, ed. Ian Kidd, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. (London: Routledge, 2017), 132–34; Alcoff, "Philosophy and Philosophical Practice."
29. Harvey Cornier, "Ever Not Quite: Unfinished Theories, Unfinished Societies, and Pragmatism," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
30. Cornier, 74, 73.
31. Cassam, *Vices of the Mind*, 61. See also Joshua Baron, *Rationality and Intelligence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).
32. Cassam, 61.
33. Baron, *Rationality and Intelligence*, 90.
34. Cassam, *Vices of the Mind*, 64. See also Stuart A. Vyse, *Believing in Magic: The Psychology of Superstition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
35. Cassam, *Vices of the Mind*.
36. In this respect, I feel close to Avital Ronnell, who sees stupidity as a primary relation, a partner for life from which we can never separate or divorce, a transcendental vice at the heart of reason. See Avital Ronnell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 11, 20, 44, 73–74.
37. Cassam, *Vices of the Mind*, 98–99.
38. Louis Althusser, *Essays in Self-criticism*, trans. G. Lock (London: New Left Books, 1976), 106.

39. F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), § 307. Hereafter cited as GS, followed by section number.
40. F. Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 95. Hereafter cited as TI.
41. Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt, "Superstition," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Erik Liddell (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2010), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.629> (accessed June 1, 2020). Originally published as "Superstition," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1765), 15:669.
42. Jaucourt, "Superstition."

CHAPTER ONE

1. Sophocles, *Fragments*, ed. and trans. Hugh Lloyd-Jones (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2003), 924, 925.
2. "Stupidity," Ronnell claims, "does not allow itself to be opposed to knowledge in any simple way, nor is it the other of thought." Avital Ronnell, *Stupidity* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 5.
3. Pseudo-Dionysius the Aeropagite, *Mystical Theology*, 1:3 and *Divine Names*, 7:3, 827a, in *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York and Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987); Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidata edita*, vol. 1, *De docta ignorantia*, ed. Ernst Hoffmann and Raymond Klibansky (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1932–), 1, 4.
4. See Nikolay Gogol, "Nevsky Prospect," in *Petersburg Tales*, trans. Dora O'Brien (Richmond, VA: Alma Classics, 2014). Dostoevsky's description of Pirogov in *The Idiot* is spot on: "This arrogance of the simple-minded, this total absence of doubt in his abilities by a stupid man is excellently portrayed by Gogol in his wonderful character of Lieutenant Pirogov. Pirogov never doubts that he is a genius, or, indeed, that he is superior to any genius. He is so certain of it that it never occurs to him to question it; he does not question anything, anyway. . . . And how many Pirogovs have there not been among our writers, our men of learning, our propagandists? I say 'have been,' but of course, we have them still." Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*, trans. David Magarshack (New York: Penguin, 1955), 470.
5. Charles W. Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
6. George Yancy, ed., *What White Looks Like: African-American Philosophers on the Whiteness Question* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 2.
7. Vladimir Jankélévitch, *Le Je-ne-sais-quoi et le Presque-rien* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1980), 15.
8. Nicolas of Cusa, *Idiota de sapientia*, in *Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia iussu et auctoritate Academiae Litterarum Heidelbergensis ad codicum fidata edita*, vol. 5, ed. Renate Steiger (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1983), 1:1.
9. Nicolas of Cusa, 1:3.
10. An early portrait of stupidity as "slowness of mind and deed" can be found in Theophrastus' *Sketches of Characters* (ca. 320 CE), a light and entertaining series of caricatures of different kinds of men (and their vices) one could have met in Athens at the time. See Theophrastus, "The Stupid Man" (*Anaistheseais Id'*), in *Characters*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Rusten and I. C. Cunningham (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2003), 14. Theophrastus (ca. 370–285 CE), an important

philosopher in his day and the author of many books on a wide range of topics, was a student of Aristotle, and assumed leadership of the latter's school after its founder's death.

11. Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, trans. Sophie Wilkins (London: Picador, 1995), 467.
12. Robert Musil, *Precision and Soul: Essays and Addresses*, ed. and trans. B. Pike and D. S. Luft (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 276, 282.
13. Ronnell, *Stupidity*, 10.
14. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Hortsman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), § 189.
15. There are exceptions. I have already mentioned some in ancient and renaissance philosophy; and I will refer to modern and contemporary sources. In the recent analytic philosophy of epistemic vices, stupidity is at times mentioned, and usually as synonymous with foolishness. See Kevin Mulligan, "Foolishness, Stupidity, and Cognitive Value," *The Monist* 97, no. 1 (1994); and Quassim Cassam, *Vices of the Mind: From the Intellectual to the Political* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 56, 132–34.
16. See Flaubert's *Letter to George Sand* dated 14 November 1871, in which he claims that "we suffer from one thing only: Stupidity. But it is formidable and universal." Gustave Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Jean Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1998), 4:411. See also the Preface in Umberto Eco, *Il secondario diario minimo* (Milan: Bompiani, 1992).
17. I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. and trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A 62/B 87, A 60/B 84.
18. Kant, A 133/B 172.
19. Kant, A 134/B 173.
20. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. David Raeburn (London: Penguin, 2004), 11:100–193.
21. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 134/B 173.
22. I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* [1798], trans. Robert B. Loudon, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), Ak 7:204. In citations of Kant's works, page references will be to the German edition of his collected works, *Gesammelte Schriften, Ausgabe der Königlich Preussischen Akademie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1900–), using the abbreviation Ak followed by volume and page numbers.
23. Kant, *Anthropology*, Ak 7:204.
24. M. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France 1978–1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 36.
25. M. Foucault, *The Punitive Society: Lectures at the Collège de France 1972–1973*, trans. Graham Burchell (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 164–66.
26. Chris Mullen, "Evidence to the Royal Commission on Criminal Justice," 51, <http://www.chrismullinexmp.com/speeches/evidence-to-the-royal-commission-on-criminal-justice>.
27. Cassam, *Vices of the Mind*, 56.
28. Kant, *Anthropology*, Ak 7:309.
29. I. Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* [1764], in *Cambridge Edition*, ed. Zöllner and Loudon, Ak 2:228.
30. Kant, Ak 2:230.
31. Kant, *Anthropology*, Ak 7:308.

32. Kant, *Ak* 7:309.
33. Kant, *Ak* 7:307.
34. Kant, *Ak* 7:311.
35. Kant, *Ak* 7:316.
36. See Heinrich Wiegand Petzet, *Encounters and Dialogues with Martin Heidegger, 1929–1976*, trans. Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 37.
37. M. Heidegger, *Überlegungen XII–XV (Schwarze Hefte 1939–1941)*, vol. 96 of *Gesamtausgabe*, ed. P. Trawny (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2014), 46, 56, 243.
38. M. Heidegger, “Nur ein Gott kann uns retten,” *Der Spiegel* 23 (30 May 1976), 217.
39. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Hortsman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 251.
40. I. Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* [1764], in *Cambridge Edition*, ed. Zöllner and Louden, *Ak* 2:254. Jean-Baptiste Labat (1663–1738) was a Dominican missionary who reported on, and defended, French slavery in the Caribbean, and the author of *Voyage aux îles: Chronique aventureuse des Caraïbes, 1693–1705* (Paris: libretto, 1993 [1772]). In the same early work, and repeating Hume’s racist comments in *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 213n, Kant speaks of “the Negroes of Africa” as having a “very vain” character and “no feeling that rises above the ridiculous”; of their religion as being so idolatrous as to sink “deeply into the ridiculous”; and of their being “so talkative that they must be driven apart by blows” (Kant, *Observations*, *Ak* 2:253).
41. CAConrad, *While Standing in Line for Death* (Seattle and New York: Wave Books, 2017), 36.
42. I am particularly aware of the nature of my claim in relation to racism, and the possible objections it might raise. I am writing these lines as protests and riots are erupting in every major city in the United States, and in many other cities throughout the world, following the murder of George Floyd by a police officer on May 25, 2020; that of Ahmaud Arbery by a former police officer and his son on February 23, 2020; and the unlawful killing of Breonna Taylor by police officers on March 13, 2020. Racism, especially in its systemic, institutionalized form, is being opposed with a determination and force not seen since the civil rights movement. I will return to the emotional aspect of this opposition—to the feelings of anger, rage, and resentment—in my discussion of spite.
43. “Arguments [*logoi*] arise from propositions [*protaseon*], while the subjects on which reasonings [*sullogismoi*] take place are problems [*problemata*]” (Aristotle, *Topics*, Book 1, 101b15–16). Further down, Aristotle defines the difference between a problem and a proposition as “a difference in the turn of the phrase. For if it be put in this way, “An animal that walks on two feet” is the definition of man, is it not?” or “Animal is the genus of man,” it is not?” the result is a proposition: but if thus, ‘Is “an animal that walks on two feet” a definition of man or no?’ or ‘Is “animal” his genus or no?’ the result is a problem” (*Topics*, Book 1, 101b28–34). See *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), vol. 1.
44. Whereas Aristotle’s *Organon* presents rules or instruments for achieving demonstrative (or “apodictic”) knowledge, a canon (a term Kant borrows from Epicurus) concerns the rules and criteria for discriminating between true and false judgments.
45. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 61/B 86.

