The Legitimacy of the Modern Age

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Thomas McCarthy, general editor
Hans-Georg Gadamer, Reason in the Age of Science, 1982
Theodor W. Adorno, Prisms, 1982
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II
Theological Absolutism and
Human Self-Assertion
Introduction

Among the weapons with which the legitimacy of the modern age is attacked, the idea of secularization is only one. Its effectiveness depends especially on the fact that the potential attack that it embodies need not be made as explicit as a demand for restitution. It allows all sorts of soft modulations of its claim. There are less indirect statements, harsher anathemas. In the application of the category of secularization, it is admitted, and has to be admitted consistently, that the modern age is an epoch of an original character; it is only denied that this is on its own account, by virtue of the rational authenticity it claims for itself. The plausibility so broadly conceded to the category of secularization (even by those whose attitude to its implications is disinterested) rests clearly enough on two things: It appears to do justice to the high degree of individualization of all the components in our historical consciousness; and making a moderate use of its consequences, it requires nothing like a 'return to the origin,' but merely an acknowledgment of dependence.

A more massive and direct attack is made through applying the sorts of categories that are meant to exhibit the epoch as a failure of history itself, as simple regression. Naturally the range of defenses that the elementary claim of the new secured for itself by appeal to the authority and validity of what had been before provided plenty of evidence for charges that it was a mere pagan reaction. But hardly anyone can still be inclined to join in the Renaissance's misunderstanding of itself as a reappearance of the old and thus a return to the inalienable norm. For the constitution of the modern age, it is not
the Renaissance that is exemplary; on the contrary, it is the opposition encountered by the fundamental Renaissance thesis of the unsurpassability of ancient literature, from the seventeenth century onward—indeed, even before it was learned how little the ancient world had been understood by those who promised to renew it. That the modern age is neither a renewal of the ancient world nor its continuation by other means no longer needs to be argued.

More on target than the accusation of a relapse into paganism is that of a relapse into Gnosticism. The Gnostic trauma of the early centuries of the Christian era is buried deeper than the trauma of the bloody persecutions that contributed to the glory of testimony to the new faith. He who says that the modern age “would be better entitled the Gnostic age” is reminding us of the old enemy who did not come from without but was ensconced at Christianity’s very roots, the enemy whose dangerousness resided in the evidence that it had on its side a more consistent systematicization of the biblical premises. Independently of the question whether the description of the modern age as a renewal of Gnosticism is representative of the full range of the attempts to contrast it as a Christian heresy to the substance of Christianity, the Gnosticism formulation deserves some consideration as the most significant of these attempts, and the most instructive in its implications. I am not particularly interested in determining what the author in fact meant by this phrase; even if like most culture-critical commonplaces it was only dropped in passing—which, however, I do not suggest was the case—it would still have to provoke reflection in view of what it can contain. The problem with which we are occupied derives contour from it.

The thesis that I intend to argue here begins by agreeing that there is a connection between the modern age and Gnosticism, but interprets it in the reverse sense: The modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism. A presupposition of this thesis is that the first overcoming of Gnosticism, at the beginning of the Middle Ages, was unsuccessful. A further implication is that the medieval period, as a meaningful structure spanning centuries, had its beginning in the conflict with late-antique and early-Christian Gnosticism and that the unity of its systematic intention can be understood as deriving from the task of subduing its Gnostic opponent.

The problem left unsolved by the ancient world was the question of the origin of what is bad in the world. The idea of the cosmos, which dominated classical Greek philosophy and was the basis of the preeminence of the Platonic/Aristotelian and Stoic tradition, determined that the question of the bad would receive a secondary, systematically peripheral position. Ancient metaphysics is not even cosmody, justification of the world, because the world neither needs nor is capable of justification. The cosmos is everything that can be, and the Platonic myth of the demiurge guarantees that in the world the potential of everything that could be and of every way in which it could be is exhausted by the reproduction of the Ideas. The crucial systematic juncture is at the point where, in the process of the world’s formation, rational planning and blind necessity, archetype and matter collide. This juncture is bridged by a highly characteristic metaphor: Reason brings necessity under its authority “by persuasion.” The Greeks’ belief in the power of speech and persuasion is here projected into the cosmos; the process that decides the quality of the nature that is coming into being within the dangerous dualism of Idea and matter is perceived in accordance with the model of the political. The Platonic demiurge is not omnipotent; he is confronted with matter, which he must employ in his work as a formless substrate of unknown origin; he must rely on the power of the reason to which he has delegated his work. The danger to which the process is exposed at this point is not felt in the text. There remains a residue of undefined incongruity,
and on this rests the entire burden of the explanation of the fact that in this world there are also bad things.

