

THE RELIGION OF REALITY



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Inquiry into the Self, Art, and Transcendence

DIDIER MALEUVRE

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To Jude, Pierre, and Ludo

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CHAPTER I

Introduction



All philosophy can do is to destroy idols. And that means, not making any new ones—in the “absence of an idol.”

Wittgenstein

THIS BOOK DEALS with the two forces in modern culture that command the centrality and force of religion: the self, on the one hand, and art, on the other.

It is largely assumed that the intellect became modern when it replaced scriptural truths and revelation with the guidance of reason, science, and empirical knowledge. On this account the modern age is said have “disenchanted” the world, according to Max Weber’s famous phrase, by which is meant that the modern mind does not believe in objects, processes, or phenomena that transcend or escape physical, logical, or rational necessity. A bolt of thunder is no angry deity but a sudden release of electrostatic energy due to measurable changes in the atmospheric pressure. Likewise with wills o’ the wisp, medical ailments and their cure, or strange noises in the attic: to be modern is to connect these phenomena with factual objective causes, rather than to allege the workings of extranatural unknowable intentions. The modern intellect works by the light of science. It draws a picture of the world not by unverifiable beliefs, but by calculated hypothesis and empirical verification. This is the sense in which the modern world underwent its disenchantment,

a process that has sectioned religious belief off from the center of natural and social life. Religion is no longer the way of the world but only an optional way of looking at the world. Indeed, to some, the divine is only a department of human knowledge, such as psychology or philosophy, rather than the absolute authority and great *explanans* over all moral, scientific, or political investigation. “Once Gods walked among humans,” wrote the German romantic poet Hölderlin (1770–1843), “but, friends, we have come too late! The Gods are . . . above our heads, up there in another world.”

But is it so certain that we moderns walk without gods? The question does not mean to dispute the process by which scientific rationalization has purged the world of mystery and, more important still, has flushed the very idea of the mysterious from knowledge and understanding. Instead, the question suggests that, having cashiered the gods, we may have enthroned other gods, other powerful centralities and inscrutabilities over our world. The first half of this study argues that religious feeling persists in the secular Western mind, and that it has taken refuge in the unlikeliest of camps, indeed the supposed debunker of religious creed: the philosophic defense of reason. Briefly put, the new deity is the self-contained, autonomous, separate self. The Enlightenment (Descartes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant), romanticism, and more recently existentialist philosophy devised a subjectivity that aspires to the sort of unconditioned, absolute existence which, in the tradition ranging from Aristotle to Spinoza, defined the deity: an intelligent force that is uncaused, unmoved, independent, free, and ultimately unfathomable. The first half of this study, titled “The Cult of Self,” traces the story of this philosophic idolizing of self in modern thought from the Cartesian cogito onward. The second half, titled “The Religion of Art,” is an inquiry into the artistic paths that lead away from this solipsist confinement.



Part I is a selective survey of modern thought from its early roots (Neoplatonic Renaissance thinkers, Descartes) to the romantic philosophers (Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche) and recent philosophy (Heidegger, existentialism, postmodernism, and American pragmatism). I argue that the mainstay of the philosophical tradition since the late Renaissance has been less an analytic than an *aesthetic* endeavor. Its stated goal was a logical description of the self; in actuality, it reshaped subjectivity and achieved a formidable modeling of man *as we want him to be*: less, that is, in the light of reason than

under the lens of self-magnification. This is the key meaning of the turn to subjectivism in modern thought. Not just that consciousness, the subject, the private mental order became the key of any inquiry into the nature of things; but also that consciousness, because it is free and sovereign, is justified in picturing the nature of reality as it wishes it to be. Hence the suggestion that the modern mind-set has produced an aesthetic, rather than an analytic, of who we are and where we stand.

Subjectivism defines the philosophic belief or existential attitude that places the human subject at the choice and mysterious center of the known universe. It is mysterious because, as Descartes surmised and Kant formulated, the subject of consciousness cannot peer into its own depths. In the attempt, it splits itself in half, into a known and a knower, a thing beheld and a beholder. And though we may of course know and see things about the thing beheld, the beholder necessarily remains out of the picture. The source of consciousness cannot become an object of consciousness without, in the process, sidestepping itself. For this reason, there is a part of consciousness that remains beyond knowledge; it is a part never conditioned or restricted by facts, ideas, or objects. Though subjectivity is in me, it is not reducible to my identity and all the things I take myself to be: for who I really am is not the product of self-knowledge, but the beam of attention that sustains all mental activity, including self-knowledge. The facts about me do not objectify me since they are known by me, that is, by an agency external to its biographical facts. In Hegel's words, "consciousness transcends its own self."¹

Subjectivity thus sits above itself, like a hidden god. This self-abstraction of course does not suggest that the late Renaissance and Enlightenment thinkers who emancipated reason supposed the self to possess a transcendental substance. What it indicates is that modern subjectivity took on attributes reminiscent of those by which the Scholastics described the Godhead. Among those features, for instance, is the Aristotelian account of God as the unmoved mover of all things, the unconditioned source that conditions every existing thing in the universe. Subtracting deep consciousness from the ambit of knowable things is a manner of declaring it unconditioned—irreducible to any attribute but contrariwise giver of all attributes. Since it is the knowing and not the known, it can never be definitely conditioned by any property. Moreover,