46. Aristotle, *Sophistical Refutations*, in *Complete Works*, ed. Barnes, 1:164a 23–25; see also 165b 11–23.
47. Aristotle, 1:165a 21–22.
48. L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969). Another version of the same idea can be found in Stanley Cavell's definition of philosophy as "the education of grownups." See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 125, and *Little Did I Know: Excerpts from Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 9. Hilary Putnam adopted Cavell's definition, which resonates deeply with much of his work. See Hilary Putnam, "An Interview with Professor Hilary Putnam: The Vision and Arguments of a Famous Harvard Philosopher," *Cogito* 3 (1989): 85–91; *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990); *Words and Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). Pierre Hadot connects Cavell and Putnam on the idea of philosophy as the education of grownups to a philosophical tradition, rooted in ancient Greek philosophy, but extending into the thought of Kant, Nietzsche, and Foucault. See Pierre Hadot, *La philosophie comme éducation des adultes: Textes, perspectives, entretiens*, ed. Arnold Davidson and Daniele Lorenzini (Paris: Vrin, 2019), 179–88.
49. G. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 248.
50. For accounts of recent scientific research on the tetrapod limb, see Mary Hoff, "A Footnote to the Evolution of Digits," in *PLOS Biology* 12, no. 1 (January 21, 2014): e1001774, <https://journals.plos.org/plosbiology/article?id=10.1371/journal.pbio.1001774>; G. P. Wagner and C. H. Chiu, "The Tetrapod Limb: A Hypothesis on Its Origin," *Journal of Experimental Zoology* 291, no. 3 (October 15, 2001): 226–40; Neil Shubin, "The Evolution of Paired Fins and the Origin of Tetrapod Limbs," in *Evolutionary Biology*, vol. 8, ed. Max K. Hecht et al. (New York: Plenum Press, 1995), 39–86.
51. Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 165.
52. Deleuze, 159.
53. Deleuze, 158.
54. Heidegger never says it explicitly, but what if the struggle for "authenticity" were first and foremost an existential-ontological struggle against one's own stupidity and the stupidity of the "they" understood as the implicit, unquestioned, and in every sense of the word *ordinary*, *average*, *doxastic* consensus in which we are always already thrown? What if Heidegger's own *Dummheit* in 1933–34 were itself an instance of such a relapse, and of the worst kind? Ronnell touches on the subject in *Stupidity*, 41–42, 73–74.
55. Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*, 790. Hereafter cited in the text as MWQ, followed by page number.
56. Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 105.
57. Musil, *Precision and Soul*, 267.
58. Musil, 283.
59. Musil.
60. Musil, 106.
61. Musil, 107.
62. Musil, 285.

63. Musil, 106.
64. Musil, 267.
65. Musil, 286.
66. As we'll see, the portrait of the bourgeois as a stupid man will not be complete without Flaubert's help, and his focus on the petty bourgeoisie.
67. G. Flaubert, *Correspondance*, ed. Jean Bruneau (Paris: Gallimard, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1973), 1:4.
68. Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), 15–16.
69. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 214.
70. Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, § 79.
71. Flaubert, *Correspondance*, 5:535; Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, ed. Claudine Gothot-Mersch (Paris: Folio, 1979).
72. Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, 299, 303, 316, 197.
73. The "Hegelian" thought that "nature is only a moment of the Idea" leaves Pécuchet's interlocutor, the parish priest, perplexed, and Bouvard entirely distressed: "This came as a surprise, a crushing blow. Bouvard did not even believe in matter anymore." Flaubert, 315, 316.
74. Flaubert, 319.
75. Musil, *Precision and Soul*, 282.
76. G. Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (Paris: Garnier, 1971), 4.
77. Flaubert, 4, 104, 134, 349, 355.
78. See Flaubert, *Correspondance*, 4:583, 863, 5: 279, 325, 797.
79. M. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1977), 35.
80. Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time: The Prisoner*, ed. Christopher Prendergast, trans. Peter Collier (London: Allen Lane/Penguin, 2002), 350.
81. Kant, *Anthropology*. Citations that follow in this section will be made in the text, by volume and page number in the *Gesammelte Schriften* (abbreviated *Ak*).
82. Robert B. Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 105. See also T. E. Hill and B. Boxill, "Kant and Race," in *Race and Racism*, ed. B. Boxill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 459; Sankar Muthu, *Enlightenment Against Empire* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 172–209; Thomas McCarthy, "On the Way to a World Republic: Kant on Race and Development," in *Politik, Moral und Religion: Gegensätze und Ergänzungen*, ed. Lothar Waas (Berlin: Dunker and Humboldt, 2004), 223–42; Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant's Second Thoughts on Race," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57, no. 229 (2007): 573–92.
83. Robert Bernasconi notes that while condemning the cruelties of slavery (*Ak* 8:358–59; *Ak* 6:283) and providing ethical instruments with which to combat chattel slavery, Kant never offers an unequivocal condemnation of the institution of slavery. In fact, he goes as far as to define Americans and Africans as "born slaves" (*Ak* 15/2:878). See R. Bernasconi, "Kant as an Unfamiliar Source of Racism," in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 150–52.
84. Mills, "Ideology," 105; Mills, "Kant's Untermenschen," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 169–93. See also Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* (New York and London: Routledge, 2010).
85. Mills, "Ideology," 106.
86. On whiteness as a social, economic, and epistemic system, see Yanci, ed., *What White Looks Like*. See also Anne Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of*

- Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 1995), esp. 149–64, 177–83.
87. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989), chapters 3 and 5.
 88. I. Kant, *Physical Geography* [1802], in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Natural Science*, trans. Olaf Reinhardt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), Ak 9:153–436.
 89. Kant, *Anthropologie Friedländer*, Ak 25: 470; *Anthropologie Pillau*, Ak 25: 733; cited in Loudon, *Kant's Impure Ethics*, 95.
 90. Kant, "Of the Different Human Races" [*Von den verschiedenen Racen der Menschen*, 1775], Ak 2:429–43; "Determination of the Concept of a Human Race [*Bestimmung des Begriffs einer Menschenrace*, 1785]," Ak 8:89–106; "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy" [*Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Principien in Philosophie*, 1788], Ak 8:157–84). Translations of those articles are available in Kant, *Cambridge Edition*, ed. Zöllner and Loudon. The first essay was revised and expanded for a second edition in 1777. Kant also republished his 1785 essay on race in 1795, his 1785 and 1788 essays on race in 1793, and all three essays on race in 1797 and 1799. See Mark Larrimore, "Antinomies of Race: Diversity and Destiny in Kant," *Patterns of Prejudice* 42, nos. 4–5 (2008): 341–63.
 91. Robert Bernasconi presents his case in four separate articles: "Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race," in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Malden, MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 11–36; "Unfamiliar Source," 145–66; "Will the Real Kant Please Stand Up: The Challenge of Enlightenment Racism to the Study of the History of Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 117 (2003): 13–22; and "Kant's Third Thoughts on Race," in *Reading Kant's Geography*, ed. Stuart Elden and Eduardo Mendieta (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 291–318.
 92. Kant, *Physical Geography*, Ak 9:316. On the absolute inferiority of the Native American, which stands even below that of the congenitally lazy "Negro," see also Ak 8:175–76.
 93. I. Kant, *Reflexionen zur Anthropologie*, Ak 15/2:878.
 94. I. Kant, "MS Barth" [1782?], 122. Cited in Werner Stark, "Historical and Philological References on the Question of a Possible Hierarchy of Human 'Races,' 'Peoples,' or 'Populations' in Immanuel Kant—A Supplement," in *Reading Kant's Geography*, ed. Elden and Mendieta, 89.
 95. David Harvey, "Cosmopolitanism in the *Anthropology* and *Geography*," in *Reading Kant's Geography*, ed. Elden and Mendieta, 276.
 96. A. F. Büsching, *A New System of Geography*, 6 vols. (London: A. Millar, 1792), 1:48; quoted in Charles W. J. Mills, "Kant's Geography in Comparative Perspective," in *Reading Kant's Geography*, ed. Elden and Mendieta, 55.
 97. Bernasconi, "Unfamiliar Source," 158.
 98. In addition to Kant's 1775 essay (Ak 2:431), his 1785 essay (Ak 8:105), and his 1788 essay (Ak 8:166–67), we should mention *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Ak 7:320.
 99. I will return to the (unstable and questionable) opposition between rationality and magical or superstitious thinking in chapter 3. For now, I am concerned to show how rationality, while opposed to superstition, is not immune from stupidity.
 100. Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, *Histoire naturelle: Histoire de l'âne*, ed. C. S. Sonnimi (Paris, 1808), 22:279 ff. Kant's familiarity with Buffon's *Natural History*

- from the early 1750s is evident in his *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens; or, Essay on the Constitution and the Mechanical Origin of the Whole Universe* [1755], Ak 1:219–368; and *History and Natural Description of the Most Noteworthy Occurrences of the Earthquake that Struck a Large Part of the Earth at the End of the Year* [1756], Ak 1:419–61, trans. Olaf Reinhardt, in *Cambridge Edition: Natural Science*.
101. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault claims that Linnaeus and Buffon share the same epistemic grid—that of a taxonomic space of visibility, which itself made possible, and indeed privileged, the world of plants over that of other organisms. See Foucault, *Order of Things*, 148–50.
 102. On the difference between narration and description, see Kant's introduction to *Physical Geography*, Ak 9:159.
 103. I. Kant, "Of the Different Races of Human Beings," Ak 2:429. To avoid any misunderstanding, it is important to emphasize that while Kant understands Linnaeus and the school divisions to operate with classes, he does not understand the concept of class in the strict Linnaean sense—that is, as coming immediately after the Phylum (say, Chordata for the dog and the wolf, but also the fish and the rabbit) and immediately before the Order (say, Carnivora for the dog, but also for the wolf, yet no longer for the fish and the rabbit). Similarly, Kant's use of the concept of phylum or *Stamm* is broad, and designates genetic lineage as such. This departure from the taxonomy of Linnaeus, based on five levels (kingdom, class, order, genus, and species), with which Kant was familiar, is of course important, given the extreme popularity of Linnaeus' work. *Systema Naturae* grew from eleven very large pages in the first edition (1735) to 2,400 pages in the 12th edition (1766–1768). The third edition appeared in Halle in 1740 in a German-Latin text and quickly led to a consensus in German circles regarding "the possibility of a rigorous systematization of nature according to a hierarchy of logical classes" (Phillip R. Sloan, "Buffon, German Biology, and the Historical Interpretation of Biological Species," *The British Journal for the History of Science* 12, no. 2. [July 1979]: 122). The German reception of Buffon's work, by contrast, was initially cold and seen as a misplaced criticism of Linnaean taxonomy.
 104. Kant, "Concept of a Human Race," Ak 8:100n.
 105. Richard Hinchliffe, "Toward a Homology of Process: Evolutionary Implications of Experimental Studies on the Generation of Skeletal Pattern in Avian Limb Development," in *Organisational Constraints on the Dynamics of Evolution*, ed. J. Maynard Smith and G. Vida (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 123.
 106. Georges-Louis Leclerc, comte de Buffon, *Ceuvres philosophiques*, ed. Jean Piveteau (Paris: PUF, 1954), 195; cited in Sloan, "Buffon, German Biology," 118.
 107. Buffon, *Ceuvres philosophiques*.
 108. Buffon, *Histoire naturelle de l'homme*, in *Ceuvres philosophiques*, 313.
 109. Kant, "Concept of a Human Race," Ak 8:93.
 110. Kant, 97.
 111. T. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1962), 99.
 112. One source, which Kant quotes (Ak 8:103–4), is the Italian chemist Abbot Felice Fontana, author of *Recherches physiques sur la nature de l'air nitreux et de l'air déphlogistiqué* (Paris: Nyon, 1776).
 113. Suman Seth, *Difference and Disease: Medicine, Race, and the Eighteenth-Century British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 269. Seth mentions works by the British colonial jurist and plantation owner Edward Long, author of a *History of Jamaica* in three volumes (1774); the physician Johann Peter Schotte, author of

- articles and a treatise on diseases in Western Africa; and the physician Alexander Wilson, author of *Some Observations Relative to the Influence of Climate on Vegetables and Animal Bodies* (1780). The latter, like Kant, and very much at the same time, attributed skin color to the discharge of phlogiston through the skin.
114. J. G. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, *Werke in zehn Bänden*, vol. 6, ed. Martin Bollacher (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1989). Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* were originally published in three parts in 1784, 1785, and 1787. For Kant's review, see I. Kant, "Review of J. G. Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*" [1785], trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Cambridge Edition*, ed. Zöllner and Louden, *Ak* 8:43–66. For a nuanced assessment of Herder's position and its proximity to Kant's on the evolution of human types, see Sonia Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference: Enlightened Relativism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chapter 4 ("The Concept of Race"). I have drawn extensively on Sikka's scholarship.
 115. Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie*, 255.
 116. Sikka, *Herder on Humanity*, 153. See Kant, "On the Different Races of Humanity," *Ak* 2:438; and "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy," *Ak* 8:174. See also Georg Forster, "Noch etwas über die Menschenrasse," in *Georg Forsters Werke: Sämtliche Schriften, Tagebücher, Briefe* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958–), vol. 8; Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, "Contributions to Natural History," Part I [1806], in *The Anthropological Treatises of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach*, trans. Thomas Bendyshe (Boston: Milford House, 1973), 303–8.
 117. I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Ak* 5: 8.
 118. Beth Lord, *Kant and Spinozism: Transcendental Idealism and Immanence from Jacobi to Deleuze* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 70. See I. Kant, *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, *Ak* 4:544.
 119. I. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, in *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), *Ak* 5: 375.
 120. Lord, *Kant and Spinozism*, 70.
 121. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, *Ak* 5: 421.
 122. Kant, "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy," *Ak* 8:162 (emphasis added).
 123. Lord, *Kant and Spinozism*, 79.
 124. Lord, 81.
 125. Lord, 82.
 126. Lord, 82–83.
 127. Lord, 83–84.
 128. Sean Carroll, Jennifer K. Grenier, and Scott D. Weatherbee, *From DNA to Diversity: Molecular Genetics and the Evolution of Animal Design*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).
 129. Lord, *Kant and Spinozism*, 95.
 130. Spinoza develops a very similar argument in the preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*.
 131. F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), § 109:167–68. Hereafter cited in the text as GS.
 132. I. Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim" [1784], trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Cambridge Edition*, ed. Zöllner and Louden, *Ak* 8:21.
 133. I. Kant, "Conjectural Beginning of Human History" [1786], trans. Allen W. Wood, in *Cambridge Edition*, ed. Zöllner and Louden, *Ak* 8:115.