However, in the tradition of Platonism itself the systematic shift of accent enters at this point. The fundamental Platonic equivocation, that the world of appearance is indeed the reproduced image of Ideas but cannot attain the perfection of the original, is resolved by Neoplatonism in favor of the second aspect: The world appears as the great failure to equal its ideal model. The metaphysical factor in this failure has been prescribed since Plato; it is the hyle [matter]. The difference between idea and substratum, between form and stuff, is increased in the Neoplatonic systems; to the theologizing of the Idea corresponds the demonizing of matter. What could at one time be conceived of as the subjection of necessity to rational persuasion, namely, the formation of the world, is now the confinement of the world soul in the womb—or better: the prison—of matter. For Plotinus the world comes into being through the fall of this world soul, which is deceived by matter and lost in it. So the world does not come into being through the power of the antithetical principle of matter alone. This distinguishes Plotinus’s system from the absolute dualism of Gnosticism. The soul’s fall into the world is an act of disorder, which still presupposes a cosmos in which everything that exists occupies the position that befits it. This order can be reestablished if the world soul reverses the process in which it ensnared itself. All of this is still within the realm of discourse laid out in Plato, even if it does, as it were, exaggerate the metaphysical ‘distances’ in the original ground plan. What is bad in the world continues to be the nonfulfillment of the obligatory order.

Gnosticism bears a more radical metaphysical stamp. Where it employs the Neoplatonist system, it is nevertheless not a consistent extension of that system but rather a reoccurrence of its positions. The demiurge has become the principle of badness, the opponent of the transcendent God of salvation who has nothing to do with bringing the world into existence. The world is the labyrinth of the pneuma [spirit] gone astray; as cosmos, it is the order opposed to salvation, the system of a fall. Gnosticism has no need of theodicy since the good God has never had anything to do with the world. Even the bringer of salvation, sent by the good God to deliver the lost pneuma through knowledge, can only appear to assume a human body in order to deceive the demiurge’s watchmen. The downfall of the world becomes the critical process of final salvation, the dissolution of the demiurge’s illegitimate creation.

This outline, which I have given here only in order to show what is really ‘Gnostic,’ need not concern itself with the broad range of speculative variants. My interest is in the challenge that this system had to represent for both the ancient tradition and the Christian dogmatics formulated on the basis of that tradition. With respect to the ancient world it disputed the status of the cosmos as the embodiment of all reality that is binding in itself; with respect to Christianity it disputed the combination of creation and redemption as the work of a single God. That there could be beneficial consequences for Christianity in the separation of God the creator from God the redeemer was grasped, with the passion that can be aroused by a theological system that is consistent in itself, by Marcion, the greatest and most fascinating of the Gnostic thinkers, who was excommunicated in Rome in 144 A.D.

The fundamental thought that underlies Marcion’s Gnostic dogmatics is, I think, this: A theology that declares its God to be the omnipotent creator of the world and bases its trust in this God on the omnipotence thus exhibited cannot at the same time make the destruction of this world and the salvation of men from the world into the central activity of this God. Marcion saw Christianity, in the process of its dogmatic formation, in just this dilemma, in view of the heterogeneous contents of its fundamental documents, which spoke on the one hand of creation and history and on the other hand of redemption and a Last Judgment. “One stands amazed,” writes Adolf von Harnack, “before the fact that Greeks were prepared to accept all of this as sacred revelation.”58 Marcion decided to make a radical incision. He found in Gnostic dualism the schema for the unequivocal character that he thought he could give to the Christian doctrine. The god who had created man and the world and given them a Law that could not be fully complied with, who directed the Old Testament history of the Jews in the manner of an ill-tempered tyrant, who demanded sacrifices and ceremonies, was the evil demiurge. The god who brings redemption without in the least owing it to man, whom he did not create, the “foreign god,” is seen as the essence of pure, because unreasoning, love. This divinity has the right to destroy a cosmos that he did not create and to preach disobedience of a Law that he did not lay down. Deliverance turns out to be primarily man’s enlightenment regarding
his fundamental and impenetrable deception by the cosmos. Gnosis must therefore be literally recognition (Erkenntnis). But the deliverer who brings this recognition from its foreign source in transcendence can no longer be the son of the creator of the world and the ruler of its history. Marcion wanted a god who did not need to contradict himself by creating man in such a way that he would have to deliver him from his lost state; by laying down a Law, the impossibility of complying with which would make it necessary for him to absolve those who became guilty under it; by setting up a natural order, only to infringe on it with his own miracles—in a word, by producing a world that, in spite of his omnipotence, in the end allows the announced design of salvation to accrue only to a few men.

Marcion wanted to place his foreign God, free of the burden of responsibility for the world, entirely and without restriction on the side of man's salvation. The price of this was the attachment of a negative valuation to the Greek cosmic metaphysics and the destruction of the trust in the world that could have been sanctioned by the biblical conception of creation. The decisive contrast to the Neoplatonic system and to the other Gnostic systems lies in that the process of salvation is not symmetrical with the preceding history of calamity; it does not follow the path back to the reestablishment of an original condition, putting an end to its 'interruption.' Men do not return to their transcendent home from a foreign world, which in accordance with the order of things they should never have left, but rather—as the enthusiast Harnack puts it—"a magnificent foreign land is disclosed and becomes their homeland." 19

Marcion made clear the logic that was the problem of the whole immense literature that the patristic epoch produced. Gnosticism’s systematic intention forced the Church, in the interest of consolidation, to define itself in terms of dogma. Harnack has advanced the thesis that "Catholicism was constructed in opposition to Marcion." 20 Taken more broadly, this corresponds to the thesis that the formation of the Middle Ages can only be understood as an attempt at the definitive exclusion of the Gnostic syndrome. To retrieve the world as the creation from the negative role assigned to it by the doctrine of its demiurgic origin, and to salvage the dignity of the ancient cosmos for its role in the Christian system, was the central effort all the way from Augustine to the height of Scholasticism. Our interest here is not in the history of this effort itself, the failure of which made it necessary to overcome

Gnosticism a second time, but in the price that had to be paid in order to overcome Gnostic dualism within the medieval system, whose frailty must be understood in relation to that effort.

