

THE MEANINGFULNESS OF THE PRESENT TIME: NOTES ON THE FATE OF MODERNITY

In his lucid and perceptive essay on Kant's understanding of the Enlightenment Foucault advances the proposal that modernity is not so much a historical epoch, but rather a mentality and an ethos based upon a presumption of unbounded criticism¹. The pages that follow wholly concur with this view. But they go on to derive from it a number of inferences: firstly, that to the extent that post-modernism is interested in a critique of power this can be accommodated within modernity's own axiological frame; and, secondly, that the moment post-modernism abjures any Enlightenment-derived project of human liberation, it reverts to a full-fledged historical metaphysic with pretensions just as holistic as those it claims to have debunked.

I. Some methodological considerations

Schemes of periodicity are an unavoidable feature of historical thinking. The bewildering mass of factual detail must be accommodated within some sort of analytical grid simply for the purpose of talking meaningfully about it, let alone detecting causal or teleological sequences within it². Systematic order must be imposed upon the chaotic stream of immediate experience by the mind surveying and/or interpreting this material. Otherwise it might become lost in the raw data of sensation or end up as a mere registrar of «the given». Yet it is by now generally accepted that «the given», i.e. the self-subsisting fragment of extra-mental Being allegedly appearing before consciousness as it is «in-itself» and serving as the foundation of the mind's knowledge about reality, is a «myth»³. This is not here understood in the sense that objective Being, namely reality as it is independently of the per-

1. M. FOUCAULT, *Qu'est-ce que c'est que les Lumières?*, accessible at Foucault.info.

2. For a discussion of various models of periodization and the methodological assumptions upon which they rest, see W. A. GREEN, *Periodizing World History*, *History and Theory*, vol. 34, no. 2, 1995, pp. 99-111.

3. The most influential demolition of this «myth» is in W. SELLARS, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Minneapolis, 1956. The basic thesis here is that in order to recognize just what is given in perception a theory cutting up reality in a specific way is presupposed. This view

ceptions and conceptions of it formed by the collective and/or individual mind, has no ontological warrant⁴. But in the sense that self-subsistent reality, if it is to be *for us*, if it is to constitute the content of our cognition and the object of our action, must first be *apprehended* by the observing consciousness. It must be captured and imported into its field of vision. This is an active process, whereby the subject of perception processes the raw materials, furnished to it by the sense organs, according to certain interpretative dispositions characteristic of the subject's cognitive makeup. These latter can, then, be construed either as indwelling modes of intuition and understanding in the Kantian manner, or alternatively as adaptive responses to the challenges of its physical environment crystallizing into more or less permanent "habits", as the pragmatists explain them. In any event, reality in its absolute externality, i.e. as it could *per impossibile* be conceived in disconnection from the cognitive faculties of the transcendental subject (to wit, the ideal collective mind of human science) is just a limiting concept with no empirical content whatsoever. Observation is «laden» with theoretical presuppositions. It is by definition the work performed by us doing the observing, and hence ineluctably affected by the abilities and disabilities of the knowing mind. It goes just as far as these abilities are capable of reaching (together with the technological enhancements provided by modern scientific know-how, electronic microscopes, space telescopes etc.). It, consequently, comes to a stop the moment it is asked to perform a task which is *ab initio* beyond its very concept, such as to describe that which, *of its nature* (and not due to some kind of technical impediment), cannot be per-

has, of course, been subjected to criticism. For a defense of the «intuitive plausibility» of direct or immediate perception of an external thing, see W. P. ALLSTON, Sellars and the 'Myth of the Given', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 65, No. 1, 2002, pp. 69-86. For an attempt to rehabilitate «the given» by revitalizing a historical tradition in epistemology, see also B. C. JOHNSEN, The Given, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 46, No. 4, 1986, pp. 597-613. Whatever one may claim about the outcome of this debate, there is no doubt that Sellars', and others', challenge of the foundationalism of "the given" has opened up the possibility for a more variegated conception of knowledge, in which historical thinking is enabled as a legitimate form of scientific inquiry, a status from which it cannot be debarred on account of its inescapable subjectivity alone.

4. Even in Sellars the epistemological argument about perception is placed within a physical context, in which the ultimate aim of thought in its scientific systematization is indeed true knowledge about the self-subsistent Nature (assumed to be "extra-linguistic fact") of which we are integral components: «...the grand strategy of the philosophical enterprise is once again directed toward that articulated and integrated vision of man-in-the-universe – or shall I say discourse-about-man-in-the-universe – which has traditionally been its goal». (SELLARS, *op. cit.*, section 39).

ceived. Of that which has not yet (for technical reasons) been perceived and of that which cannot ever be perceived there is no knowledge; of the first not yet, of the second unto eternity.

These considerations apply *a fortiori* to the historical subject matter. For the stuff of history is the actions of humankind and their products mental and material, i.e. institutions, values, theories, artifacts, techniques etc. And these have an inner and an outer side: an objective surface which is capable of being and must hence be empirically observed (directly with regard to the present, indirectly as to the eras gone by) and a subjective core consisting of the thoughts and feelings of the agents (individual and collective) from whom they flowed, internal states that could also be conceived, following D. Davidson⁵, as a special type of causes bringing about that which is subject to observation. This latter aspect can only be reconstructed by some kind of empathetic method, with all the difficulties attaching thereunto; difficulties, drawbacks and abuses, though, which do not make the task in the least avoidable. For historical understanding is not integral unless the account or narrative⁶ involved does combine both dimensions, the observational or empirical and the interpretative or speculative. In both cases it is the *historical imagination* that is called upon to fill the gaps both of the empirical record⁷, the paucity of which increases tremendously the more remote the historical age in question, and of our critical understanding of the motives or reasons (emotional and evaluative commitments) that fired the agents from within. And this to a much greater extent, needless to say, compared to the *theoretical imagination* which, as intimated above, is at any rate also at work in the so called «hard» sciences.

There is one circumstance at least which differentiates methodologically the historical from the natural sciences, and this is the fact that we do not in history dispose of instruments that can bring the historical fact closer to us or laboratories that can reproduce the historical phenomenon under controlled conditions. Hence we have to content ourselves with what lies at hand, the material remnants of bygone epochs, the surviving documents and the diffuse, or otherwise, memory of past events. But this distinction is not of itself enough either to pronounce natural science innocent of theoretical

5. D. DAVIDSON, Actions, Reasons, and Causes, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 60, n. 23, 1963, pp. 685-700.

6. For the central importance of narrative development in historical thinking, see W. B. GAL-
LIE, The Historical Understanding, *History and Theory*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1962, pp. 149-202.

7. For a discussion of the problem of gaps in the historical evidence and the possible method-
ological responses of the investigator, see H. D. KELLNER, The Discontinuity of the Historical
Consciousness, *History and Theory*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1975, pp. 275-296.

preconception in its explanation of the material process, or history devoid of scientific objectivity. The under-determination of theory by empirical fact is at work in both spheres, except that in historical thought the margin for speculation is much wider, a dangerous latitude, indeed, that has encouraged all manner of deleterious excess in theory construction and, much worse, in the practical application of untamed fancy masquerading as rational insight. Thus, the crucial concern must surely be not the outlawing of creative intuition (of *abductive* thinking, in C. S. Peirce's terminology) either in natural science or in history, but the insistence that hypothetical assumptions must at all times be under the bridle of the empirical evidence available and also of the theoretical paradigm (or research program) that enjoys the widest support among researchers in the given field, both matters to be decided by considerations of experimental and logical adequacy internal to the scientific discipline and not by extraneous political or ideological concerns. In historical thought the factual substructure that justifies the conclusions of the narrative may be absent, remote or reachable only through an extremely convoluted path. But even under these very adverse conditions we need not despair of objectivity that commands widespread acceptance. What is the actual shape of the past to which history refers will be decided by the collective research of the community of historians working under generally accepted standards. And what counts for objective truth is the sum of propositions about that past to which, given those standards, it is rational to assent, the final form of which will be fixed when present imperfections of method as well as biases are removed (i.e. at an ideal terminus of historical development). This is the *regulative* idea of truth guiding the work of the practicing historians, whose validity can be gauged by its actual results, namely existing historical accounts that do indeed rest upon widespread consensus⁸. Under these constraints «productive imagination» as constitutive not only of the «context of discovery» (as traditionally and non-controversially conceded by classical positivism), but also of the «context of

8. This discussion is guided by the concepts of "internal realism" and "ideal rational acceptability", as developed in H. PUTNAM, *Reason, Truth and History*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1981. See also W. H. WALSH, Truth and Fact in History Reconsidered, *History and Theory*, vol. 16, no. 4, 1977, pp. 53-71; R. MARTIN, Objectivity and Meaning in Historical Studies: Toward a Post-Analytic View, *History and Theory*, vol. 32, no. 1, 1993, pp. 25-50; M. BEVIR, Objectivity in History, *History and Theory*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1994, pp. 328-344. What unites all these texts is the determination to reject the notion that accepting the necessarily subjective quality of the historical narrative inevitably leads to relativism. Defining historical reality is a decision internal to the community of historians (internal realism), while the practice of impartiality, openness to criticism and comprehensiveness with regard to recognized facts yields results counting as truthful representations of that reality. We do, in fact, possess countless empirical examples of what historical objectivity amounts to, as well as a working knowledge of what the criteria are for that achievement.

explanation» itself, when at the cutting edge of progressive discovery the possible overthrow of a reigning paradigm is adumbrated, is not in danger of degenerating into an exercise in free-floating intuition, an arbitrary extrapolation from a puny empirical base, the factual reference serving as a mere pretense to cover up what is in fact a poetic metaphysics. This might be termed an «absolutism of theory», whose culmination was the great array of ontological systems produced in the 19th century.