134. Kant, "Universal History," *Ak* 8:29.
135. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 569/B 598.
136. Kant, "Idea for a Universal History," *Ak* 8:21.
137. Kant, "Review of Herder," *Ak* 8:65.
138. J. G. Herder, cited in Kant, "Review of Herder," *Ak* 8:64.
139. F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 136.
140. David Biello, "Researchers Identify Human Skin Color Gene," *Scientific American*, December 16, 2005, <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/researchers-identify-huma/>.
141. W. E. B. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn: An Essay Toward and Autobiography of a Race Concept*, in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1986), 551.
142. W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Writings*, ed. Huggins, 363.
143. Du Bois, 372.
144. Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*, 551.
145. Du Bois, 649, 650.
146. Du Bois, 654.
147. Du Bois, 704–6.
148. Du Bois, 623–24.
149. Du Bois, 654.
150. Du Bois, 596.
151. Du Bois, 556.
152. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, 6th ed. (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1975), 394.
153. Darwin, 118.
154. Darwin, 118.
155. Paul Antoine Miquel, *Comment penser le désordre?* (Paris: Fayard, 2000), 268–69.

CHAPTER TWO

1. Voltaire, "Superstition," in *Dictionnaire philosophique ou la raison par l'alphabet*, ed. Christiane Mervaud, vol. 35 of *Ceuvres complètes* (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1994 [1764]), 36.
2. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trans. A. J. Krailsheimer (New York: Penguin, 1966), L 364/B 249.
3. H. S. Versnel, "Desidaimonia," in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, online publication, December 2015, <https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-2073>. Sources include Xenophon, *Agésilas*, in *Scripta Minora*, trans. E. C. Marchant and G. W. Bowersock (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1968 [1925]), 2:1–2, 8; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, Volume 1: Books I–IV, trans. Walter Miller (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1914), 3:3.58; Aristotle, "Politics," in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, vol. 2, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. Benjamin Jowett (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 1314b39–1315a4.
4. See Theophrastus, "The Superstitious Man" (*Desidaimon*), in *Characters*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Rusten and I. C. Cunningham (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2003), character 16; Plutarch, "On Superstition [*Peri Desidaimonias*]," in *Moralia*, Volume II, trans. Frank Cole Babbitt (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1989), 452–95.
5. See Mary Beard, John North, and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome, Volume 1, A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 216.

6. Plutarch, *Moralia*, 164E.
7. John Scheid, "Superstitio," in *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, online publication, March 2016, <https://oxfordre.com/classics/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.001.0001/acrefore-9780199381135-e-6150>.
8. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Volume VI: Books 20–23, trans. W. H. Jones (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1969), 22:56.118.
9. Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, Volume II: Books 8–10. *Panegyricus*, trans. Betty Radice (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1969), 10.96.
10. Tacitus, *Annals: Books 13–16*, trans. John Jackson (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1937), 15.44.
11. Suetonius, *Lives of the Caesars*, Volume II, Book 6: *Nero*, trans. J. C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1997), 16.2 See also Dale B. Martin, *Inventing Superstition: From the Hippocratics to the Christians* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 1–3.
12. Lucretius, *De Rerum natura*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1992). Hereafter cited in text as *De Rerum*, followed by volume and page numbers.
13. G. Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," in *Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 272.
14. Deleuze, 273.
15. Francis Bacon, "Of Superstition," in *The Oxford Authors: Francis Bacon*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 373.
16. Pierre Bayle, *Various Thoughts on the Occasion of a Comet* [1683], ed. Robert C. Bartlett (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 79. See also Chiara Bottici, *Filosofia del mito politico* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2012), 76–77, 151–53. Like Bottici, I will be concerned to explore the political consequences as well as the limits of this critique of superstition.
17. Bayle, *Various Thoughts*, 15.
18. Jean le Rond d'Alembert, *Essai sur les éléments de philosophie* (Paris: Fayard, 1989 [1759]), 116–17; Voltaire, *Homélies prononcées à Londres en 1765* [1767], in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 62, ed. Jacqueline Marchand, Roland Mortier, and John Renwick (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1987). Voltaire's second *homélie* is on superstition.
19. Louis, chevalier de Jaucourt, "Superstition," in *The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project*, trans. Erik Liddell (Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2010), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0000.62> (accessed June 1, 2020) ; originally published as "Superstition," in *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* (Paris, 1765), 15:669.
20. Jaucourt, 15: 669.
21. For a contemporary attack on superstition, especially religious superstition, from a rationalist and science-based perspective, see Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2006), as well as the 2007 television documentary, *Enemies of Reason*, the first episode of which is titled "Slaves to Superstition." The episode begins with the words "Science frees us from superstition" and later claims that "reason is facing an epidemic of irrational superstitious thinking" that "impoverishes our culture."
22. S. Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* [1901], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage/The Hogarth Press, 2001), 6:259. Hereafter cited as *SE*, followed by volume and page numbers.

23. SE, 6:260. On the connection between superstition and obsessional neurosis, see also *Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* [1909], SE 10: esp. 229–36; *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13:28, 86–87.
24. Freud, SE 13:87.
25. Wilhelm Max Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie Teil II: Mythos und Religion*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1906).
26. Freud, SE 13:97.
27. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, in SE 23:134.
28. Freud, SE 23.
29. Freud, SE 23.
30. Freud, SE 23.
31. Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, SE 21:47, 49.
32. Freud, SE 21:49.
33. Freud, SE 21.
34. Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, SE 21:113.
35. Cathy Lynn Grossman, "Religion Colors Money Views; Survey Reveals Many See God Steering Economy, Government as Meddlers," *USA Today*, September 20, 2011; Ryan Avent, "'Deus ex Machina': Faith in the Free Market," *The Economist*, September 20, 2011, <https://www.economist.com/blogs/freeexchange/2011/09/deus-ex-machina>. Cited in Bernard E. Harcourt, *Critique & Praxis: A Critical Philosophy of Illusions, Values, and Action* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 213.
36. I will return to this connection in detail. For now, let me say that Althusser sees in Spinoza the first theorist of ideology and one who, as we'll see, enables him to arrive at his own concept of ideology, which supplements and complicates that of Marx. See L. Althusser, "The Only Materialist Tradition, Part I: Spinoza," trans. Ted Stolze, in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Warren Montag and Ted Stolze (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); *On the Reproduction of Capitalism*, trans. G. M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2014), 172n, 192. Preliminarily, and minimally, let us say that if this connection is legitimate, then philosophy cannot, as Marx once believed, be understood solely as ideology, and it has a crucial role to play in the critique of ideology, without standing simply outside it, *de jure* as it were.
37. Those terms were introduced during the Scottish independence referendum of 2014 and the Brexit referendum of 2016.
38. Benedict de Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. Silverstone and Israel, *TTP* Pref.: 10. The standard critical edition of Spinoza's Latin works is Benedict de Spinoza, *Opera*, ed. Carl Gebhardt, 4 vols. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1925). Here and hereafter all page citations for Spinoza's work will be to the Gebhardt edition. Further citations of the *Theological-Political Treatise* will quote the English translation in Silverstone and Israel, and the chapter and page numbers I provide will be to the Gebhardt edition—for example, *TTP* 1:27.
39. Benedict de Spinoza, *A Political Treatise*, in *A Theologico-Political Treatise, and A Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005). Hereafter cited as *TP*, followed by chapter and paragraph numbers from the Gebhardt edition of Spinoza's works. For example, *TP* 5:6.
40. Quintus Curtius, *History of Alexander*, trans. John C. Rolfe (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1946), book 4, 10:7. Spinoza cites Curtius in *TTP*, Pref. 8. Bayle also cites Curtius, and develops an argument similar to that of Spinoza: "Statesmen foment the superstition of presages . . . either to intimidate subjects or to fill them with confidence" (Bayle, *Various Thoughts*, 99).

41. Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). Cited hereafter as *De Cive*.
42. Ludwig Feuerbach, *Lectures on the Essence of Religion*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 219.
43. Susan James, *Spinoza on Philosophy, Religion and Politics: The Theological-Political Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 31.
44. James, 31.
45. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985). Cited hereafter as *E* followed by part number; then proposition, definition, axiom, or appendix; then scholium, demonstration, or corollary.
46. Jason Read, "The Order and Connection of Ideas: Theoretical Practice in Pierre Macherey's Turn to Spinoza," *Rethinking Marxism* 19, no. 4 (2007): 510.
47. Read, 510.
48. Read, 510.
49. Read, 510.
50. Read, 512.
51. Read, 512.
52. Pascal, *Pensées*, L 944/B 250.
53. Pascal, L 364/B 249.
54. See Michael A. Rosenthal, "Why Spinoza Chose the Hebrews: The Exemplary Function of Prophecy in the *Theological-Political Treatise*," in *Spinoza: Critical Assessments*, ed. Genevieve Lloyd (London: Routledge, 2001), 3:245–81.
55. For details, see James, *Spinoza on Philosophy* chapter 1; Wiep van Bunge, *An Essay in Philosophy in the Seventeenth-Century Dutch Republic* (Leiden: Brill, 2001); Herbert H. Rowen, *John De Witt, Grand Pensionary of Holland, 1625–1672* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978).
56. See Steven Nadler, *Spinoza: A Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 170.
57. For a subtle defense of the production of myths in the context of the critique of political rationality, closely related to Spinoza's argument, see Bottici, *Filosofia*, 153–54, 180–92, 205–6.
58. Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 36–52.
59. See, in particular, *TTP* chapter 5. On Spinoza and the secularization of the notion of sacred history, see Y. Yovel, "Spinoza on History and its Secularization," *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 34 (2013): 97–109.
60. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, SE 23:107.
61. Freud, 123.
62. Freud, 106, 123. On religion as a (useful) illusion, see Freud, *The Future of an Illusion* [1927], SE 21:30.
63. Freud, SE 23:113.
64. Freud, 115.
65. On instinctual renunciation as the root of civilization, see Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, SE 21:10.
66. Freud, SE 23:117.
67. Freud, 106.
68. Freud, SE 21:127.
69. Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, SE 13:22, emphasis added.

70. Freud, *SE* 21:122.
71. Freud, 122.
72. L. Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," trans. Ben Brewster, in *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (London: New Left Books, 1971), 127–86. Now also reproduced in L. Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2014), 232–72. References will be to the latter edition.
73. L. Althusser, "Spinoza," in *The New Spinoza*, ed. Montag and Stolze, 8; *Reproduction of Capitalism*, 259–65, 268–69n.
74. Read, "Order and Connection," 513.
75. The fact that, in the age of information capitalism, the subject herself has become the commodity, and her data—her face, habits, preferences, desires, interests, thoughts, fears, hopes, friends and family connections, et cetera—the value that can be endlessly exchanged and turned into surplus behavioral value, certainly complicates the Marxist picture. But it doesn't render it invalid. On the contrary, it signals the (perhaps last) frontier of a long process of reification, which culminates in the commodification of life itself, construed as "experience." We used to think of search engines as tools to look for information and connect with an increasingly global community. We have now realized that we are the ones being searched, the information being tracked, monitored, packaged and monetized. See Alexander Halavais, *Search Engine Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 32–34; Bernard E. Harcourt, *Exposed: Desire and Disobedience in the Digital Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (London: Profile, 2019).
76. Karl Marx, *Differenz der demokratischen und epikureischen Naturphilosophie*, in *Karl Marx–Friedrich Engels Werke*, 40 vols. (Berlin: Dietz, 1968), 40:299–300. *Marx–Engels Werke* will hereafter be cited as *MEW* followed by volume and page numbers.
77. Karl Marx, Preface to *A Contribution to Political Economy*, in *Early Writings*, trans. Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin, 1992), 425.
78. *MEW* 3:26.
79. *MEW* 3:26–27.
80. Feuerbach, *Lectures*, 219.
81. Feuerbach, 219.
82. Lenin, "Socialism and Religion," in *Lenin Collected Works*, 45 vols. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 10:87. See also Delos B. McKown, *The Classical Marxist Critiques of Religion: Marx, Engels, Lenin, Kautsky* (Nijmegen: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975), 96–97.
83. K. Marx, "Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*" [1844], in *Early Writings*, 261.
84. Marx, 262.
85. Marx, 262.
86. Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts" [1844], in *Early Writings*, 342.
87. Marx, 342.
88. Marx, 342.
89. Marx, 342.
90. Marx, 342.
91. Marx, "Excerpts from Mill," 261.
92. Marx, 261.
93. Marx, 269.
94. Marx, 277.
95. Marx, 277.

96. Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 325.
97. Marx, 375.
98. Marx, 377.
99. W. Shakespeare, *Timon Of Athens*, in *The Complete Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), act 4, sc. 3.
100. Marx, *Early Writings*, 378.
101. Marx, 378–79.
102. K. Marx, *Das Kapital: Kritik der politischen Ökonomie. Buch I: Der Produktionsprozeß des Kapitals*, in MEW 23:85; K. Marx, *Capital: Volume 1*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 163. Hereafter *Capital, Volume 1* will be cited as MEW 23, followed by the German pagination from MEW and the English pagination from the Penguin translation.
103. MEW 23:85, 89/164, 168, translation modified.
104. MEW 23:88/166.
105. J. Rancière, "Le concept de critique et la critique de l'économie politique des 'Manuscrits de 1844' au 'Capital,'" in L. Althusser, E. Balibar, R. Establet, P. Macherey, and J. Rancière, *Lire Le Capital* (Paris: PUF, 1965), 117.
106. Marx, *Zur Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* [1859], in MEW 13:7.
107. Marx, MEW 13:2.
108. MEW 23:85/163.
109. MEW 23:86/164.
110. MEW 23:86/164.
111. K. Marx, *Das Kapital: Bd. III*, in MEW 25:835; K. Marx, *Capital: Volume III*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1991), 965–66, my emphasis. Hereafter *Capital* vol. 3 will be cited as MEW 25, followed by the German pagination from MEW and the English pagination from the Penguin translation.
112. MEW 25:835/966.
113. MEW 25:836/967.
114. MEW 25:837/968.
115. MEW 25:836/968.
116. MEW 25:837/968.
117. MEW 25:837/968.
118. MEW 25:838/969, emphasis added.
119. MEW 25:404/515, translation modified.
120. MEW 25:405/516.
121. MEW 25:412/523, translation modified.
122. MEW 25:406/516, translation modified.
123. Joseph Schumpeter, *The Theory of Economic Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 126; *Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1951), 170.
124. MEW 25:362/471.
125. MEW 25:356/465.
126. MEW 25:405/516, translation modified.
127. J. Rancière, "Le concept de critique," 181.
128. Lacan, *Le Séminaire, livre XVI: D'un Autre à l'autre (1968–1969)* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2006), March 5, 1969.
129. Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Sheridan (London & New York: Routledge, 2018), 301.