The persuasive power of Gnosticism for early Christianity lay in the universal foundation that it offered for the eschatological promise. The downfall of the world and judgment over it were supposed to be imminent, and concentration on the significance of this event as salvation presupposed consciousness that the world deserved destruction. Gnosticism gave the most plausible explanation of this presupposition. It was meaningless to pursue the questions of the creation of the world and the lord of its history when this episode was soon to come to an end. The fact that the expected parousia [presence, arrival] in this case, the 'Second Coming' did not occur must have been full of consequences for the transformation of the original teachings. Here, however, we are interested only in one point: The world, which turned out to be more persistent than expected, attracted once again the old questions regarding its origin and its dependability and demanded a decision between trust and mistrust, an arrangement of life with the world rather than against it. It is easy to see that the eventual decision against Gnosticism was due not to the inner superiority of the dogmatic system of the Church but to the intolerability of the consciousness that this world is supposed to be the prison of the evil god and is nevertheless not destroyed by the power of the god who, according to his revelation, is determined to deliver mankind.

The original eschatological pathos directed against the existence of the world was transformed into a new interest in the condition of the world. The metaphysical interest in the Creation returned once it appeared that deliverance was accomplished less spectacularly in the underground of what is merely believed. The large number of patristic commentaries on the first book of the Bible, Genesis, is tangible evidence of this consequence. Christianity had to adjust itself to the rules of the game in the given and persisting world; it had to demonstrate its ability to discuss with the surrounding Hellenistic world the latter's pressing questions regarding the attitude of the new doctrine to the old cosmos. The eschatological heritage, which soon aroused not the community's hope but its fear, which motivated prayer not for the early coming of the Lord but for postponement of the end, proved to be a burden in the effort to achieve acceptance in the surrounding spiritual world. The scene is Romanesque, but not for that reason any
less instructive, when in the apocryphal *Passion of Saint Paul* the emperor Nero explodes with rage precisely because Paul holds out the prospect of the destruction of this world by fire; the fact that Nero orders the execution of Paul and the cremation of the Christians is understood as the consequence of this *kerygma* [proclamation, invocation, preaching], as giving its adherents a taste of their own medicine.  

The settlement arrived at between Christianity and ancient metaphysics led to a new conservatism regarding the cosmos. Augustine’s turning away from Manichaean Gnosticism designates the end point of a development. The conception of creation is effective in criticism even of Neoplatonism, which had provided and would continue to provide so many elements of the new system. Augustine attacks the postulate of Porphyry that the flight of the soul from the world of bodies is the goal of its striving; he who says this, Augustine objects, must apply the same reasoning to the world soul and feel himself called upon to hasten the destruction of the world.  

The Stoic formula that the world was created for the sake of man finds broad acceptance in the patristic literature, making it possible to forget that man’s salvation had been expected precisely from the destruction of the cosmos. The concept of providence, although foreign to the biblical world of ideas, is assimilated as theological property and made into an essential anti-Gnostic principle.

But a result of this development is that the question of the origin of what is bad in the world becomes pressing once more, and at the same time the traditional means of solving it are cut off. Plato had not said that the demiurge was omnipotent but only assured us that he had made the world as good and as worthy of himself as he was able. Necessity, the adversary whom he had found already on the scene, had set him a limit beyond which he had no power but that of mere persuasion. The biblical God of creation had been raised to an omnipotent being, and the elimination of Gnosticism required that matter be deprived of its dualistic predestination and be included in the unity of the creation from nothing. The elaboration of *creatio ex nihilo* [creation from nothing] as *concreatio* [co-creation (of matter and form)] was Augustine’s lasting achievement in his commentaries on Genesis. Exegesis no longer could, and no longer wanted to, overlook the fact that God, in the biblical account of creation, had expressly given each of His works the confirmation that it was good. Then where did the bad in the world come from?

The answer that Augustine gave to this question was to have the most important consequences of all the decisions that he made for the Middle Ages. With a gesture just as stirring as it was fateful, he took for man and upon man the responsibility for the burden oppressing the world. Now, in the aftermath of Gnosticism, the problem of the justification of God has become overwhelming; and that justification is accomplished at the expense of man, to whom a new concept of freedom is ascribed expressly in order to let the whole of an enormous responsibility and guilt be imputed to it.