1. G. W. F. Hegel, "Preface," *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. Baillie (New York: Dover Publications, 2003), 14.

this unmoving center is a center, a mover, because—and this touches upon the second main tenet of subjectivism—human knowledge is believed to animate the whole range of things known. Subjectivity is a center in that every object is perceived never in itself, but in relation to the human beholder who thereby stands at the hub of all the spokes connecting him to every thing that is. There is not an object in the universe that does not somehow look toward the human agent. One could say that the act of knowing things moves them in our direction, forces them to face our subjective center. For everything known is known by, and from the standpoint of, the human subject. Thus subjectivity is the unconditioned center that conditions the rest of existence. This is the meaning of, for instance, Kant's self-declared second Copernican revolution whose aim was to vindicate the cosmographic map of a universe rotating around a human sun.



The first half of this study, “The Cult of Self,” argues that this exaltation of the self since the late Renaissance leads to a kind of idolatry.

Broadly speaking, two attitudes define the idolatrous character. The first is expediency and consists in enlisting the divine into human service. The second is cynicism and consists in believing in gods one has created for one's convenience, deities whose human-made origin is known but papered over. Consider the parable of the Golden Calf in the Old Testament. Despairing of Moses' return, the chosen people turn to Aaron, his brother, and ask for new gods: “Come, make us gods that shall go before us,” the crowd says (Exodus 32:1). “Make us gods”—the phrase itself is a recipe for unbelief. For how can one believe in the absolute transcendence and authority of anything custom-made for us? Does it not seem as though the idolater really worships himself, his own values, fears, cravings, aspirations, and comfort to which he subordinates the deity? Indeed, convenience is at the source of the idolatrous cult. The idolater believes mostly in his mortal self and builds an altar to it. He subjugates the infinite to the finite, the whole to the part. Perhaps to highlight the deficiency of idolatry, Spinoza defined true religion as honoring God without ever wishing that He loved us in return. For such a wish attributes human emotion and partial intention to the Absolute and thus spoils its absoluteness. Idolatry lies in this wish for human-directed deities, a wish that can never be entirely happy since it undermines the authority and absoluteness to which it prays.

To say that the self in modern life is a cult, a masquerade of religion, is

therefore to suggest that this exaltation is artificial, that it calculatedly has the self as its chief beneficiary; and that it is cynical, since the self knows itself to be the source of the cult to which it professes unconditional faith. An object of belief that is created cannot logically be unconditional, since it has a beginning. To believe in the absolute value of the subjective standpoint but to admit, by subjectivity's own logic, that this absolute standpoint too is of our subjective device—this simply sinks any claim to absoluteness.

Of course, from an empirical standpoint, the self seems autonomous and necessary. It is necessary in that one cannot conceive a human life that does not include a modicum of physical separation and self-awareness. At the animal level, the self dwells in a distinct physical organism that relies on its environment for life but moves volitionally and in relative independence of its surroundings. Owing to this basic individuation, this organism cannot help perceiving objects from a unique standpoint which, in the case of humans, is self-aware and therefore carries a unique sense of individual experience. To be human entails, in howsoever feeble a way, being able to account descriptively for who one is. In sum, being human commits each person to exist as his or her own person, in one destiny, bound by one birth and death, the resident owner of a changing yet continuous internal monologue. A thoroughly integrated society to which members are individually unaware of belonging is a society no more but an aggregate like the tentacles of an octopus or a clump of trees.

Subjectivism is the philosophy that takes the internal monologue to be the essence of the human form of life and therefore the starting point of any investigation into it. Not only does animal existence play only a secondary role in individuation, but physical life itself is significant only when taken up in the inner voice of consciousness. Indeed, we conscious beings may be said to have physical existence inasmuch as we know it. So, at any rate, seems to be the upshot of Descartes's famous "I think therefore I am" which, *inter alia*, subordinates being to thinking. I can be sure that I (and therefore the world) exist not because existence is primary, but because clear reason forces that conclusion. Note, then, that existence is no longer an external fact but a distilled deduction. It is, as it were, absorbed into mind stuff. Thus Descartes raised the inner light of consciousness, the internal monologue, over all physical, social, empirical externalities.

To taper the human essence down exclusively to the inner light of consciousness leaves too much out of the picture to seem, at first blush, of much

practical worth (What, after all, is an absolute self that nevertheless needs to eat, drink, breathe, and draw from outside and others the very meat for its existence?). In reality, however, the intellectual abstraction of self served very concrete practical purposes. Idealistic though it was, it nevertheless ministered to very earthly material purposes. Philosophic subjectivism invented a self that was a social and political entity excellently suited to an entrepreneurial age in need of individual agents emancipated from the old feudal and ancestral ties, one capable of conducting business and brokering contracts within institutions and laws that existed to serve the entrepreneur. To reverse the classical and feudal balance of power between institutions and the average person, a compelling doctrine had to come into place that guaranteed the sanctity of the individual. And this sanctification somehow had to presume a radical division of world and person by which the latter might be declared to exist independently of the former and possess self-given properties unimpeachable by external circumstances. Subjectivism supplied, or at any rate gave philosophic sanction to, this new emancipated human agent, the person.