130. Samo Tomšič, *The Capitalist Unconscious* (London: Verso, 2015), 215.
131. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XVII: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis 1969–1970*, trans. and annotated R. Grigg (New York: Norton, 2007), 124.
132. J. Lacan, "Radiophonie: Réponses à sept questions posées par M. Robert Georgin pour la radiodiffusion belge, 1970," in *Autres écrits* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2001), 434.
133. Lacan, "Radiophonie," 435.
134. Lacan, 435.
135. Slavoj Žižek, *Incontinence of the Void: Economico-Philosophical Spandrels* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2017), 167.
136. MEW 23:192/528–29, 283/637–38; MEW 25:821/949.
137. For a detailed and critical discussion of the commentators who ground their accusation of Marx as glorifying the human conquest of nature in its quest for self-realization in *The Communist Manifesto*, see Joseph Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 133–40.
138. See Paul Burkett, *Marx and Nature: A Red and Green Perspective* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, and *The Return of Nature: Socialism and Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2020); Paul Burkett and Joseph Bellamy Foster, *Marx and the Earth: An Anti-Critique* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).
139. K. Marx, *Ökonomische Manuskripte 1857/1858*, in MEW 42:321–22; K. Marx, *Grundrisse, or Outlines of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), 408, translation modified. Subsequent citations of this work will give German pagination from MEW and English pagination from the Penguin edition.
140. MEW 42:323/409.
141. MEW 42:323/409.
142. Heidegger's position is very close to that of Marx, and his assessment of the project of modernity as bound up with what he calls the "scientific projection of nature" echoes the Marxist critique. Unlike Marx, however, Heidegger attributes this tendency and epochal shift not to capitalism *per se*, but to an inflection point within the history of being, the roots of which, he claims, can be found in the covering up and forgetting of the *essence* of being as concealment and sheltering. Capitalism and communism, he claims, are in this respect two sides of the same coin—that is, of the will to subjugate nature and unleash the human will to power. See M. Heidegger, *Beiträge zur Philosophie*, vol. 65 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), §§ 50–80; *Metaphysik und Nihilismus*, vol. 67 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1999), §§ 131–42; *Die Geschichte des Seyns*, vol. 69 of *Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1998), §§ 37–68; "Die Frage nach der Technik" and "Wissenschaft und Besinnung," in *Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Stuttgart: Günther Neske, 1954).
143. MEW 42:323/409.
144. MEW 42:323/409.
145. MEW 42:323/409.
146. MEW 42:323/409.
147. MEW 42:323–24/409, translation modified.
148. See Joseph Bellamy Foster, "The Epochal Crisis: Converging Economic and Ecological Contradictions," *Monthly Review* 65, no. 5 (October 2013).
149. MEW 23:529/638.

150. R. Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, in *Œuvres*, ed. André Bridoux (Paris: Gallimard, 1953), 168.
151. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What Is Property?* ed. Donald R. Kelly and Bonnie G. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 96–97.
152. Althusser, *Reproduction of Capitalism*, 236.
153. Althusser, 254.
154. Althusser, 254.
155. Althusser, 254.
156. Althusser, 254.
157. Althusser, 255.
158. Althusser, 242. The reference is to Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 259–63; see also Gramsci's letter to Tatiana Schucht, 7 September 1931, in *Lettere del carcere* (Turin: Einaudi, 1968), 479.
159. Althusser, *Reproduction of Capitalism*, 245.
160. Althusser, 251.
161. Althusser, 256.
162. Althusser, 256.
163. Althusser, 256.
164. Althusser, 257, emphasis added.
165. Althusser, 257.
166. Althusser, 258.
167. Althusser, 258.
168. Althusser, 259.
169. Pascal, *Pensées*, B 252, L 821, emphasis added.
170. Althusser, *Reproduction of Capitalism*, 262.
171. Althusser, 263.
172. Althusser, 261, 262.
173. Althusser, 227.
174. Althusser, 228.
175. Tomšič, *Capitalist Unconscious*, 89–91. Psychoanalysis, Tomšič argues, suffered a similar fate “when the Post-Freudians recentered the subject on the ego and deduced from Freud’s *Wo es war soll Ich werden* an imperative of normalisation” largely implemented through the International Psychoanalytic Association, “the psychoanalytic equivalent of the Stalinist Party” (91). It is the same subject—namely, the subject of ego psychology, institutionalized and normalized—which Deleuze and Guattari target in *Anti-Oedipus*, and to which they oppose the “true” subject of desire in the form of the schizophrenic.
176. Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, trans. Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 53.

CHAPTER THREE

1. Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Notes from Underground*, trans. Ralph E. Matlaw (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1960). Hereafter cited in the text as *Notes* with page number.
2. The expression is Coleridge's. See Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808–1819: On Literature*, vol. 5 of *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. R. A. Foakes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1987), 315.
3. Mario Vincentini, *Al principio era l'odio* (Turin: Einaudi, 1949).

4. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno: The Divine Comedy I*, trans. and ed. Robin Kirkpatrick (London: Penguin Classics, 2010), canto 3:5–6.
5. F. Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 1, § 1. Hereafter cited as *GM*.
6. Friedrich Nietzsche: *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin and New York/Munich: dtv and Walter de Gruyter, 1967–77 and 1998), 10:5 [1] 20. Hereafter cited as *KSA* followed by volume and page numbers.
7. *KSA* 10:7 [9].
8. F. Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), § 13. Hereafter cited as *GS* followed by section number.
9. Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 3, Def. 1. Cited hereafter as *E* followed by part number; then proposition, definition, axiom, or appendix; then scholium, demonstration, or corollary.
10. For a long time, and to this day, *triste*, the word for “sad” in various romance languages (Italian, French, Spanish), carried the sense of base, contemptible, despicable, and malicious. See, for example, Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais* (Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 1965), book 1, chapter 2.
11. F. Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 57:191. Hereafter cited as *AC* followed by volume and page numbers.
12. F. Nietzsche, “Homers Wettkampf,” in *KSA* 1:783–92; “‘Homer’s Contest’ by Friedrich Nietzsche,” trans. C. Acampora, in *Nietzscheana* 5 (Urbana, IL: North America Nietzsche Society, 1996). Acampora’s translation is preceded by a useful introduction, “Re/Introducing ‘Homer’s Contest,’” i–iv.
13. *KSA* 1:787.
14. F. Nietzsche, “The Wanderer and His Shadow,” in *Human, All Too Human (II)*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), § 29. Hereafter cited as *HH2*.
15. *KSA* 13:15 [113].
16. *KSA* 13:15 [113].
17. *KSA* 13:11 [54].
18. *KSA* 12:10 [109].
19. *KSA* 12:10 [83].
20. *KSA* 13:15 [113].
21. See Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 134.
22. Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984), 128–29, emphasis added. Also by Lorde, see “A Poem for Women in Rage,” *The Iowa Review* 12, no. 2 (1981): 220–22. Further positive accounts from feminist philosophers of anger as emotional responses to male oppression include Marilyn Frye, “A Note on Anger,” in *The Politics of Reality* (Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1983); Elizabeth Spelman, “Anger and Insubordination,” in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*, ed. Ann Gary and Marilyn Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).
23. In that respect, I disagree with Martha Nussbaum’s claim in chapter 2 of *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, Justice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016) that anger is necessarily bound up with retribution, and retribution with resentment. From a Nietzschean perspective, the taming of the Furies, and their transformation into the “kindly ones” (or Eumenides), can only be a decadent deception, animated

by the desire for *delayed* revenge. If anything, I want to show how resentment is rooted not in anger *per se*, but in the specific form of anger that is purely reactive, imaginary, and vindictive. Lorde makes the same point by focusing on the positive side of anger: “The angers of women can transform difference into power. For anger between peers births change, not destruction, and the discomfort and sense of loss it often causes is not fatal, but a sign of growth” (“Uses of Anger,” 131).

24. Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit*, 134.
25. Adam Smith, *The Glasgow Edition of the Works and Correspondence of Adam Smith*, vol. 1, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. D. Raphael and A. L. Macfie (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 2.3.1.1. Hereafter cited in text as MS followed by volume, section, and page numbers.
26. Benedict de Spinoza, *Short Treatise on God, Man and his Well-Being*, in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume 1*, ed. and trans. Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985), 2.6.1 and 2.6.5.
27. F. Nietzsche, “Mixed Opinions and Maxims,” HH2 62. See also *Human, All Too Human*, trans. Gary Handwerk (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), § 321 and § 499 (hereafter cited as HH1); and GS § 338.
28. See E 4, Props. 7 and 14. See also Spinoza’s reply to Willem van Blyenbergh, 5 January 1665 (Letter 19), in *The Collected Works of Spinoza, Volume 2*.
29. F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ed. Rolf-Peter Hortsman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 22. Hereafter cited as BGE followed by page number. See also F. Nietzsche, *Dawn: Thoughts on the Presumptions of Morality*, trans. Brittain Smith (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), § 456.
30. This appreciation of Epicurus is (rightly) contested. See Joseph Vincenzo, “Nietzsche and Epicurus,” *Man and World* 27 (1994): 383–97.
31. KSA 12:9 [35].
32. KSA 7:1 [217].
33. KSA 12:9 [35].
34. F. Nietzsche, “What I Owe to the Ancients,” in *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 1990), 120. Volume cited hereafter as TI followed by page number.
35. This question, which I leave to one side for the moment, will turn out to be decisive: *ressentiment*, as we’ll see, is really a hatred of time itself.
36. TI 121.
37. KSA 12:10 [118].
38. KSA 11:36 [49].
39. KSA 12:10 [128].
40. F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969). Hereafter cited as TSZ followed by page number.
41. KSA 12:10 [21].
42. KSA 13:14 [89].
43. KSA 13:15 [30].
44. I will return to indignation, especially as a political affect, in my discussion of Spinoza’s *Political Treatise*.
45. KSA 13:14 [119].
46. KSA 13:14 [47].
47. KSA 12:10 [168].
48. See BGE 62; GM 3, § 15, § 17.
49. KSA 13:14 [29].

50. KSA 12:8 [4].
51. Guy Elgat, *Nietzsche's Psychology of Ressentiment: Revenge and Justice in On The Genealogy of Morals* (London: Routledge, 2017), 86.
52. Elgat, 86.
53. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Exchange in Archaic Societies* [1950], translated by W. D. Halls (London: Routledge, 1990).
54. In addition to Mauss's 1950 essay, already mentioned, see Andrew Lang, *The Secret of the Totem* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1905); James George Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1910); S. Freud, *Totem and Taboo: Some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* [1913], in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Vintage/The Hogarth Press, 2001), vol. 13; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship* [1949/1967], rev. ed., trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
55. The Aztecs, for example, sacrificed hundreds of human lives at times, without any bad conscience, any sense of guilt, and with the greatest respect and gratitude for the victims, because they were to be united with the totem.
56. See Simon McCarthy-Jones, *Spite . . . and the Upside of Your Dark Side* (London: One-world Publications, 2020).
57. David K. Marcus, Virgil Zeigler-Hill, Sterett H. Mercer, and Alyssa L. Norris, "The Psychology of Spite and the Measurement of Spitefulness," *Psychological Assessment*, February 17, 2014, Advance Online Publication, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0036039>.
58. KSA 10:364 [97].
59. See Francis Fukuyama, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness*; Didier Fassin, "On Resentment and *Ressentiment*: The Politics and Ethics of Moral Emotions," *Current Anthropology* 54, no. 3 (June 2013): 249–67; Jacqueline Taylor, "Resentment, Sympathy, and Indignation," *Humana: Mente Journal of Philosophical Studies* 35 (2019): 1–17. I have already voiced my reservations regarding Nussbaum's take on resentment. I will discuss Fassin and Taylor in the following section. As for Fukuyama's book, it lacks serious engagement with resentment as a political affect and fails to define its meaning.
60. KSA 13:11 [148]; KSA 11:37 [177].
61. KSA 13:14 [29].
62. See Mikhail Bakunin, *Political Philosophy: Scientific Anarchism*, ed. G. P. Maximoff (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1984), 121; Bakunin, *God and the State* (New York: Dover, 1970), 37–40; Peter Kropotkin, *Ethics: Origin and Development* (New York: Tudor, 1947), 14; Kropotkin, *The State: Its Historic Role* (London: Freedom Press, 1946), 12.
63. In his criticisms, Nietzsche is never explicit about which anarchists he has in mind. There is evidence that his knowledge of Stirner's individualist version of anarchism was only indirect, and based on Friedrich Albert Lange's *The History of Materialism and a Critique of its Value in the Present Period* (Iserlohn, 1866)—see Albert Lévy, *Stirner et Nietzsche* (Paris: Société nouvelle de librairie et d'édition, 1904), chapter 1. But it's not clear that Stirner's version of anarchism is the one that Nietzsche is critical of. On the other hand, Nietzsche's knowledge of Lasalle and Bakunin was firsthand; it dates from his early Basel years as well as his correspondence with Wagner, who had been involved in the revolution of 1848 in Dresden alongside the young Russian anarchist. See Nicolás González Varela, *Nietzsche contra la democracia: El pensamiento*

- político de Friedrich Nietzsche (1862–1872)* (Madrid: Montesinos, 2010), 97, 105, 118. In a note from the *Nachlass* from 1873, Nietzsche speaks of Bakunin's "hatred of the present" and his wish "to erase history and the past" (quoted in González Varela, 106–7).
64. KSA 4:16 [29].
 65. KSA 4:16 [29].
 66. Bakunin, *Political Philosophy*, 248.
 67. Saul Newman, "Anarchism and the Politics of *Ressentiment*," in *I Am not a Man I am Dynamite: Friedrich Nietzsche and the Anarchist Tradition*, ed. John Moore (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 117–18.
 68. Alexandre Matheron, "L'indignation et le conatus de l'État spinoziste," in *Spinoza: Puissance et ontologie*, ed. M. Revault d'Allonnes and H. Rizk (Paris: Kimé, 1994), 219–29.
 69. Stéphane Hessel, *Indignez-vous!* (Montpellier: Indigène éditions, 2010). Philip Roth's *Indignation* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2008) was published two years before Hessel's opuscul. It is an ambiguous, open-ended, and ultimately very Spinozist book. It describes the futile and destructive chain of sad passions, including indignation, which Roth's narrator describes (somewhat enigmatically) as "the most beautiful word of the English language" (95). At the same time, the indignation the young college student and main character, Marcus Messner, feels when confronted with the implicit but tangible anti-Semitism of the Dean of men, and the bigotry of the deeply Christian ethos of Winesburg College, appears as the only adequate response, despite the fact that it inevitably leads Messner to drop out of his Ohio college, to be drafted into the US Army to fight in the Korean War, and to be killed after a few months. In a recent interview, the French economist turned Spinozist F. Lordon draws our attention to the fact that while it is a sad passion that combines anger and hatred, indignation is sometimes the only possible reaction, and, all things considered, the least bad option. See Frédéric Lordon and Michaël Foessel, "Les puissances de l'indignation," *Esprit* 423, nos. 3/4 (March–April 2016): 167–77.
 70. KSA 7:19 [26]. Nietzsche also writes: "Create for yourselves the concept of a 'people' [Volk]: you can never conceive it to be noble and lofty enough" — *Unfashionable Observations*, trans. Richard T. Gray (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 2:7. My thanks to Keith Ansell-Pearson for the references.
 71. Matheron, "L'indignation," 228.
 72. Reason, Spinoza argues, "can indeed do much to control and moderate the passions; but at the same time the path taught by reason is a very difficult one, so that those who believe that ordinary people or those who are busily engaged in public business can be persuaded to live solely at reason's behest are dreaming of the poet's golden age or of a fairy tale" — *A Political Treatise*, in *A Theologico-Political Treatise, and A Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2005), 1:5; hereafter cited as *TP* followed by volume and page numbers. In the meantime, politics is the realm of passions, and requires that we distinguish between different kinds of passions, and even between different kinds of sad passions. In that respect, and as Roth's novel indicates, indignation is better than blind submission or regret.
 73. Elgat, *Nietzsche's Psychology*, 114.
 74. On the complex question of the relation between *ressentiment* and justice, see Elgat, *Nietzsche's Psychology*. Elgat offers a "thin" reading of *ressentiment*, which makes this "instinctive, hateful and aggressive reaction to a feeling of displeasure" one that

“consummates itself in acts of revenge,” blind to “matters of justice,” and in fact wholly incompatible with “the attainment of justice” (4). My own reading, which is perhaps less “thin” and ultimately aims to distinguish between spite and *ressentiment* as two expressions of vindictiveness, suggests that Nietzsche *does* allow for a connection between *ressentiment* and justice, while—and in this sense I agree entirely with Elgat—seeing justice in the strong and full (or nonmoral sense) sense as the product not of “weakness, *ressentiment* of reactivity,” but of “strength, the overcoming of *ressentiment* and activity” (8). In that respect, I see ways of bridging the gap Jacqueline Taylor draws in “Resentment, Sympathy, and Indignation” between Nietzsche (as well as Spinoza and Scheler) and the “champions” of resentment (Butler, Hume, Smith, and Strawson). The problem with Elgat’s overall argument, as I see it, is that it never distinguishes (at least explicitly) between what is right, what is fair, and what is just, or, for that matter, between justice in a moral sense and justice in a purely legal sense.