Five years after turning away from Manichaeanism and one year after his baptism, Augustine wrote the first book of his *De libero arbitrio* [On Free Will]. But the thematic question of his treatise is not the freedom of the will as an anthropological and moral quality but rather as the condition under which it was possible for the just God to punish man, on account of his failings, with the bad things in the world. The premise of human freedom allows Augustine to interpret the deficiencies of the world not as an original failure of the construction of the world for man’s benefit but rather as the result of God’s subsequent intervention in His work in order to put nature in the service of justice with respect to man.

The guide to his solution of the problem of the origin of the bad (undae malum?) had already been given to Augustine by the linguistic fact that ancient philosophy had not distinguished in its language between the wickedness that man perpetrates and the bad things that he encounters. That these bad things are the world’s reflex of his own wickedness was thus already implicit in the formulation of the question. The problematic of freedom is secondary; it is promoted from outside inward, the train of thought being that the bad things in the cosmos can only be punishments if man can really be made responsible for his actions. The justice of the *dixit tustus* [just God] is preserved as a premise, not proved as a conclusion. Belief in a just God gives access to the knowledge of human freedom and the solution to the metaphysical question of the origin of the bad; Augustine’s reasoning here corresponds to his schema of the dependence of knowledge on premises accepted in faith.

But is not freedom, if it is made responsible in this way for the bad things in the world, itself bad in its turn? Here is the gap in the argumentation through which the Gnostic demiurge threatens to force his way in again. Augustine summons up dialectic and rhetoric in
order to close this gap; the difficulties in answering this question were evidently responsible for the delay of seven years in the composition of the second and third books of the treatise on freedom. Must not even those who lead bad lives assent to freedom, without which they could not ever be good? Even he who is wicked wants at least to be able to be good; thus even for him, freedom is something that he does not wish did not exist. Freedom confirms the goodness of God and His work in every case because it wills itself; indeed it wills itself independently of its moral quality. But falling back upon the reflexive structure of the will, which wills not only this or that but primarily itself as the condition of its concrete acts of choice, only moves the problem a step further back: The will that wills itself is only free if it can also not will itself. Here rationality breaks down; reasons cannot be given for self-annihilation: "Scire enim non potest quod nihil est" [For what is nothing cannot be known].

Can man bear the burden of being responsible for the cosmos, that is, for seeing to it that God’s design for His work does not miscarry? This conception reminds one remotely of Nietzsche’s attempt, with the idea of “eternal recurrence,” to make man sense the enormity of his responsibility for that which always, again and again, will be the way it was once. Augustine has none of this pathos of human responsibility for the world. The burden placed on man is for him only a side effect of the unburdening of his God. But Augustine would certainly never have been a Manichean if the bad parts of the world had appeared to him merely as disruptions of the great order, as absences of beauty in an otherwise unclouded picture. In order to deserve as punishment the world as it had been perceived and evaluated by the Manicheans, the sins of man, which take over the position of the wickedness of the Gnostic demiurge, had to be great, all too great. Even in the remorseful examination of his past life in the Confessions, Augustine found no sin that could have been measured on this scale. The balance between the condition of the world and the guilt of mankind, which he had drawn up in his early philosophy of freedom, caused him to become the theologian of the uniquely great original guilt of mankind and of its mythical inheritance.

In the very text that had convinced Marcion of the wickedness of the Old Testament lawgiver, in Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, Augustine found the theological means by which to formulate the dogma of man’s universal guilt and to conceive of man’s ‘justification’ [in the theological sense of the term] as an absolution that is granted by way of an act of grace and that does not remove from the world the consequences of that guilt. There he also found the doctrine of absolute predestination, which restricted this grace to the small number of the chosen and thus left the continuing guilt of the all too many to explain the lasting corruption of the world.

The Gnostic dualism had been eliminated as far as the metaphysical world principle was concerned, but it lived on in the bosom of mankind and its history as the absolute separation of the elect from the rejected. This crudity, devised for the justification of God, had its unspoken irony in the fact that the absolute principle’s responsibility for cosmic corruption — the elimination of which had been the point of the whole exercise — was after all reintroduced indirectly through the idea of predestination. For this sin, with its universal consequences, in the end only the original ground of everything could be held responsible — all that the massa damnata [condemned mass] had to do was to suffer the consequences.

For our present purposes the essential fact is that the later Augustine, the theologian of original sin and predestination, was to become the most important source and authority for the theological speculation of the later Middle Ages. The Gnosticism that had not been overcome but only transposed returns in the form of the ‘hidden God’ and His inconceivable absolute sovereignty. It was with this that the self-assertion of reason had to deal.

In many ways the Scholasticism of the Middle Ages travels Augustine’s path over again. Its attempt to hold the God of creation and the God of salvation together in one system rests, in the full range of its variants, on the ground plan of De libero arbitrio. And even the opposition of humanism holds to the precedent of Augustine’s spiritual biography as given in the Confessions — only it travels the path in the opposite direction: Petrarch, the reader of Augustine, is led back to Cicero and from him to Plato.