Emblematic of this metaphysical turn in historical thought we may take to be Hegel's reinstatement of the ontological argument demolished by Kant. Hegel's claim that thought alone posits or defines "true reality" (*Wirklichkeit*, as opposed to the "merely" empirically existent) led directly to the elevation of dialectics (i.e. the intellectual seizure of the ineffable core of Being) into the supreme form of knowledge transcending in validity both mathematics and experimental science. This amounted to a rejection of the Kantian understanding of dialectics as the mutual cancellation of theoretical postulates about the non-empirical, as well as to a reactivation of a Platonic conception of it as true ontological insight by means of *noesis* alone. This epistemic extremism was unfortunate, for it obscured the sound elements of the Hegelian project itself, namely its determination to handle the raw matter of social life (its economic and institutional content) as well as the adaptive responses of the self-conscious subject within the cage of objective necessity; a covert materialism that was to be later brought out by G. Lukacs⁹ and J. N. Findlay¹⁰ and more recently by R. Brandom¹¹.

II. Periods as hypotheses

Historical periods can be understood, to begin with, as methodological devices. They are analytical constructs that help organize the data, imposing some sort of structure leading to essays in interpretation. From this angle they amount to the construction of ideal types, whose relation to the reality they refer to is not, as is well known, one of more or less exhaustive empirical description. Rather they isolate what the interpreter proposes as the most salient and/or determining features, and on the basis of this decision an attempt is made to explain the patterns of organization and the developmental tendencies of the historical formation in question. They are, thus, hypotheses whose validity is assayed with respect to the breadth of empiri-

9. G. LUKACS, *Der junge Hegel. Über die Beziehungen von Dialektik und Ökonomie*, Neuwied, Luchterhand, 1967.

10. J. N. FINDLAY, *Hegel: A Re-examination*, New York, Macmillan, 1958.

11. R. B. BRANDOM, Some Pragmatist Themes in Hegel's Idealism, *European Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 7.2, 1999, pp. 164-189.

cal facts that can be subjected to their hermeneutical import. They are tools of further research, and hence open to necessary modification in case they encounter anomalous features in the reality they study. It is thus that they fulfill the requirement of “analytical realism”, to use the formulation of T. Parsons. They are realist in the sense that they are not ends in themselves, but rather the opening gambit in a project of investigation, in the process of which they are constantly tested, modified and, if need be, rejected. The purpose in formulating these theoretical models is not to whet our skill in conceptual abstraction, but to immerse ourselves in the given social situation and bring it alive by identifying the essential nexus of relations, the network of power lines as it were that provide it with its historical thrust. Their adequacy, hence, is to be decided not with reference to their logical perfection, aesthetic or ideological appeal, but *ex post*, namely by judging whether they have stood the test of continuous empirical control. This conception is intimately associated with the Weberian methodological precept of value neutrality, which (as is also well known) does not in the least imply that the guiding function of value choices in social life should be elided in order to construct some thoroughly objectivist or naturalist model of action; but rather the contrary, namely the identification of those value preferences that do in fact play that guiding role, irrespective of whether the interpreter as a person identifies with them or as a scientist had different explanatory expectations. If understood in this manner schemes of periodicity do not exclude, but rather promote, explanatory pluralism, namely attempts to construct different ideal typical reconstructions of the real, each of which is vying with all others for empirical validation in an open field of inquiry.

The crucial thing about the procedure advocated here is that it does not close off avenues of alternative theoretical thinking, but rather aims to provoke them. To identify a historical epoch in the above manner *ipso facto* ignites a problematic, whether the attempted delimitation is in fact illegitimate, in the sense that it might obscure fundamental *continuities* with the one that preceded it. For instance, Burckhardt’s thesis about the Renaissance, as the “discovery” of man and the world, provoked a search for the survival of medieval structures and attitudes well into the modern period. It also motivated the attempt to show the significance both of the human individual as a self-defining entity (viz. Abelard) as well as a vibrant naturalism (viz. R. Bacon, Grosseteste, Averroism and nominalism) in the very heart of the Middle Ages themselves¹². Similarly with respect to that crucial transformation that laid the very foundations of modernity, namely the sci-

12. H. BARON, Burckhardt’s ‘Civilization of the Renaissance’. A Century After its Publication, *Renaissance News*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1960, pp. 207-222. See also M. A. HOLLY, Burckhardt and the Ideology of the Past, *History of the Human Sciences*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1988, pp. 47-73.

entific «revolution» of the 17th century. The proposal that it signified a sharp break with the medieval conception of science was countered by the claim that in fact it capitalized on the systematic critique of the Aristotelian system (and in particular its theory of motion) that had been accomplished by the medieval thinkers themselves, an idea most strenuously defended by P. Duhem. And this is as it should be, since Burckhardt himself conceived of his epochal book as a mere «essay».

III. Periodization as *historiosophy*: the cognitive roots of theoretic speculation

But the construction of periodic schemes in history has another use, beside the analytic sketched above, which I would call *historiosophic*. The point here is not merely to arrange a given body of facts for the purpose of hypothetical interpretation, but to proceed to a hidden meaning which is the «true reason» why the selected phenomena cohere. This enterprise is imbued with an a priori conviction that the phenomena under study form an organic structure and are guided by some sort of teleological directedness: they fall together in a specific way so that a certain outcome may be brought about. Both the «intelligible» arrangement and the putative culmination are endowed with an inherent necessity in a larger historical metaphysic wherein the events thus situated could not have unfolded otherwise. This end is, thus, already somehow contained in the phenomena from which it flowed. This is an application to history of Leibniz's doctrine of *inesse*. This asserts that an effect must pre-exist in inchoate form within the cause that precedes it, if there is to be a genuine ontological connection between the two. For it is logically impossible that something might proceed from something with which there is no affinity of essence. The causal sequence that we claim to observe is, thus, the actualization of a metaphysical link implicit in the very nature of reality, and not merely a fortuitous contiguity in space and time of certain chunks of experience. Leibniz's notion that the present is pregnant with the entire series of future events is the most explicit and influential formulation of the doctrine on which the idealist philosophy of history, discussed here, is based¹³.

Of course in Leibniz *inesse* is an ontological principle determining the basic constituents of physical reality (his *monads*) and not a historical process. But it only takes a widening of its hermeneutical range for it to

13. On the significance of Leibniz as the crucial philosophical source of the idealist philosophy of history with respect to its stress upon teleological necessity, see R. KRONER, *Von Kant bis Hegel*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1961.

serve other purposes as well. And the one who did this was, of course, Hegel through his notorious assertion that the «only» assumption the philosophical mind brings to the study of historical becoming is that of «reason». Rationality here implies the intelligibility of empirical developments from the point of view of an underlying system of mental concepts and values that subtend the empirical phenomena. Empirical events count only as embodiments (“objectivations”) of notions generated by the true and proper philosophical method, if these events are to be ingredients of interpretation. The Leibnizian *monad* has now been extended to denote any given “concrete universal”, i.e. a historically significant form of life constructed around the intelligible scaffolding of its leading concepts and moral preferences. The operative unit of theoretical understanding is now that of Spirit, i.e. the organized existence of a human community that can be situated as a distinct link in the ascent of a universal Reason towards definitive realization. This Reason, as the end-all of the said teleological process, comprehends the sum total of the core aspirations (freedom, justice, mutuality, mental cultivation etc.), that human society *per se* has been implicitly striving towards, since the inception of historical time.

An influential school of thought, whose leading exponent is K. Loewith, attributes the invention of this mode of historical understanding to Judaeo-Christian theology, with all subsequent formulations of this scheme seen as «secularizations» of that initial sacred formula¹⁴. H. Blumenberg has subjected this analysis to trenchant critique¹⁵. He argued, firstly, that the Enlightenment story of social regeneration effected by reliance upon the innate abilities of man as a physical being is radically different from the theological emphasis on man’s ontological worthlessness and abandonment to divine grace. The modern notion of progress is premised upon and derives from the reactivation of the notion of cognitive curiosity within the natural world as the proper field of human self-fulfillment, something that was stringently condemned by theology as a lethal symptom of *superbia*. Its eschatology, therefore, if we are minded to preserve the term, is cast in terms of radical immanence. The element of existential hope, the aspiration for the fulfillment and flourishing of humanity, has indeed been preserved, because

14. K. LOEWITH, *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*, Chicago, U. of Chicago Press, 1957. For the tacit political ends underlying Loewith’s argument, namely the claim that a historicist soteriology on the model of the traditional theological paradigm led in the direction of Nazism and caused the accession of prominent philosophical figures to it, see J. A. BARASH, The Sense of History: On the Political Implications of Karl Loewith’s Concept of Secularization, *History and Theory*, vol. 37, no. 1, 1998, pp. 69-82.

15. H. BLUMENBERG, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1988.

it is a permanent determinant of the social condition of the species. Blumenberg is not intent upon denying all similarities between the theological mode and the modern notion of progress. The question, however, is the *realization* under novel historical conditions of that ancient longing, a realization that has procured completely new meaning to that hope. In the gap opened by the collapse of medieval theology an old notion was drastically “transposed”. This transposition, hence, transformed totally the logical sense and the empirical references of the old idea.