75. See Elgat, *Nietzsche’s Psychology*, chapter 6.
76. Spinoza, *E 3*, Prop. 22, Schol.; *E 3*, Def. of emotions, 20; *E 4*, Prop. 51, Schol.
77. *HH1* 92, translation modified. Nietzsche expresses a very similar position in an early note from the spring of 1877, titled “Socialism”: “It is only when the representatives of the future order will confront in struggle [*im Kampfe gegenüberstehen*] those of the old order, and when both powers [*beide Mächte*] will be equal, or more or less equal, that treatises will become possible; and on the basis of such treatises a system of justice will later be born [*entsteht nachher eine Gerechtigkeit*].—There is no such thing as human rights [*Menschenrechte giebt es nicht*]”—KSA 8:25 [1].
78. On this question, I deviate from Elgat’s interpretation in *Nietzsche’s Psychology*, 119–20.
79. Elgat, 117.
80. Elgat, 118.
81. The textual evidence for this claim can be found in Spinoza, *TP* 6:1. The argument for the claim can be found in Matheron, “L’indignation.”
82. The position I am adopting here, and which I will develop further, is therefore somewhere between that of Solomon (who believes that all justice, not that of the slaves, arises out of *ressentiment*) and that of Elgat (who claims that, for Nietzsche, “there is no close or essential connection between instances of *ressentiment* and justice”)—*Nietzsche’s Psychology*, 21. The latter position, Elgat remarks, does not exclude that, “on some occasion, cases of *ressentiment* can contingently give rise to just settlements and decisions, possibly also generating a concept of justice that is based on these.”
83. The following passage makes quite explicit Smith’s own indignation in the face of slavery: “Fortune never exerted more cruelly her empire over mankind, than when she subjected those nations of heroes to the refuse of the jails of Europe, to wretches who possess the virtues neither of the countries which they come from, nor of those which they go to, and whose levity, brutality, and baseness, so justly exposes them to the contempt of the vanquished.” Smith, *Moral Sentiments*, 5:2.9.
84. KSA 13:14 [29].
85. KSA 13:14 [29].
86. Robert C. Solomon, “One Hundred Years of *Ressentiment*,” in *Nietzsche, Genealogy, Morality*, ed. Richard Schacht (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 123. Solomon joins those who, from Bishop Butler to Peter Strawson, argue for the social usefulness and legitimacy of resentment as a response to damaged dignity or pride, and attempt to establish norms for appropriate resentment. See Joseph Butler, *Fifteen*

- Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel, and a Dissertation upon the Nature of Virtue*, ed. W. R. Matthews (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1967 [1726]); David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1751]); Peter F. Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment* (London: Methuen, 1974).
87. Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980), 81.
 88. Fassin, "On Resentment," 249. In a similar vein, but a different context, that of bearing witness to sexist injustice, see Lynne McFall, "What is wrong with bitterness?" in *Feminist Ethics*, ed. Claudia Card (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1991).
 89. KSA 13:15 [113].
 90. Miguel de Beistegui, *The Government of Desire: A Genealogy of the Liberal Subject* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), part 3.
 91. Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James H. Nichols Jr. (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1969), 14.
 92. Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York and London: Penguin Books, 1992), 288.
 93. Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 26.
 94. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, trans. Joel Anderson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 165. See also Drucilla Cornell and Sara Murphy, "Anti-racism, Multiculturalism and the Ethics of Identification," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 28, no. 4 (2002): 419–49.
 95. Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition*, 161, emphasis added.
 96. Honneth, 165.
 97. Honneth, 163.
 98. Fukuyama, *End of History*, 206.
 99. Jean Améry, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980).
 100. Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. 2, *Studies in the Phenomenology of Constitution*, trans. Richard Rojewicz and André Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), section 2, chapter 3 ("The Constitution of Psychic Reality Through the Body").
 101. The following remarks and thoughts are indebted to Jeanette R. Malkin, "Thomas Bernhard, Jews, *Heldenplatz*," in *Staging the Holocaust: The Shoah in Drama and Performance*, ed. Claude Schumacher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 281–97.
 102. Malkin, 282. Malkin has in mind very different plays, such as Rolf Hochhuth's 1963 *The Deputy* (*Der Stellvertreter*), Erwin Sylvanus's 1957 *Dr. Korczak and the Children* (*Korczak und die Kinder*), or Peter Weiss's 1965 *The Investigation* (*Die Ermittlung*).
 103. Malkin, 283.
 104. Thomas Bernhard, *Heldenplatz* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 112. The translation is Malkin's.
 105. Malkin, "Thomas Bernhard," 285.
 106. Cited in Heinrich Wille, "Wunsch oder Bedingung? Zum Rechtsstreit über Thomas Bernhards letztwillige Verfügung," *Der Standard*, 7 March 1989, 19.
 107. Malkin, "Thomas Bernhard," 293.

108. Améry, *At the Mind's Limits*, 81.
109. See also *HH1* 475, where, reflecting on the rise of European nationalisms, Nietzsche writes: "the literary incivility of leading the Jews to the slaughterhouse as scapegoats for every possible public and personal misfortune is gaining the upper hand." It is, once again, the issue of blame and the politics of the scapegoat that is at stake.
110. Fassin, "On Resentment," 251.
111. CAConrad, *While Standing in Line for Death* (Seattle and New York: Wave Books, 2017), 8.
112. Fassin, "On Resentment," 255. Mbeke's speech is available here: <http://www.dirco.gov.za/docs/speeches/1998/mbek0529.htm>.
113. Fassin, "On Resentment," 255.
114. Fassin, 256.
115. Fassin, 260.
116. *La Haine* (1995), or *Hatred*, is the title of a film by Mathieu Kassovitz, as well as an expression from the *banlieues*. The film is inspired by the case of Makomé M'Bowolé, who was shot in the head at close range by a police officer inside a police precinct. *Avoir la haine* means to harbor and feel hatred not toward anything in particular, but toward an entire system. It is a socially generated *condition*.
117. Fassin, "On Resentment," 258.
118. Fassin, 260, 259.
119. Fassin, 260.

CONCLUSION

1. Michael L. Morgan, *Spinoza: Complete Works* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 2002), 688n24. In the same note, Morgan remarks that "in classical contexts (Cicero or Virgil) it is often translated as 'patriotism,' and in Spinoza it is often taken to be the highest form of civil duty."
2. See Emmanuel Bove, *La stratégie du conatus: Affirmation et résistance chez Spinoza* (Paris: Vrin, 1996), 260.
3. M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1927), § 26.
4. F. Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 195.
5. See Christian B. Miller and Ryan West, eds., *Integrity, Honesty, and Truth Seeking* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); Jason Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind: On Intellectual Virtues and Virtue Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Robert C. Roberts and W. Jay Wood, *Intellectual Virtues: An Essay in Regulative Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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