Gnosticism had not destroyed the ancient cosmos; its order survived but (nor is this the only case in which ‘order’ as an overriding value has done this) emerged as terror, from which the only way out was a flight into transcendence and the final destruction of the “cellula creatoris” (“cell of the creator”: Marcion). The cosmos had not only changed its prescriptive evaluation, it had also lost the quality that was most important for its reliability — its eternity.
prescribed remedy of flight—the offer of deliverance against the world—schemes to alter reality in man's favor did not constitute a live alternative. Augustine's momentous turning from Gnosticism to human freedom preserves 'order' for the Middle Ages and prepares the way for the return of Aristotle at the height of Scholasticism. The price of this preservation of the cosmos was not only the guilt that man was supposed to assign himself for the condition in which he found the world but also the resignation that his responsibility for that condition imposed upon him: renunciation of any attempt to change for his benefit, through action, a reality for the adversity of which he had himself to blame. The senselessness of self-assertion was the heritage of the Gnosticism which was not overcome but only 'translated.'

Translator's Note

a...  de Ûbe. The usual English-language formula for this famous problem is "the problem of evil," but the latter term is so exclusively a predicate of the will, of human action and its results, that this formula prevents us from appreciating the broader issue of the origin of "badness," of what is simply not good, for whatever reason—the issue that, as the author goes on to show, is crucial both for Gnosticism and for Augustine. Augustine's term, malum, does not prejudice the answer as our terminology (no doubt largely owing to his influence) does.

2

World Loss and Demiurgic Self-Determination

The second overcoming of Gnosticism, at the end of the Middle Ages, is accomplished under 'aggravated circumstances.' It is no longer able to save the cosmos of Scholasticism and is dominated by doubt whether the world could even originally have been created for man's benefit. The escape into transcendence, as the possibility that is held out to man and has only to be grasped, has lost its human relevance precisely on account of the absolutism of the decisions of divine grace, that is, on account of the dependence of the individual's salvation on a faith that he can no longer choose to have. This changed set of presuppositions brings into the horizon of possible intentions the alternative of the immanent self-assertion of reason through the mastery and alteration of reality.

A 'disappearance of order' ['Ordnungszwang'], causing doubt regarding the existence of a structure of reality that can be related to man, is the presupposition of a general conception of human activity that no longer perceives in given states of affairs the binding character of the ancient and medieval cosmos, and consequently holds them to be, in principle, at man's disposal. In turn, the 'disappearance of order' is bound up with a new concept of human freedom. But the burden that devolves on man this time is of a different nature from the one laid on him by Augustine: It is responsibility for the condition of the world as a challenge relating to the future, not as an original offense in the past. The revalued cosmos of Gnosticism had preserved the stability of its ancient predecessors; it could only be destroyed from
outside, by the superior strength of the transcendent principle, or ‘over-
come’ by a move toward the outside. Human hope had its vanishing
point beyond the world. The reality that at the end of the Middle
Ages comes to be seen as ‘fact’ [factum: something done or made, i.e.,
a contingent state of affairs] provokes the will to oppose it and con-
centrates the will’s attention upon it. The bad aspects of the world
no longer appear as metaphysical marks of the quality of the world
principle or punishing justice but rather as marks of the ‘facticity’ of
reality. In it man appears not to be ‘taken into consideration,’ and
the indifference of the self-preservation of everything in existence lets
the bad appear to him as whatever opposes his own will to live. The
Middle Ages came to an end when within their spiritual system creation
as ‘providence’ ceased to be credible to man and the burden of self-
assertion was therefore laid upon him.

Thus “self-assertion” here does not mean the naked biological and
economic preservation of the human organism by the means naturally
available to it. It means an existential program, according to which
man posits his existence in a historical situation and indicates to himself
how he is going to deal with the reality surrounding him and what
use he will make of the possibilities that are open to him. In man’s
understanding of the world, and in the expectations, assessments, and
significations that are bound up with that understanding, a fundamental
change takes place, which represents not a summation of facts of
experience but rather a summary of things taken for granted in advance
[Päsumptionen], which in their turn determine the horizon of possible
experiences and their interpretation and embody the ‘a priori’ of the
world’s significance for man.

Self-preservation is a biological characteristic, and insofar as man
stepped onto the world’s stage an imperfectly equipped and adapted
organism, he had need from the start of auxiliary means, implements,
and technical procedures for securing the satisfaction of his elementary
needs. But in relation to this aspect of human nature the means of
self-preservation, allowing for small variations, were constant for long
periods. It seems to be the case that over long stretches of his history,
man has not seen his situation in the world as one of fundamental
want and physical need. Rather the picture that he has made of himself
exhibits the features of a being that is well provided for by nature
but fails, itself, in the distribution of her goods. The problem of justice
is thus predominantly posed as that of the measures taken in distri-
bution. It is easy to see that in the framework of this idea, man’s
technical skills and accomplishments can only have the function of
supplementing and assisting nature, of executing her ends. The de-
struction of trust in an ordered structure of the world oriented to
man—whatever motives were operative in that destruction—had to
mean an eminently pragmatic change in man’s understanding of and
relation to the world. If the ‘disappearance of order’ that was brought
about by the disintegration of the Middle Ages pulled self-preservation
out of its biologically determined normality, where it went unnoticed,
and turned it into the ‘theme’ of human self-comprehension, then it is
also the case that the modern stage of human technicin can no
longer be grasped entirely in terms of the syndrome of the anthropo-
logical structure of wants. The growth of the potency of technique
is not only the continuation—not even the acceleration—of a process
that runs through the whole history of humanity. On the contrary,
the quantitative increase in technical achievements and expedients
can only be grasped in relation to a new quality of consciousness. In
the growth of the technical sphere there lives, consciously facing an
alienated reality, a will to extort from this reality a new ‘humanity.’
Man keeps in view the deficiency of nature as the motive of his activity
as a whole.