Blumenberg showed, moreover, that secularization, i.e. the transition from transcendence to immanence, or the attempt to establish the worldly validity of sacred notions and symbols, is not something that commenced *after* the disintegration of Christianity, roughly around the 17th century. It was a dynamic internal to the Christian intellectual and moral experience from its very birth. It was made necessary the moment that the expectation of an imminent Second Coming firing the original church had been voided, with the consequence that the Christian was now obliged to work out a way of coping with a phenomenal world that was not dissolving away as fast as originally hoped. Hence the complicated adventure of medieval thought trying to parse the interdependencies of nature and grace, of reason and mystical faith, culminating with the epoch-making fusion of the Hellenic Logos with sacred Revelation in Aquinas. This was indeed a crucial validation of the secular, as the condemnation of Aristotelianism by the Church in 1277 shows, a condemnation that seems to have included central tenets of Aquinas’ own thought. This trend consummated itself with the Nominalists, who tipped the gnoseological balance towards empirical reason by emphasizing the contingency of the natural realm, in order to free the Will of God of any obligation in creating this sensible world and no other. This decoupling of the divine essence from the physical effects of its creative energy Blumenberg calls the second occurrence of Gnosticism, 17th century science being the final attempt to suppress the Gnostic riddle (of the duality of the good and evil God) through the assumption of a *deus absconditus*.

Blumenberg’s discussion lays the emphasis upon post-Augustinian thinking. But a glance backwards into classical antiquity is likely to show, to my mind, that the search for holistic meaning does not begin with the transcendent ecstasies of Christian theology, at least not as abruptly as K. Löwith postulates. Even if it is true that ancient thought does in general operate with a cyclical conception of time, as opposed to the linear, directed one, postulated by theology, this does not necessarily imply the catastrophic break assumed by secularist theory. For one thing, linear, i.e. progressive, philosophies of history were indeed developed within the Sophistic and later Epicurean tradition. Intimations of a «pregnant» time playing itself out towards an appointed end could be read off the philosophical texts, espe-

cially as the philosopher contemplates the rhythm of political phenomena. The pursuit of the ideal (“mixed”) constitution in both Plato and Aristotle could be interpreted as a project to break that vicious circle in the empirical rotation of political forms, whereby a temporary equilibrium of (rough) justice has always disintegrated propelling society back into anti-political strife. This is indeed a project of transcendence, of going beyond. The claims, later, of Cicero and Polybius that the Roman constitution was the actualization of the aforesaid terminus that had eluded Hellenic society could also count as a theory of the «fulfillment of political time» in a *nunc stans*, this idealized present serving as a true end of history in quasi-Hegelian terms. It was this fake eternity of the Roman form of life that Augustine was later to mock. Furthermore, the way that Aristotle writes the history of Hellenic philosophy might also be considered as a model of a temporal teleology, wherein earlier movements of thought prepare dialectically (through their insights plus the diverging views that they incite) the culmination of human thinking in Aristotle’s own theory of man and the cosmos. This is the template for Hegel’s own account of the history of philosophy.

A holistic understanding of the meaning of existence is also something that spans the alleged chasm between ancient and Christian thinking. Communitarianism, the notion that the individual self has no metaphysical standing unless integrated into an overarching social whole, which in its turn is a simulacrum of cosmic harmony, is also a staple of antique thought. Aristotle was to be so successfully Christianized in the end (as Plato was, albeit less thoroughly, in the initial stages), because the Hellenic Polis could more or less naturally (in its aspect of organic togetherness) mutate into the God-governed *civitas* of the Christian imagination, *ecclesia* itself being a term that pointedly evokes the collective dimension of ancient political experience. It goes without saying that significant features were shed in the course of this historical transmutation (for example freedom of thought and expression for the free citizen). *Parrhesia* for the Greek means the possibility of unfettered expression before the assembly of citizens. *Parrhesia* for the Christian means testimony for Christ against the tyrannical authorities of this world, coupled with complete disclosure of personal sin before His “terrible throne” at the eschaton. But what concerns us is continuity, not identity.

Furthermore, theological time itself may be regarded just as cyclical as that of the ancients. The sacred scheme of paradisial innocence, subverted by the Fall and restored through Christ, does describe a perfect metaphysical circle, whose meta-historical pinnacle merges with its non-historical origins. The crucial difference here seems to be that for the Greeks the completion of the circle takes place within the eternal realm of Nature, whereas in the Christian vision a leap beyond the physical is posited. This is a cru-

cial difference; but it could be attenuated by the consideration that Nature in Greek thought counts only as illumined by the Logos and not as empirically available. The “invisible harmony” of the real, as dissected by the logically competent mind, is “stronger than” the visible one present to the senses of the ordinary person, according to the programmatic saying of Herakleitos which set the tone for Hellenic philosophy as a whole. It is an intelligible Nature of the mind, which is the content of eternity from the Hellenic standpoint.

And so it is plausible to submit that the pursuit of «meaning in history», a project whose successful completion actually freezes historical time, as radically in the Christian version as in the supposedly non-historical Hellenic one, was not the exclusive concern of post-antique theology. It may, in fact, be conceived as a constitutive requirement for the survival of our species within its natural habitat, from the very moment that humankind acquires its existential distinctness. To speak with Blumenberg again, as soon as the human animal achieves its erect posture, it is directly brought face to face with the vast superiority of the natural system that threatens to wipe it out. This is the terrible “absolutism of reality” in Blumenberg’s happy turn of phrase¹⁶. As against the onslaught of *prima facie* malevolent energies and powers beyond comprehension and control, it would seem that an instinctive response would be to activate whatever counter-absolutisms this emergent being finds at its disposal, one of them being the absolutism of communal existence and secondly the much more free-ranging absolutism of language. The solidarity of beings is equally fearful and helpless as oneself provides an immediate refuge from the rage of the elements, whereas a more active response is vouchsafed by the deployment of the weapon of linguistic sorting. This is an ability that differentiates the human animal from dumb and brute nature around it. It enables it, by attaching a label (a name) to the multifarious features of external reality pressing upon it and thus “formatting” its environment, to establish some sort of manageable relation to it, either one of propitiation or, later, one of manipulation –imaginary, as in the case of magic, or practically efficacious as in the case of science a long way down the road.

Community and the logos would seem to be the primordial bulwarks of species life. They are mutually dependent and mutually reinforcing, in that the establishment of a durable nexus of relations, which guarantees collective togetherness, is mediated through linguistic exchange; while, in turn, the solidity of a common life enables the group, having carved out a safe place

16. H. BLUMENBERG, *Arbeit am Mythos*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1979.

in nature to venture beyond it; an enterprise that mobilizes its linguistic resources to a new peak of semantic flexibility, refinement and invention. That the Logos is the foundation of community (τὸ ξυνόν) is an insight we find already in Herakleitos. That language is an *activity*, namely a creative force (*Kraft*) by means of which the self-conscious Ego penetrates ever more deeply into the reality that encloses it, while simultaneously reshaping the form and contents of its self-consciousness, was the central proposal of the romantic philosophy of language begun by Hammann and Herder. From this angle, it is in the nature of language to be ecstatic and poetic, in the technical sense of always transgressing the boundaries of existence within which it has hitherto developed, in order to spill over into new segments of the physical sphere, that immeasurable Unknown that forms the horizon of its activity. And this expansion can only take place by assimilating novel experiential contents into its categorical system, thereby both adding new meaning to the existing categories and engendering new ones. This is the reason why W. v. Humboldt defined language as a concrete and present “infinity”. It is a process whereby, by utilizing finite means (the given syntactical and semantic resources of a natural system of signs), an infinite task is performed, i.e. ever wider, and hitherto unknown, spheres of the physical are brought into the scope of humanity’s creative labor¹⁷.

Language is the primary tool by means of which the immediacy of the empirically given is transcended. If phenomenality, the Platonic *Cratylus* argues, is conceived as a system in thoroughgoing flux (and this is how modernity conceives of the realm of phenomena *par excellence*), then language cannot be a reflection of it, for its semi-permanence does not allow it to chase after the evanescent contents of appearance. It must, rather, function as a kind of bridle upon this incessant vanishing, in order to catch and preserve what is of importance to the self-reflecting being which through language *acts upon* that elusive external object. All words, as Hegel would further argue, are universal, in the sense that they denote not simply a concrete and finite thing that can be pointed to through the employment of a name or a pronoun (“This”), but the entire class of entities sharing essential attributes with the particular “This” before us¹⁸. Language is, in Hegel’s striking phrase from the *Realphilosophie* of 1805-06, the “night of preservation” (*Nacht der Aufbewahrung*), the place of catchment where the first

17. W. v. HUMBOLDT, *Über die Verschiedenheit des menschlichen Sprachbaues, Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie*, Bd. III, Stuttgart, Cotta, 1963.

18. G. W. F. HEGEL, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, tr. J. B. Baillie, New York/Evanston, Harper, 1967, pp. 149-160.

harvest of the Ego's engagement with external reality is stored. And it is a place of darkness, because those first fruits of cognition are indeed confused images and haphazard opinions (εἰκασίαι and δόξαι in Platonic parlance), which can only be turned into solid knowledge if processed by science¹⁹. Language, thus, already points beyond the empirically present, and, in the developed form of theory, always makes predictions concerning the likely course of future events. In the first instance, language is a response to a stimulus affecting our sense organs from without, hence its function is to register (and hence, in a sense, freeze) the occurrence. But this «representational» function of the passive mind, on account of its very success, passes into a process of generalizing the particular, of understanding it under the aspect of its universality, as a specimen of a kind. In this manner the subject of knowledge also acquires its consciousness of self, a feeling of its creative power over against the extra-mental realm²⁰. Memory summarizes past experience, names its essential constituents and projects this scheme into the future, an activity for which, as Kant argued, past experience alone is not an adequate warrant. Cassirer has called, as is well known, this function of the knowing mind the construction of «symbolic forms», i.e. categories endowed with subjective meaning, such that transcends (is under-determined by) the body of empirical facts which first triggered its activation. Cassirer insists (true to the scientistic interpretation of Kantianism promoted by H. Cohen and the Marburg neo-Kantians) that the universal concept must possess an empirical basis, to begin with, and that it must be continuously applied to fresh empirical contents. But given the ontological incommensurability between the human understanding (the *intellectus ectypus* in Kantian parlance) and the infinity of the natural field, which is its intentional object both in knowledge and in praxis, the under-determination of Symbol by its experiential reference is an insuperable predicament.

The distinctive mark of scientific theory is its systematic attempt to limit the degree of this under-determination. Myth, on the contrary, banks on the divergence between consciousness (the intention to know and the intention to act successfully in fulfillment of its survival tasks) and the physical system, and is not concerned to fill the gap between itself and recalcitrant reality by empirical means. Rather, in order to secure the existential

19. G. W. F. HEGEL, *Jenaer Realphilosophie: Vorlesungsmanuskripte zur Philosophie der Natur und des Geistes von 1805-1806*, Hamburg, F. Meiner, 1969, p. 180.

20. E. CASSIRER, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. 1: Language*, New Haven/London, Yale University Press, 1957, pp. 249-277. See also E. CASSIRER, The Influence of Language upon the Development of Scientific Thought, *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol 39, no. 12, 1942, pp. 309-327; E. CASSIRER, The Concept of Group and the Theory of Perception, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1944, pp. 1-36.

solidity of self-consciousness (the comparative advantage, as it were, of the human animal) it resorts to the further potentiation of the labor of «productive imagination». That is why, as Blumenberg indicates, myth must not be conceived either as inchoate proto-science (containing, that is, a kernel of true insight into the constitution of the real) or as the irrational enemy of science, destined to disappear the more the latter perfects its methods and theories. Myth and science have always been and will continue to be complementary endeavors of the mind running *in tandem*. The former deals with aspects of existing in the world, which either cannot *in principle* be touched by science (such as the meaning or purpose of existence) or have not yet been adequately so touched (for contingent technical reasons). The vulnerability of human life in the face of the «absolutism of reality», together with the subjective perplexities resulting thereof, will never be done away with by the progress of science and technology. Hence the countervailing «absolutism of *theoria*», of the contemplative and speculative modes of pure consciousness, will always be a necessary recourse, supplemented on occasion by the requisite forms of human community, designed to undergird such forms of poetic ecstasy.

We may include in this understanding of myth, indebted to Blumenberg, the concept of ideology as well, in which the construction of historical teleologies usually plays a central role. And if we do so, we can understand why the «end of ideology», once trumpeted by sociologists, has proven itself to be a myth (in the pejorative sense of the term). What was probably meant by that slogan was the end of a particular sort of ideology (e.g. Stalinism or more broadly Marxism). But even if that were true, this does not in the least signify the end of ideology *per se*. For sets of subjective beliefs intended to invest with purpose and meaning the «brute» facts of worldly existence, whether these have been scientifically investigated and explained or not, will always crystallize in the vast interstices between that which we do not or cannot know and our sense of self, collective or individual.

It ought to be stressed that the notion of complementarity adopted here carries an important implication. If myth and science be simultaneous operations of transcendental consciousness (i.e. of the paradigmatic mind of humanity face to face with natural necessity), still the work that they do is different both in terms of method and substance. For the aim of science is to expand our inventory of facts and their causal interrelations, so that we may come to know a lawfulness pertaining firstly to the system of appearances and, ultimately, throwing a hook to the core of physical reality itself. We, then, deal with natural necessity by making use of whatever aspects of that necessity can be seized and forced to work in our favor.

Poetic imagination, on the other hand, signifies the return of consciousness to itself, an act of self-concentration that creates, *ex nihilo* as it were,

a sense of the absolute worth of human inner space as an ontological end in itself. This (imagined) ontological fact can then be maintained against, despite and irrespective of Nature and its inherent lawfulness, the latter being thus “placed in brackets”. From this it follows that it is illegitimate, either for science to intrude into the domain of myth in order to nullify or prohibit its operations, or, conversely, for myth (religion, metaphysics, ideology) to invade the sphere of science, in order to impose its own transcendent “truths”. The latter was roughly the situation during the long centuries of the predominance of metaphysics and theology, the former during the Enlightenment with its misguided conviction that there was a zero-sum relation between experimental and/or mathematical reason on the one hand and religious belief on the other.

It could be argued that this false either/or is still the prevalent assumption in the debate about the relative merits of modernity and post-modernity, whichever side of the question one is arguing from.

IV. The existential import of historiosophy: mono-causal reductionism and history as catastrophic change

On account of its existential import, the historiosophic scheme is a closed system of concepts and valuations not susceptible to revisions and re-figurations of its components. Any tampering with its assumptions, however mild, seems an assault on its very validity. Disputes, consequently, between the orthodox believers and the revisionists develop into bitter feuds of mutual anathema, and even extermination, as the history of Christianity, as well as Marxism, can illustrate. The subscriber to unadulterated “orthodoxy” hates the critical adherent of the selfsame doctrine much more violently than he hates the holder of opposite points of view. What is at stake here is the doctrine’s claim of definitive cognition, as well as its soteriological valence.

To effect the perfect arrangement of the material captured by its conceptual mesh, historiosophic dogma is prone to mono-causal (single cause) and mono-telic (single purpose) accounts of the historical flow. The fewer the interpretative variables, the greater the logical cohesion seems and even aesthetic polish of the theory. The latter has to be molded as a tightly ordered and beautiful vision, in which relations of mutual implication link its various elements, while all of them directly or indirectly derive from the one guiding insight. If done in this way, it becomes easier to go fishing in experience for the striking instances “verifying” the neat theoretical construct.

This simplification, however, simultaneously shuts out an infinite mass of empirical matter. But this is supposed to be cured through the claim that the portion of reality escaping through the holes (very large indeed) of the hermeneutic net is that which is philosophically uninteresting, the one that

“does not count”. In Hegel’s parlance what falls through is mere “appearance” and not “essential actuality” (*Wirklichkeit*), and hence it can safely be elided²¹. This amounts to the assertion that what reality is, is to be defined by the theory itself, which further implies that any theory, philosophically heroic enough, must put on a show of being self-validating. If it is subjected to empirical tests and criticized for its lack of predictive power, this is waved away as either irrelevant or malicious. This is a coherentist understanding of truth of a radically anti-scientific kind, resting upon an *a priori* assumption that experimental science, as the study of finitude and mere phenomenality, is incapable of producing truth endowed with necessity. It, hence, borders on a sort of collective solipsism, one which, by not recognizing reality except in so far as it is defined by itself, keeps loading itself with new-fangled *ad hoc* hypotheses, simply in order to shut out the adverse findings of any possible experimental testing²². It is in this self-referential nature of «absolute» theory that K. Popper espied its metaphysical nature, namely the fact that it formulates itself so as to be *ab initio* impervious to the falsificatory power of empirical counter-examples. This also roughly corresponds to those methods of «fixing belief» classified by C. S. Peirce as that of «authority» and that of «reason», where the latter is to be understood in the pejorative sense of latching onto a vivid intuition of the mind and assuming that its vividness alone is warrant enough of its purchase on extra-theoretical reality²³.

It bears repeating, however, that taking refuge in paregoric notions of having «deciphered» the deep meaning of physical and historical existence

21. G. W. F. HEGEL, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, II, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, 1975, pp. 124-161, 186-213.

22. Hegel justifies this through the claim that both mathematics and empirical science lack the proper method: they are both «analytic», i.e. assume that reality and thought are cut up into finite components that can only be externally brought into connection, while «true» philosophy proceeds «dialectically», i.e. assumes the metaphysical identity of all things thus leaving behind the law of the excluded middle. Hegel’s philosophical «refutation» of mathematics is presented in the Preface of the *Phenomenology*, while his criticism of the «false» (or quantitative) notion of infinity that allegedly vitiates the empirical sciences is to be found in IDEM, *Wissenschaft der Logik*, I, Frankfurt a. M., Suhrkamp, 1974, pp. 260-358. The kind of coherentism, on the contrary, that issues from the abolition of the analytic-synthetic distinction in the manner of Quine is constantly under the jurisdiction of experience, and the internal reconstructions of both the circumference as well as, in extremis, the very logical core of the theory is an attempt to bring the theory in more satisfactory conformity with the experimental findings, not to deny the latter. The same can be said of Putnam’s «anti-realism», in which only *metaphysical* realism and its «magical» kind of reference is rejected, but experimental science does not in the least forfeit its status as the sole source of (approximate) truth about extra-mental reality.

23. C. S. PEIRCE, *The Fixation of Belief*, *Collected Papers*, Vol. 5, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard U. Press, 1934, pp. 223-247.

is not the invention of the «bad» 19th century. It is, as we saw in section III above, an ingrained habit of the mind that could be understood as an adaptive response crystallizing in the process of evolution, i.e. as a behavioral mode to counteract the terror emanating from the power of the elements. Thus, it provides survival advantage. To believe oneself knowable and strong, even if the belief is based on metaphysical fictions, does have pragmatic cash-value in the sense that it may, within limits, enhance the staying power of the individual and the species in the face of overwhelming natural forces. This in turn is the precondition for the overthrow in due time of those fictions. Illusions and/or prejudices may be, thus, seen as functional constituents of the attempt of the human animal to fashion frameworks for a productive common life, as E. Burke famously showed in the case of the political phenomenon. Without the cosmic and existential solidity that holistic world views provide, however falsely, the business of life cannot be organized under the roof of a value system that integrates individuals within a collective project and vouchsafes the self-esteem that comes from understanding themselves as parts, however lowly, of a significant whole.