After the kind of delay characteristic of the philosophical explication
of historically effective motives in consciousness, Nietzsche formulated
the situation of man in the ‘disappearance of order,’ abandoned by
natural providence and made responsible for himself, but he did so
not in order to express disappointment at the loss of the cosmos but
rather to celebrate the triumph of man awakened to himself from the
cosmic illusion and to assure him of his power over his future. The
man who conceives not only of nature but also of himself as a fact
at his disposal has traversed only the first stage of his self-enhancement
and self-surpassing in the self-assertion of his modern history. The
destruction of trust in the world made him for the first time a creatively
active being, freed him from a disastrous holling of his activity.

For Nietzsche every form of teleology is only a derivative of theology:
The supposed centering of the world’s meaning on man appears to
him to be equivalent to the ‘providence’ that misleads man into con-
curring with the divine approval of everything at the creation. Asking
nature for information regarding man’s destiny and fullness of power
had led to the post-Copernican abasement of his self-consciousness.
"Has the self-belittlement of man, his will to self-belittlement, not progressed irresistibly since Copernicus? Alas, the faith in the dignity and uniqueness of man, in his irreplaceability in the great chain of being, is a thing of the past... Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane—now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into—what? into nothingness? into a 'penetrating sense of his nothingness'?” Nietzsche rightly sees in the Copernican reform an attempt to save the cosmos once again, or to reestablish it; wrongly, he suggests that in its intention and primary effect this attempt was carried through at the cost of burdening mankind.

But that is not yet the full point of his critique. The induced effect on consciousness of a scientific proposition rests on him on the “overrating of truth” as science, which makes man’s understanding of himself dependent on the picture of reality that he can obtain. “How can anyone presume to speak of a destiny of the earth?... Mankind must be able to stand without leaning on anything like that...” The assumption that if not reality itself, then at least the truth about it must be useful and beneficial to man, appears to Nietzsche as the last, hard-to-recognize remainder of that teleological metaphysics, as a transformation of the “absurd faith in the way of the world,” the “most crippling belief for hand and reason that there has ever been.”

Modern natural science did indeed arise as part of a critique of the principle of the anthropocentric teleology of nature, but for Nietzsche this does not exclude the possibility that in regard to the human relevance of truth that it presupposes, and on which respect for natural science is grounded, it has held fast to the teleological premise. Precisely by Nietzsche’s enabling us to see how even the great instrument of self-assertion, modern science, stands under a residuum of the conditions whose acceptance in the ancient world and the Middle Ages had kept the will to self-assertion latent, the inner logic of the connection between self-assertion and the ‘disappearance of order’ becomes clear with a unique sharpness.

The final overcoming of the Gnostic inheritance cannot restore the cosmos because the function of the idea of the cosmos is reassurance about the world and in the world, because it has as its correlate the theoretical ideal and the theoretical leisure that had been associated with the idea of the cosmos from the time of the Greeks. The world cannot be made ‘good’ in itself once more by a mere change of sign because it would then cease to be man’s irritation and provocation.

The later Nietzsche sought, through the idea of eternal recurrence, to change the function of the idea of the cosmos: The cycles of the world process were not to repeat the model of a prescriptive lawfulness in nature, as in the Stoic cosmology, but rather to raise the sum total of the consequences of human action to the role of the ineluctable lawfulness of the world and thus to charge man with absolute responsibility for the world. Theory, which contemplates the world, was to become functionless compared to the praxis that changes it. From this point of view eternal recurrence is the dissolution of self-assertion, as a still dualistic element, in the identity of human will with natural law, which makes possible the “highest evolution of man as the highest evolution of the world.” The pregiveness of nature is reduced to a minimum—to the most external, mechanistic contingency, as the “conception by which to gain the highest power”—to the substrate of what Nietzsche calls the “world construction.”

The self-assertion of reason as the epitome of the motives constituting the epoch is reduced by Nietzsche to an episode of a merely preliminary character. Natural science and the historical attitude, we are told, have exhausted their usefulness in overcoming the Middle Ages. They were still weapons that the Middle Ages had sharpened against itself, useful as means for winning a new freedom, but not themselves as meaning with which to fill that freedom. The power that the instrument has gained over the will, which it was supposed to serve, must be broken in a new turning. Like knowledge against the Middle Ages, art has to be mobilized against science. It seems to him that against historical writing and natural sciences “immense artistic powers are called for.” The function of philosophy changes; it no longer has to establish the possibility of science and to give birth to new sciences but rather “to consider the problem, to what extent science may grow: It has to determine the value!” It finds in art the power with which “to break the unrestricted drive for knowledge,” not to let “the reins of science” escape from its hands.