The theoretic challenge here is to grasp within one synoptic insight a) the distinctness of a historical age or social formation *together with* b) the institutional and cultural achievements of that which preceded it as the very prerequisite for the emergence of the later one's unique «spirit»; but to do this under conditions of metaphysical agnosticism, without in other words imposing upon the flow of historical matter a preconceived scheme of teleological inevitability such as vitiated the Hegelian insight. Historical emergence must be recast as a hypothetical empirical process to be illustrated with reference to the facts, material as well as intellectual, that can be adduced to sustain it.

If, however, this is a plausible assumption *for us*, the historiosophic mind itself does not share it. Historical metaphysics usually takes the analogy of gestation and birth, that somehow naturally comes upon the tongue when we talk about the succession of historical phases, not as a mere *façon de parler*, but as a substantive piece of truth in itself. This literal construal of a metaphorical expression lays in ordinate store by the painful ruptures that accompany biological births, thus privileging the notions of overthrow, dismantlement, collapse and negation, as the appropriate categories through which to divine historical meaning. This perspective is, as indicated, one-dimensional, in that each of the stages of historical becoming –arranged in an order of ascent, whereby the «higher» one «breaks with» the mode of life of the one it transcends– must be organized in terms of a single, if possible, controlling concept or value, so that the catastrophic starkness of the transition may be accentuated. There is an «age of Faith» and an «age of Reason», and in this taxonomy the concept of faith denotes one unitary men-

tal phenomenon as does the concept of reason. In such wise an absolute conflict can be set up, which can only end up with the demise of the one and the triumph of the other. This may result in the rhetorical tightening of the philosophic presentation, but clearly has no relation to the drama played out in historical actuality. Faith was a multivalent category and its relation to rationality was probed in a stimulating variety of ways in the medieval period. Similarly, reason has a multiplicity of connotations in the context of the modern scientific age, while its relation to metaphysical belief is both congenital and an enduring problematic of contemporary thought. These anomalies, though, must be ironed out so that each concept must acquire a single constitutive meaning by reference to which it can be criticized.

All great metaphysical systems that shaped the cultural endeavor of humanity are guilty of this reductivism: for Christianity, antiquity was the age of idolatrous blasphemy and carnal sin, for the Age of Reason medievalism was synonymous with superstitious irrationalism, for Romanticism the 18th century marked the triumph of crass utilitarianism and the death of poesy, for the “post-modernists” the modern period is tantamount to the tyranny of instrumental rationality. From the moment one does not simply enter the collective mind of an ideological movement as a form of inquiry concerning how the world is perceived through the lens of its metaphysical predilections (as the methodology of hermeneutic understanding legitimately and plausibly demands), but actually buys into those predilections, the incommensurability of historical epochs seems a foregone conclusion. For, then, the age in which one places oneself ideologically and existentially becomes an intransigent polemic against the one from which it supposedly freed itself in a revolutionary epic. And the adherents of its spirit conceive themselves as combatants for its unquestionable rightness. Philosophy thus mutates into ideological and political struggle, with or without the pretext of some sort of comprehensible argumentation.

It is certainly true to say that this historical Manicheanism was brought to a peak by the Enlightenment, which was congenitally incapable of a differentiated, empathetic reading of the cultural experience of the Middle Ages. This blanket dismissal has to be assessed with reference to the ferocity of the absolutist intellectual and political system that it was trying to overthrow. It was an understandable polemic given the historical context. This does not excuse its methodological defectiveness, which is indeed the least attractive element of the Enlightenment program. But it is not an element that exhausts the entirety of the Enlightenment world-view. It bears the traces of the literary controversy concerning the superiority of the ancients over the moderns or vice versa that agitated the early 18th century especially in France²⁴.

24. For an incisive account of how that quarrel provided the cultural frame, in which the

If you drag into the picture the skepticism of Hume, then his psychological interpretation of knowledge and morality restores to the very foundation of culture, precisely that non-rational dimension of existence which the Enlightenment is supposed to have obliterated. That «reason is the slave of the passions» or, alternatively, that reason is in fact a «cold passion» is an insight that stems from that paragon of the modernist ethos. And his empiricist understanding both of political forms and their history, with his demolition of the social contract, restores an unbroken continuity of the enlightened present with the primitive beginnings of the species. Philosophical empiricism also ignited literary romanticism and hence the return to sensibility and a feeling for raw nature, thus reinstating poetry at the peak of cultural achievement. If we superadd the jarringly discordant voice of Rousseau, then we obtain an insistent counterpoint to a whole set of themes constituting the official, so to speak, Enlightenment. Rousseau's contrarian anti-liberalism and intuitionist subjectivity are equally integral to the period's project of Reason. In Kant, finally, the epistemological grounding of the mechanistic outlook of Newtonian science is superseded by the validation of practical faith and by the elaboration of an organicist view of living Nature which is the source for the romantic metaphysics of the 19th century. The rational thinker and the seer are closely intertwined here, the scientific and the extra-scientific side of the human experience circle each other.

The post-modernist critique may have a vested interest in absolutizing the most questionable feature of the 18th century's conception of itself, but close hermeneutic and exegetical attention shows that the very philosophical practice of the Enlightenment subverts from within the anti-historicism that undoubtedly issues from some of its exponents. It also falsifies the reductionist reading of it (so much in vogue at the beginning of the 21st century), according to which its prime concern was the denial of the non-rational dimensions of existence cultivated in previous ages and the establishment of technique and technology as the sole arbiters of life. In fact, it even renders inoperative the notion that there might even exist such a unitary entity as the «mind of the Enlightenment», as for example E. Cassirer essayed to present it. For in his version we find the same traits of interpretative reductivism and teleological determinism that we mentioned above: the significance of the British thinkers of the period is drastically undervalued and the entire movement of ideas is reconstructed so as to lead inexorably to the consum-

anti-historical thinking of the Enlightenment (with Descartes in pride of place) as well as the historicist response (brilliantly anticipated in Vico's return to the barbarous roots of civilization) took shape, see J. M. LEVINE, Giambattista Vico and the Quarrel Between the Ancients and the Moderns, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 52, no. 1, 1991, pp. 55-79.

mation in critical idealism²⁵. The last great neo-Kantian is averse to appreciating that Kant's epistemology presupposes the validity of the chief contention of empiricism, namely that knowledge is solely about phenomena, i.e. things as they are given to the senses. And thus in his philosophy of culture we get as much an ideological use of the concept of the Enlightenment as any by its romantic or post-modernist opponents.

It is the later Habermas, who dealt a telling blow to the reductionistic reading of cultural evolution by showing that the one-dimensional understanding of rationality as instrumental control, that prevails in Weber, and which entrenched the unidimensional view of modernity prevailing in our days, is an unwarranted narrowing of the meaning and function of reason in its Western historical contexts²⁶. In Weber we become aware of the thoroughgoing tension between the *universalistic aspect and significance* of western rationality, as a critical culture implicating in principle all right-thinking human beings on the one hand, and, on the other, its *exclusively local realizations* that for contingent historical reasons privileged intellectual and practical attitudes aiming at technical control. It may be countered that Weber's methodological pluralism does not preclude the formulation of parallel paradigms of rationality that yield alternative historical results – in fact he himself also formulated the ideal type of value-guided rationality. But it is a fact that in his interpretation of western European (and especially Protestant) society he averred the overwhelming dominance of instrumental reason, and that is why Habermas' bringing out a diversified typology of rational action is a valuable enlargement of the Weberian picture.

The Enlightenment's historical one-sidedness has also long been refuted by modern historiography, which has firmly placed it within a continuum of cultural development, especially with respect to its most characteristic achievement, namely modern science, a placement that in no wise obscures the latter's singularity. We have already mentioned P. Duhem's thesis concerning the dependence of Galilean physics upon the foundational work of the Parisian nominalists, a claim, however, which seems to be overly tinged by its author's Catholicism, French nationalism and not least his conventionalist view of science²⁷. A more convincingly argued version of the same

25. E. CASSIRER, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1968.

26. This is true despite the fact that in his theory of the "life world" and its "colonization" Habermas reverts to a restricted view of rationality in line with Weber's, at least as far as the present moment is concerned. See J. HABERMAS, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, Frankfurt a.M., Suhrkamp, Bd. I, pp. 225-261 and IDEM, *op. cit.*, Bd. II, pp. 173-293. See also J. C. ALEXANDER, Habermas' New Critical Theory: Its Promise and Problems, *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 91, no. 2, 1985, pp. 400-424.

27. J. AGASSI, Duhem Vs. Galileo, *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 8, no. 31, 1957, pp. 237-248.

idea is laid out in Crombie's work²⁸. Randall adopted a similar approach with special emphasis upon the pioneering epistemological investigations of the school of Padua²⁹. The continuing influence of theistic metaphysics upon the development of modern science, and especially with regard to Newton's celestial mechanics, was brought out by Burt³⁰. The widely influential work of A. Koyré opened new interpretative possibilities by emphasizing forcefully the Platonic inspiration of the Galilean revolution. Galileo's new theory of motion is linked here with the resolution of an ancient dispute concerning the applicability of mathematics to the study of natural phenomena. The Aristotelian tradition always preferred non-mathematical descriptions of natural processes as they appear to the senses, arguing that these are truer to the infinite variability and qualitative character of phenomena. The Platonists insisted on the underlying mathematical structure of reality, which the mind reaches by leaving behind it the confusion of sense impressions (*doxa, eikasia*) and building upon its rational intuitions (*noesis*). By assuming that the laws of nature have mathematical structure and by the distinction between primary and secondary qualities of things, Galileo was able to show the significance of mathematical idealization in experimental science and, thus, vindicate Plato³¹. Modern science issues, according to Koyré, from this decisive refutation of Aristotelian anthropomorphism. It goes without saying that these views have been challenged by thinkers who are more intent upon emphasizing the radical newness of the modern mind, especially its determination to erect theory on strictly empirical and/or pragmatic foundations. There is undoubtedly a legitimate con-

28. A. C. CROMBIE, *Augustine to Galileo*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1980.

29. J. H. RANDALL, The Development of Scientific Method in the School of Padua, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1940, pp. 177-206.

30. E. A. BURTT, *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Physical Science*, Garden City N.Y., Doubleday Anchor, 1954. See also E. A. BURTT, Method and Metaphysics in Sir Isaac Newton, *Philosophy of Science*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1943, pp. 57-66. For a more technical discussion of the place of metaphysical, i.e. non-empirical, terms in the construction of scientific theory, see J. W. N. WATKINS, Metaphysics and the Advancement of Science, *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*, vol. 26, no. 2, 1975, pp. 91-121. Watkins concludes: «The history of science is usually written in terms of its empirical conquests. I have no complaints about that. But it could be written differently. The first half of Bohm's [1957], which describes the development of modern physics from classical mechanics via wave theory, electromagnetic field theory, and kinetic theory, contains few formulas, and says little about experiments. It is a beautifully clear exposition of changing world-views. A history of science that concentrates upon the *M*-components [metaphysical terms] of great scientific theories can unfold a metaphysical drama as exciting and as dialectical as Hegel's (and with the advantage of not having been invented by Hegel)» (*ibid.*, p. 115).

31. A. KOYRÉ, Galileo and Plato, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 4, no. 4, 1943, pp. 400-428. Also A. KOYRÉ, Galileo and the Scientific Revolution of the Seventeenth Century, *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 52, no. 4, 1943, pp. 333-348.

cern here, although it would be misguided to equate Newton's *hypotheses non fingo* with facile Baconian inductivism. Without a conceptual framework, "experience is blind", to use Kant's apt phrase. Besides, despite the long Aristotelian interval, one might argue that the attempt to define scientific method in recognizably modern terms had already begun in ancient Greece, namely in the attempt of the Ionian cosmologists to produce causal explanations of natural phenomena by means of other natural phenomena. Herodotus' refutation of the hypothesis of Thales concerning the cause of the annual inundations of the Nile could be read as an early instance of the use of a «crucial experiment». As J. Agassi argues³², even the upholder of the radical novelty of modern scientific theory cannot ignore a diffused search for scientific method, however groping and/or stillborn, throughout the ages (Presocratic naturalism, Archimedean experimentalism, medieval empiricism etc.). That is the reason why Hellenic antiquity always posed a serious classificatory challenge for those Enlightenment historians of culture that upheld the catastrophic model for the irruption of Reason in the present, such as Condorcet. For, however fervently they believed in a spiritual revolution that does away with the obscurantist past, they could not deny the affinities of modern rationality with the classical mind. This was, in fact, a covert thesis of continuity, affirming the origins of scientific thinking and political freedom in antiquity and their re-emergence in the modern period after a lengthy but not permanent interruption.

The most systematic investigation, albeit solely on the level of the history of thought, of the two-fold process of mobilizing ready to hand concepts from the past in order to respond to qualitatively new historical conditions, is to be found again in H. Blumenberg. His point is that the return at the end of the medieval period of the «repressed» Gnosticism (i.e. a radical disconnection between the divine will and the visible universe) under the guise of nominalism showed that the problem of nature could not be solved within the confines of traditional theology. With God thus becoming *absconditus*, a new project of physical knowledge had to be initiated, in which the human mind –itself integral element of the natural realm– was left alone facing the cosmos. In the metaphysical vacuum thus created it had to depend solely on its own resources. But these resources included habits of thought nurtured within the discarded theological framework (natural and moral teleology, human self control and subjection to a cosmic rhythm to justify individual existence etc.). But in this repetition what was put to use was not

32. J. AGASSI, Continuity and Discontinuity in the History of Science, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 34, no. 4, 1973, pp. 609-626.

the metaphysical substance of these notions, but *the function that they performed* in integrating existence, except that the historical frame of their operation was now completely changed. Thus, they filled the places vacated by the discarded theology by acquiring new intellectual content and moral significance. The God of the deists does indeed have a “family resemblance” to the medieval God, in the sense that He continues to personify the ultimate foundation of order in the universe. To that extent the secularization thesis is correct –but only to that extent. For the conception of what this order consists of (mechanical laws) and what exactly its metaphysical foundation is (a mathematical *intellectus archetypus*) diverges radically from older conceptions. The role played by «God» in unifying the universal system is similar, but what this system is and the mode of His influence is radically novel. One might even elect (to speak in terms of contemporary controversies) to include biological evolution in the repertory of divine provisions to engender the physical system as we know it. A putative God inventor of evolution and the laws of quantum mechanics is still a supreme being, whose creative energy is the «first cause», but these formal likenesses mask the vast metaphysical change that separates a God like that from the Biblical God. The epochal transition from late medievalism to modernity also necessitated a completely altered conception of the way the human mind acquires cognitive access to the cosmic structure. This change in outlook is summed up in the vaunted «epistemological turn» in philosophy, all versions of which stressed the epistemic self-containment of the knowing subject –whether this self-dependence was assessed optimistically (as by the rationalists) or pessimistically (as by the empiricists).

This is the process Blumenberg terms “transposition” of concepts, drawing on the distinction between the substance and function of ideas in cultural development, first drawn by Cassirer³³. It is in this manner that one can defend the «legitimacy» of the Enlightenment without assuming teleological inevitability in the historical process, and without subscribing to the Enlightenment’s own historiosophic conception of itself as the necessary victor in a struggle against darkness that put an end to history. The scientific spirit of modernity was a functional accommodation of the human animal to the transformed landscape of its social action, shot through with

33. H. BLUMENBERG, *Legitimität*, p. 75. The work in question is E. CASSIRER, *Substance and Function and Einstein’s Theory of Relativity*, New York, Dover, 1953, in which the attempt is made to understand from a Kantian point of view the abandonment of Aristotle’s logic of essential substances and their attributes (the only logic that Kant himself accepted as valid) in favor of a «logic of relations». In the context of this the claim is made that a concept in science is to be understood in terms of the historically changing functions that it performs in the development of scientific theory.

remnants from the dark past, which however were put to new tasks. And only an empirical investigation of this transition, through a methodic history of ideas and a historical sociology of culture, can illustrate its modalities.

V. The metaphysics of post-modernism

It would seem, then, that our disquietude with the technocratic excesses and the blanket anti-historicism of certain theoretical versions and practical applications of the Enlightenment can be dealt with without resorting to a monistic essentialism about its «spirit» and without succumbing to its Manichean philosophy of history. But it is definitely this monism and this Manicheism that its post-modernist denigrators bank on, both in their historiographic definition of modernity and in their conceptions of themselves as «liberators» from its defeated spirit. Post-modernism seems to be as much a historiosophy as the grand metaphysical narratives that it rightly condemns. It is a historiosophy, moreover, which can define itself only negatively by an unavoidable reference to the era that it supposedly has supplanted. Thus, even on the linguistic level, post-modernism cannot extricate itself from its hated alter ego.

But the affinity is much deeper. In the typical fashion of the metaphysical philosophy of history modernity is reduced to a few of its elements, and the great diversity of rationalist and non-rationalist perspectives that weave its empirical actuality is simply hushed up. This procedure has, of course, its roots in Nietzsche's pithy but sweeping labeling of European civilization as the unique outgrowth of Socratic and Christian thanatophilia. In the wake of the senseless carnage of First World War the means for this thanatic obsession were diagnosed to be the technological applications of science. In Weber's case, the ideal type of means-ends rationality, meant as a methodological guide in historical research, was to be tinged at the end with the cultural pessimism of the «iron cage» metaphor and a longing for lost poetic enchantment and an immediacy of existence drenched in spontaneous feeling –the same non-scientific motive that pervades the German «sociology of estrangement» in general. This depressing vision was but a veiled proposal of regression to an idealized pre-modern *Gemeinschaft* and thus a revocation of that hearty-felt longing that pervaded the German romantic tradition and was most strikingly enunciated by Novalis. This homeward Odyssey was rendered excessively problematic, though, when Adorno and Horkheimer discovered that the technocratic perversion was the defining mark of the entire recorded history of the race, in which case the golden age of human wholeness must presumably be sought in some hidden aboriginal «dreamtime».

Heidegger's was the final and most influential version of this diagnostic, which –freed from the quasi-Marxian assumptions of Frankfurt theory– was

able freely to mine medieval mysticism and later to advocate in the manner of Nietzsche the return to the Presocratics, in this case to Eleatic intuitionism specially interpreted, by means of which the objectified self of contemporary life is absorbed by a dark, ineffable Being. It is in these deep commitments of his theory that one might profitably seek the affinities between Heideggerianism and Nazism, and not just to the ephemeral political associations of Heidegger as a person. And this is the reason why he stubbornly refused to denounce Nazism as a world-view as long as he lived.