This whole theory interests us here only for the implications that it allows to become visible in a retrospective view of the foundation of the modern age. It was not enough for Nietzsche to legitimize resistance against a reality no longer characterized by consideration for man; man’s right then remains dependent on reality as he finds it or believes he finds it. His right should consist in imputing the least possible binding force to reality, so as to make room for his own
works. “Not in knowing but in creating lies our health! . . . If the universe has no concern for us, then we want the right to scorn it.”

One might think that this formula defines exactly the self-consciousness of an age that has given itself up to its technical achievements. But Nietzsche ignored this possible interpretation of his basic thought. There is no talk of technique in his writings. Technique retains the posture of self-assertion, with its dependence on theoretical truth about nature. It derives from a teleology that compensates obedience to the laws of nature with mastery over nature. Technique may have seemed to Nietzsche to be the epitome of the surrogates for the lost natural teleology benefiting man. That he passes it over in silence, that he ignores the manifest possibility of implanting in it some of his pathos of human pretension, is more instructive than if ‘interpretations’ could be cited.

That technique also could surpass the character of pure self-assertion, that it could not only disguise the element of need but even eliminate it in the immanence of becoming an end in itself, that it could break out of competition with nature’s accomplishments and present itself as an authentic reality, was still beyond the horizon of experience at the time. Hence the absolutism of art. “Only as an aesthetic phenomenon is the world any longer justified for eternity . . . !”

The method employed here, that of viewing the problematic of the origin of the modern age from such distant vantage points, may seem questionable. That is a result of the difficulty we are faced with on account of the difference between the historical process and its expression in documents. As Karl Marx noted in the preparatory work for his dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus, we have to distinguish “the steady forward motion of the mole of real philosophical knowledge from the talkative, exoteric, variously gesticulating phenomenological consciousness of its subject.”

Gnosticism had made acute the problem of the quality of the world for man and, through the contradiction that the patristic literature and the Middle Ages opposed to it, made cosmology conditional on thymology. The modern age attempted to strike out this condition by basing its anthropodicy on the world’s lack of consideration of man, on its inhuman order. But it remained for Nietzsche to make visible the presuppositions of this justification of man by disputing them. We are concerned here only with this effect of making visible, not the dogmatics employed in achieving it—that is, with the optics, not the analysis.

The mole threw up his first hill at this point, enabling us to trace his underground route. The nature of history does not allow us to practice historical microscopy; we have to look where the structures of the process manifest themselves of their own accord.

The modern age has regarded self-preservation (conservatio sui) as a fundamental category of everything in existence and has found this borne out all the way from the principle of inertia in physics to the biological structure of drives and the laws of state building. Nietzsche sees in self-preservation only the metaphor of a rational category, the attempt to conjure up an order from (and in spite of) disorder. In accordance with the precept, “Beware of superficial teleological principles!” he recommends that we examine whether self-preservation can be assumed to be a fundamental drive of living things. “A living thing seeks above all to discharge its strength—life itself is will to power; self-preservation is only one of the indirect and most frequent results.”

Self-preservation for him can only be understood as a reaction to a reality that necessitates it; it presupposes that the quality of this reality is an endangering one. But the model of a relation to reality that Nietzsche wants is not supposed to depend upon a quality of reality. “There is neither order nor disorder in nature,” he wrote as early as 1868 in an essay on the problem of teleology since Kant. The replacement of self-preservation by the “will to power” is only the reversal of the thought that reality is indifferent with regard to its individual members—the result is the doctrine that life must be indifferent with regard to reality.

The elimination of the premise that the world has a particular quality for man that in effect prescribes his basic mode of behavior makes fully visible for the first time what it could mean to take things for granted in advance in a world concept. Nietzsche’s philosophy is among the approaches to a kind of thinking that removes problems by specifying the conditions under which they no longer arise. But the coup de main of putting the will to power in place of new answers, of ending the history of reoccupations by striking out the very schema whose formal constancy they presuppose, has only illuminated better what it was meant to destroy. To give oneself the history that sets one free of history, or that only endorses what is present without putting it in question, would have meant, so to speak, to secede from history and throw off its burden—which is often dreamed of, also, for instance, in the form of the pseudonymous ‘Being’ whose advent is supposed to expose an entire history as forgetfulness of it.
Notes to Pages 109–126


37. C. F. von Weissscher, *The Relevance of Science* (New York and Evanston: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 94; "This transformation of Christian radicalism into the radicalism of reality I should like to describe by the concept of secularisation, using this term in a pregnant sense."


Part II

Introduction

Chapter 2


4. _Vorarbeiten..._ _Musarion_ ed., vol. 6, p. 14; "Historical thinking and the natural sciences were needed against the Middle Ages knowledge against "faith. We now direct art against knowledge..." P. 108: "People became more clever during the Middle Ages... This sharpening of the spirit by the pressure of a hierarchy and theology was absent in the ancient world." P. 100: "Science... comes into being... when the gods are not thought of as good."