The same features can be detected in arguably the most emblematic work of the post-modernist imagination, namely Foucault's *The Order of Things*³⁴. What we have here is a poetic elegy hiding under a philosophical costume, a kind of prose poetry consisting of bold flights of thought that have been rendered as a proof to normal historiographic assessments (i.e. reference to established fact) through the claim that they are not meant to be a history of scientific method, but an uncovering of the hidden presuppositions behind the work of all scientists operating at any given period. This «archaeological» method, which is not explicitly defined, seems to consist in the arbitrary selection of mainly marginal and non-canonic intellectual documents in order to establish suggestive, even fascinating, linkages that bear out the main interpretative thesis. These texts, thus, play the role of privileged facts verifying the guiding insight, while at the same time forbidding the testing of it by reference to evidence that has been excluded as allegedly non-relevant, in the typical procedure of «absolute» theory as defined above. Foucault writes about the historical development of science while *a priori* disclaiming the métier of a historian of science, thus robbing his possible critics of their accustomed tools and forcing them to evaluate his theory only on its own terms. This is the classical stratagem of self-validation. We, further, detect in his account the kind of periodization that reduces whole historical eras (whose boundaries, incidentally, are quite elastic as it suits the argument) to a single each time mode of intellectual procedure: the Renaissance is the period of signs and analogies that illustrate the “sympathy” of all things, the so-called Classical Age (the 17th and 18th centuries), the period of «representation», in which measurement fixes the separate individuality of objects, and the 19th century the age of the sciences of Man, in which linguistics, economics and anthropology are premised upon the historical evolution of their subject matter. The fact that multifarious strands of thought surrounded and even penetrated the one that he chooses to privilege in each one of these periods is a possibility that his exposition is meant

34. M. FOUCAULT, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York, Routledge, 2002.

to preclude³⁵. As was to be expected, these three absolutely distinct and mutually exclusive epistemic universes (*epistemes*, in Foucault's language) succeed one another by means of an abrupt "mutation" that puts knowledge on a new foundation thus negating the assumptions of the previous one. The most celebrated doctrine of the book is the anti-humanist manifesto that caps the theoretic perambulation: we are apparently at the threshold of another catastrophic mutation which will wipe out Man as a concept and value, thus inaugurating a new epistemic era, which however is not in the least described as to its constitutive features. We are thus left to imagine, based on the tenor of his discourse, that Foucault's post-humanism is actually a return to the enchanted wholeness of the era of mystical «sympathies», a suspicion that is inevitably strengthened by his fascination in the last years of his life with the theocracy of the Ayatollahs.

What all of these approaches have in common is, thus, a regressive longing, whose practical implications are the wholesale dismantlement of the technological and institutional frame of contemporary life, unmixed with the slightest appreciation of the advantages that the realization of Enlightenment values has brought, despite their often alienated form. And as such they can serve as a cover, especially in societies where the values and institutions of modernity have not taken deep root, for outright reactionary political and ideological projects. Compared to this, the classical Marxian critique of capitalism is more theoretically cogent and realistic, demanding as it does the preservation of the manifest advantages of modernity in terms of both material well-being and freedom and the suppression only of the conditions of alienation which safeguard the unequal distribution of what is explicitly recognized as the wealth of humanity. Marxism, as a genuine product of the Enlightenment, was contemptuous of any longing for the resurrection of pre-modern forms of life and of any anti-scientific program, for after all it did understand itself precisely as a form of science. For Marx the anti-Enlightenment is synonymous with political and intellectual reaction. His main indictment of capitalism is on account of its *irrationality*, not its rationalism. As Sokal commented at the time of his celebrated prank³⁶, the

35. For a critique showing how determined Foucault was to privilege just one historical element of each epoch, in order to construct each of his «epistemes» in abstraction from the multitude of diverging and even antithetical modes of investigation co-existing with the one that he wants to emphasize, see G. S. ROUSSEAU, *Whose Enlightenment? Not Man's: The Case of Michel Foucault*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1972-1973, pp. 238-256. Rousseau argues that in the abandonment of the Renaissance theory of "signatures", for instance, the most important motive was the realization of the absence of any healing effects of the substances that were supposed to owe their medicinal qualities to their resemblance with the diseased organ to which they were applied. It is this testing by pragmatic consequence that Foucault deliberately ignores.

36. A. SOKAL, *A Physicist Experiments with Cultural Studies*, *Lingua Franca*, 1996, pp. 62-

reason why he and countless others committed themselves to Marxism was the doctrine's emphasis on the scientific understanding of society, not because of its debunking of scientific method. In so far as post-modernism today passes as the legitimate successor of Marxism in radical theory, it is instructive to note that the two currents of thought are clearly incompatible.

But, one might interject, divergence from Marxism might be a tolerable price to pay if, by means of the post-modernist denial of modernity, the dragon of «grand narratives» is slain and theoretical thinking is thereby brought back to the raw immediacy of finite existence in all the dimensions that transcendental philosophy had left out of purview, namely the urgency of its sensuousness, its bodily presence and function, its imaginative self-inventions, the elusiveness of its discourse etc. In fact the seminal event, according to some, in 20th century philosophy, namely the confrontation between Cassirer and Heidegger at Davos in 1929³⁷, is deemed to signify precisely such a demise of the universalistic philosophy of consciousness that had been hitherto hegemonic in European modernity and the triumphant rise of a new ruling paradigm, that of finitude (*Dasein*) wandering unredeemed and unredeemable in a world voided of meaning and even of sheer reality. And it is true to say that at Davos the brash and aggressive Heidegger did indeed emerge rhetorically victorious vis-à-vis a sick and fatigued Cassirer, who according to accounts could only manage a rather trite recapitulation of formulaic neo-Kantianism.

But whether this knock-out signaled the end of the quest for universality in thought and the definitive demonstration of the impossibility of intersubjective meanings in communication is another question altogether. One might think that the very occurrence of the debate, together with countless similar, albeit less notable ones that have been continuing ever since, is rather indication of the possibility of shared (undistorted, in Habermas' parlance) meanings in communication³⁸. This may not be a *realized* possibility, but if

64, accessible at www.physics.nyu.edu/faculty/sokal together with many other texts relating to the famous hoax.

37. For an account of the exchanges based on notes by those present, see C. H. HAMBURG, A Cassirer-Heidegger Seminar, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1964, pp. 208-222. For commentary on the encounter, see G. WAITE, On Esotericism: Heidegger and/or Cassirer at Davos, *Political Theory*, vol. 26, no. 5, 1998, pp. 603-651; P. E. GORDON, Continental Divide: Ernst Cassirer and Martin Heidegger at Davos, 1929 – An Allegory of Intellectual History, *Modern Intellectual History*, 1.2, 2004, pp. 219-248; D. COSKUN, Cassirer in Davos. An Intermezzo on Magic Mountain (1929), *Law and Critique*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2006, pp. 1-26.

38. For the existence of a «communication *a priori*» in philosophical debate, see K.-O. APEL, Communication and the Foundation of the Humanities, *Acta Sociologica*, vol. 15, no. 1, 1972, pp. 7-26.

you take it out as a regulative notion, as the prospect on a horizon towards which all participants implicitly move, then all talking as such grinds to a halt. And if this is indeed the point of post-modernist philosophy, namely to demonstrate the impossibility of talking by means of haphazardly strung phonemes that simulate talk, then it must be conceded that some of its votaries have succeeded triumphantly in making it. But this cannot be all. For Heidegger was addressing an audience, which he desired to have assent to what he was enunciating. He was not, presumably, interested, as no *bona fide* philosopher is presumably interested, in swaying them through his charm and the melodiousness of his diction alone. For philosophic assent is a rational act of some sort, however hard it may be to define the criteria involved. The very desire for conversation is *ipso facto* an indication of some shared meaning that the participants aim to discover or to construct.

Apart from that, the Enlightenment that Heidegger «slew» at Davos was the version presented by Cassirer, which –as already mentioned– was trimmed and doctored, in order to present an inevitable Kantian culmination of the movement. Cassirer's disinclination towards British empiricism, on account of its heteronomous –in his view– conception of the mind, thus, leaves out of the picture precisely that cohort of modern thinkers most averse to the holistic metaphysic that ultimately issued from Kant (against Kant's own express epistemological prohibitions, it ought to be noted). Empiricism is the very doctrine that undermined the gnoseological megalomania of rationalism, by emphasizing the insuperable limitations of the mind's cognitive abilities and the *a posteriori* nature of knowledge. Empiricism, thus, restored a methodological skepticism, in the sense that every scientific hypothesis on offer is now seen as up for possible refutation through the adduction of fresh empirical evidence. In this manner, the goal of a complete description of reality is drastically put off. The salutary consequence of this is that space is opened up for radical disagreement among competing theoretical explanations, that dissent is now seen as the very motor propelling scientific theory to its next (provisional) peak. The significance of *dissensus* in social and intellectual life is certainly not the invention of post-modernist theorizing.

Thus, at Davos it was not just Cassirer as a person who was exhausted, but also his restricted, if not retrograde, account of Enlightenment method, the one that the post-modernists eagerly uphold and promote precisely because it can be easily defeated. His defeat, then, such as it was, cannot be taken as symbolizing the «end of modernity» in philosophical terms. And in fact, among the audience at Davos was a person who sat silently, abstaining from the exchanges, but whose own view of science represented the latest development in self-consciously Enlightenment thinking. His name was Carnap, and the logical positivism that he initiated is precisely premised upon the ex-

plicit rejection of the possibility of the Kantian synthetic *a priori*, thus returning to a Humean epistemology with its attendant damnation of holistic metaphysics.

If, consequently, our overview of the Enlightenment is broadened to include those of its tendencies that were inimical to grand synthetic reconstructions of nature and history as closed wholes, in other words to its analytical, its finitist side, then it would seem that the legitimate concerns of the post-modern critique, its emphasis on the concrete individual, existing in spite of and even against the «spirit of the age» and outside ruling orthodoxies and institutions, can be fully addressed within Enlightenment theory itself. For the «essence» of modernity, if there is such a thing, surely is not just the construction of totalizing systems of order and control, as even such a perceptive analyst of the modernist condition as Z. Bauman claims³⁹. But such systems *are legitimated* by the free thought and action of the individuals consenting to place themselves under their jurisdiction. A «democracy from below», as Bauman envisages it, is not, either in practice or in logic, the antithesis of *legitimate* order. For the recognition of self-determining agency, the privileging of subjective autonomy, is an integral part of the Enlightenment narrative of governing reason. Disobedience, dissent, antinomianism is just as integral to that narrative as the regulative aim of reasoned consensus, a consensus which –as indicated above– is in substantive matters of moral purpose a mere horizon enveloping an actuality of diverging and even contradictory orientations. And, whatever operative consensus there might be in modern society, is to be found in the scaffolding of *procedural* norms and arrangements, whose function is to guarantee the radical self-definition of the autonomous individual.

The coercive inculcation of moral and metaphysical visions, deemed obligatory for all, would seem to be the characteristic tendency of pre-modern societies. This does not imply that the ideal type of an «open society» fully corresponds to, or mirrors, the empirical reality of modern society –no ideal type is meant to do that. But to the extent that this reality diverges from the normative framework, this constitutes a violation of the very rational principles guiding the modern mind. And this violation can only be cured through the invocation and the consistent application of those principles themselves, something that undoubtedly also enlarges their scope and meaning under changing historical circumstances. The victims of state repression, illicit technological monitoring of privacy, denial of their various self-

39. Z. BAUMAN, Sociological Enlightenment – For Whom? About What?, *Theory, Culture and Society* 2000, vol. 17. 2, pp. 71-82.

definitions (sexual, ethnic religious etc.), can only fight back by invoking rights that are, or ought to be, legally guaranteed. This recourse is fully within the procedural confines of the modern system and in consonance with its moral logic. It is hard to see in this context in what way the meaning of «right» disappears, especially as it is constantly on the tongue of those fighting the failings of modernity, including its intransigent foes. This is, rather, a process that demands the further completion of the system of modernity that remains, in Habermas' phrase, uncompleted, because social actuality keeps throwing up concrete cases that challenge the ideal principle of the primacy of the autonomous self to empirically extend itself in ways that previous ages could not conceive: if homosexuality in the past was «self-evidently» a sin and a disease, today it is, just as self-evidently, recognized as a right. And, we must add, this process *cannot be completed*, for no one can predict which similar such cases will be thrown up in the future.

The unwillingness of the post-modernist critique to envisage modernity in its philosophical many-sidedness and in its social contradictoriness, in which case it would view its own critical thought and action as an integral aspect of modernity's own work, is the cause for its ultimate philosophical failing. For, in its essentialist determination to describe modernity as a unitary system of administrative regimentation, panoptical surveillance, technological streamlining, and economic optimization (all sides of one and the same project of objectification), it can only counterpose its own soteriological vision, which is just as much holistic and metaphysical as any of the historiosophic grand schemes that it ostensibly loathes⁴⁰. Post-modernism is, hence, not the enemy of «grand narratives» that it wants to pass as. It simply seeks to substitute its own grand vision for those it claims to have overthrown. It is preaching an end of history, albeit a negative one, in which the place of the religion of man is taken by an equally universal and all-pervasive religion of cosmic emptiness. The finite self, robbed of all cognitive and moral resources, is now supposed to be wandering without purpose in a grand desert worn by care and ennui. With all meanings voided language itself comes to an end, excepting perhaps the «private language» of a solitary poet, whom of course nobody understands, if one hears at all. This is the modern version of the hermits and the stylites of late antiquity, those «fools in Christ» fired by a transcendent eros, except that today one is in love with the absent *per se*, with the *Nichts das nichtet* (which very often turns out to

40. For a perceptive discussion of the metaphysical core of post-modern theorizing, see F. G. VERGES, The Unbearable Lightness of Deconstruction, *Philosophy*, vol. 67, no. 261, 1992, pp. 386-393.

be the author's own ego). Of course, one could put up some kind of hyper-anthropic or agonistic show in the midst of this bleakness, but with the disappearance of mutuality as a meaningful concept or value this gesture is the apogee of vanity. It either collapses on itself, or if it chances upon some other wanderer in the desert it may fall upon him/her to possess and/or enslave. Power is the only recognized mode of intersubjective intercourse in this scheme, which puts up a show of opposing power, but in fact secretly idealizes it. But, at the end of the day, a gigantic chasm called either Nothingness or alternatively Being (which comes down to the same thing) devours these vain doings and the whole thing implodes into a terminal silence.

This is not the silence of Wittgenstein sensibly warning us to keep mum about things that cannot be spoken of. It is the absolute silence reigning when the very sources of life have been stilled. This is a shocking vision indeed. And the question is, firstly, whether it accurately describes our present condition in all of its aspects and dimensions. This is an empirical matter, and straightaway we can see that the answer is negative, if only judging from the activity of the best of the post-modernist believers themselves who keep fighting against the injustices of the present order, as if it made sense to aim for a better world. The general garrulousness of that tribe is also to be emphasized. For, just like Heidegger at Davos, they aim to convince us by some wordy concoction constituting an argument, however ciphered.

The second question is who is actually seduced by the vision. This, being a matter of psychology, admits of no philosophical answer.

P. S. VALLIANOS
(Athens)

**ΤΟ ΝΟΗΜΑ ΤΟΥ ΠΑΡΟΝΤΟΣ ΚΑΙΡΟΥ:
ΣΗΜΕΙΩΣΕΙΣ ΓΙΑ ΤΗΝ ΜΟΙΡΑ ΤΗΣ ΝΕΩΤΕΡΙΚΟΤΗΤΑΣ**

Π ε ρ ί λ η ψ η

Τὸ ἄρθρο ἀναφέρεται κατ' ἀρχὴν σὲ ὁρισμένες θεμελιακὲς ἀπορίες σχετικὰ μὲ τὴν φύση τῆς ἱστορικῆς γνώσης. Τὸ ἀντικείμενο τῆς ἱστορικῆς ἔρευνας (τὸ ἀντικειμενικὸ δεδομένο ἢ γεγονός) εἶναι ἐξ ὁρισμοῦ ἀπὸν. Ἀπὸ αὐτὸ ἔπεται ὅτι ὁ ρόλος τῆς «δημιουργικῆς φαντασίας» ἢ τῆς ἐρμηνευτικῆς συνείδησης στὴν διατύπωση τῆς ἱστορικῆς ἀλήθειας εἶναι καθοριστικός. Ἐξ ἄλλου, σήμερα ἀναγνωρίζεται ὅτι ἡ ἐμπειρικὴ παρατήρηση εἶναι «ἐμφορτὴ θεωρίας», ἀκόμη καὶ στίς φυσικὲς ἐπιστῆμες. Ἡ διαπίστωση ὅμως αὐτὴ δὲν ἔρχεται νὰ ἀναιρέσει τὴν ἀντικειμενικότητα τῆς γνώσης καὶ στὴν μία καὶ στὴν ἄλλη περίπτωση. Τὸ τί «πραγματικῶς ἔλαβε χώρα» στὸ παρελθὸν ἀποφασίζεται ἀπὸ τὴν κοινότητα τῶν ἐπιστημόνων ποὺ μεταχειρίζονται κοινῶς παραδεκτὲς κριτικὲς μεθόδους. Ὁ χωρισμὸς σὲ περιόδους εἶναι κρίσιμο ἀναλυτικὸ ἐργαλεῖο τοῦ ἱστορικοῦ. Ὅμως τέτοιες κατατάξεις τοῦ ἱστορικοῦ ὕλικου εἶναι εὐρετικὲς ὑποθέσεις ποὺ καθοδηγοῦν τὴν ἔρευνα, καὶ ὄχι «ἱστοριοσοφία», μ' ἄλλα λόγια ἀδιάσειστες ἀλήθειες γιὰ τὴν ἀπαράβατη νομοτέλεια τοῦ ἱστορικοῦ γίνεσθαι. Ἡ περιοδολόγηση «νεωτερικότητα-μετανεωτερικότητα» εἶναι μιὰ ἐρμηνευτικὴ προσέγγιση ποὺ κυριαρχεῖ τελευταῖα. Ὅμως καὶ αὐτὴ, ὅπως προβάλλεται ἀπὸ τοὺς «μετανεωτερικοὺς» στοχαστές, παρουσιάζει ὅλα τὰ χαρακτηριστικὰ τῆς ἱστοριοσοφικῆς μεταφυσικῆς, τῆς «μεγάλης ἀφήγησης», δηλαδή, ποὺ ὑποτίθεται ὅτι ἀρνεῖται. Ὅλα τὰ οὐσιώδη καθήκοντα τοῦ κριτικοῦ στοχασμοῦ, ὅπως τὰ ἀντιλαμβάνονται καὶ οἱ ἴδιοι οἱ μετανεωτερικοί, ὑπηρετοῦνται ἀπὸ τὶς βασικὲς ἠθικὲς καὶ διανοητικὲς στάσεις τῆς νεωτερικότητας, χωρὶς νὰ εἶναι ἀναγκαῖα ἡ ριζικὴ κατάλυση τοῦ νοήματος καί, στὸ τέλος, τῆς ἴδιας τῆς γλώσσας. Τὸ ζητούμενο εἶναι νὰ πραγματοποιθοῦν τὰ νοήματα τῆς νεωτερικότητας, ποὺ ἀπὸ τὴν σκοπιὰ αὐτὴ παραμένει ἀνολοκλήρωτη, καὶ ὄχι νὰ ξεπέσουμε στὸν ἀνορθόλογο μυστικισμό.

Περικλῆς Σ. ΒΑΛΛΙΑΝΟΣ