7. _Vorarbeiten..._ _Musarion_ ed., vol. 6, p. 35.


Chapter 3

1. Irregularity, _Adversus haereses_ II 14, S (PG, vol. 7, p. 151); "Unibiam autem et vacuum ipsum aut a Democrito et Epicuro sumentes, sibi petitam aptavat... Sometipos ergo in hoc mundo, cum sint extra Pleroma, in locum qui non est, deputaverunt. Quod autem dicante imagines esse haec eorum quae sunt, rumus manifestissime Democrito et Platonem suentissimam edissentur."


3. Tertullian, _Adversus Marcionem_ V 4, 14: "Deridendi potest deus Marciounis, qui nec tractavit nec uelatis." I 25, 3: "immoderat et stupens deus"; I 26, 3: "stupidissimis!" V 4, 3: "deus ille ordinans." Alsd echt _Adversus Valentinianos_ 7, 4: "sedem... Byrohs istic... in maxima et ultima quie... in otiis platonis plascebat et... stupens divinitatis, ut insis Epipureus." In addition to structural equivalence he asserts a dogmatic dependence, as a classic example of the dangers of the reception of philosophical doctrines: "longum est... ostendere hac sententia omnibus haeretice damnnati, quod cosine cx subdeequoires viribus et philosophiiceps regulis consent, sed Marcioun principalem nuna fidei terminus de Epicuri schole agnoscit." (Ad. Marcionis V 19, 21) I 25, 8: "si aliquem de Epicuri schole deum adaequabit Christium nominem tindare, ut quod beatum et incorruptibile si neque ait neque alius molestias praestet; hunc enim sententiam rumina Marcioun renovat ab illo sc. deis severissit et iudiciariss viris." W. Schmid, in his article "Epicurus" in the _Reichskirchen für Aristos_ (University of Munich, 1961, pp. 791-801), refers to the important, non-Christian, parallel testimony of Plutarch. _Stoica_ 9, 15, who sees Epicurus and the Gnostics united in their denunciation of the cosmos, though "certainly the thought related primarily to morphological similarity, scarcely to historical dependence." A passage in Hieronymus _Commentarii in Iob_ VIII 18, 12 that resembles Plutarch's polemic very closely was already traced back by Harnack to Origen, according to which ore. Schmid allows us to regard Antonius Sakkas as a possible common origin of the 'topos': "doit Epicurus non esse providentiam et voluptatem maximum hominum. Composition hules sceleratior Marcioun et omnibus haeretici qui vetus lacerans testumem. Cum enim recipiant providentiam, causans Creatorem et asserentium in plerique operibus errasse et non tamen tecum ut facere debuerat."

4. Clarke's second rejoinder: (Leibnit, _Philosophische Schriften_, ed. C. J. Gerhardt, p. 304): "In reality, and with regard to God, the present Frame, and the consequent disorder, and the following renunciation, are all equally parts of the design framed in God's original perfect idea."


6. Loc. cit., pp. 371f: "Une simple volonté sans aucun motif la mere will is a fiction non seulement contraire à la perfection de Dieu, mais encore chimerique et contradictoire, incomparable avec la conception de la volonté..." Thus already in the _Dieu_ et _L'homme_ of 1686: "... Il ne faut pas assez s'imaginer des decrets absolu, qui n'avent aucun motif raisonnable..." (section 3). And still earlier, 1680, in a letter to Phillipp in Hamburg, in the form of an argument against Descartes: "On voit bien que la volonté de Dieu même ne sera qu'une fiction mise pour faciliter ceux qui ne s'attachent pas assez à apprécier ces choses. Car quelle volonté (bon Dieu) qui n'a pas le bien pour objet ou motif qui plus est, ce Dieu n'aura pas même d'entendement... Mais de dire qu'un tel Dieu a fait les choses, ou de dire qu'elles sont est produites par une nécessité aveugle, c'est un l'autre, ce me semble" (_Philosophische Schriften_, vol. 4, p. 285). W. Sabian, _Die Philosophie des jungen Leibnit_. Untersuchungen zur Entwicklungsgeschichte seines Systems (Heidelberg: 1909), p. 122, quotes from a letter to Vetterkopf, the jurist in 1681, this sentence: "It is not in the power of any being to will whatever it likes au wellen, us et volit."


8. William of Ockham, _Commentary on the Sentences_ I 45, 1 M: "Unum deus possit facere aliquae quae nec felet nec fecit... s ac esset natura naturalis, vel omnii producens simul vel nulla." Quadragesima VI: 1: "Deus multa potest facere quae non vult facere."

9. William of Ockham, _Commentary on the Sentences_ I d. 2, q. 4, d.: "... creatio est simpliciet de nihil, ita quod nihil essentiae vel intrinsecum vel simpliciter praececdent in ipsis re, ergo nulla res non variata praestat in quoscumque individuo de essentia unius individui de novo creatum, quia si aliquid essentiae non re, simpliciter per consequens non creatur, ergo non est aliquis res universales de essentia individuum, quia sic, illa praecoeerent omni individuo post primum producens et per consequens omnia producens post primum