The person is the pillar of modern times—it is the fulcrum of our moral, political, social, economic, and religious universe. It crystallizes our sense of what is crucial about human existence and how to live it. Interestingly, however, this exalted entity, the person, has its origins not in philosophy or ethics or Roman law, but on the stage. The word *persona* designated a character in ancient Greek and Roman theater, and stems from the verb *per-sonare*, “to sound through,” in reference to the clay or wooden masks through which actors spoke their parts.² The person issues from the world of magic and make-believe. It was originally an artifice, an aesthetic illusion—quite a contrast indeed with the subsequent philosophic and legalistic consolidation of the person which, especially since the Renaissance, built the autonomous individual as an ultimate reality, a bedrock, the truest first thing about us.

The aim of this study is, in the first half, to survey the story of how the mask that was personhood has come to stand for the face—how indeed we have come to believe so staunchly and adoringly in what, to others, was a momentary illusion. More constructively, the second half considers ways of envisioning

2. This etymology has been discussed, for instance, by T. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, in the chapter “The Individual,” in *Soziologische Exkurse* (Frankfurt, Germany: Europäische Verlanganstalt, 1969), and by Hannah Arendt, in *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harvest Books, 1981), 227.

the human experience beyond personhood. The first half lays out the modern installments in the tale of an idolatrous creation, while the second sets forth the story of a religious recovery. Idolatry and religion are used here in antinomy to distinguish two contrasting dispositions. Idolatry seeks particulars and figure-heads; it focuses on the limited, on what can be held and caressed by thought. Idolatry thus naturally harkens to images, masks, gods that tangibly resemble us, speak our language, and confirm, rather than stretch, our understanding. Idolatry feeds the personal and the individual. Religion, by contrast, seeks the universal, of which the anthropomorphic person can be only an aspect. Even while religious faith requires an active commitment of one's inner life and conscience, even while an act or profession of belief demands personal forethought and deliberation, this commitment in the end recommends giving over the grossly individual. This is the gift required of the person—that it ceases being the center. Doubting Thomas's error was to want proof before belief, hence to put man ahead of God, a God cut to the size of human reason/understanding. Thomas could not surrender his human-based perspective. This means not that religion endorses irrationality, but that it asks us to see that the individual with his sense, psychology, understanding, incidental interests and concerns—that all these are not the ultimate keyholes through which to see the universe. The wisdom in the great religious traditions and—to vindicate in advance the second half of this study—*art*, is that the mask must come off and reveal the ultimate reality, of which the self is just one of the personas.

Besides being the age-old labor of religion, liberation from the empirical person is written also in the labor of reason. When Socrates states that to philosophize is to learn how to die, or when Plato talks about purifying the mind to face the sun of truth, philosophy already points to the necessity of discarding the grossly personal. It says that the noble task of the intellect is to show things not as we want them to be, but such as they are—a vision that requires victory over personality. This Socratic wisdom braided itself into the Christian (Augustinian and Thomistic) tradition that inspired at least ten centuries of Western thought on the virtue of emptying oneself before the truth, God, the divine.

Depersonalization, however, can be a trap. Witness the passion for impersonality at work in late-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century philosophy. The latter rose in reaction against the Enlightenment and romantic faith in a disengaged self-powered subjectivity. Twentieth-century philosophers used

reason to purify reason of anything even tangentially mysterious, inner, or subjective. Whether we look at G. E. Moore, or L. Wittgenstein, or the Vienna School's linguistic analysis, or A. J. Ayer's and Gilbert Ryle's logical empiricism on the analytic side of the philosophical divide; or whether, on the continental side, we consider Martin Heidegger's attack on anthropocentric metaphysics, or Freudian psychology, or the rise of sociological and anthropological determinism, or structuralist and postmodernist visions of the subject's dissolution in myriad networks of meaning and language, it seems that twentieth-century philosophers have done nothing but hunt the self-possessed Cartesian ego into extinction.

An aggregate of theoretical assumptions spanning two centuries of philosophy, the Cartesian ego is roughly the idea, underpinning the Enlightenment, that the mind is by nature self-sufficient and independent from external reality, to which it is tangentially connected; that individual consciousness is in-born and private; and that the mind carries its own spiritual and intellectual beacon, an island of certainty, clarity, and spirit in a storm of transience and illusion.

This is the self-serving piety that twentieth-century philosophy wished out of the way. Where self-knowing clarity once ruled, we are now the flotsam of unconscious currents and historic tides beyond our power to fathom or resist. Instead of portraying intellectual self-possession, modernism pictured a subject that, as per the word, is *subjected* to, and therefore the product of, social conditioning. Where reason once legislated, we find linguistic and logical structures that seemingly do the thinking for us. The Self is dead; long live the Structure. Thus the nineteenth and twentieth centuries launched an intellectual backlash that embraced a scientifically flavored *amor fati* that fettered man to a sense of helpless dependence on forces beyond his control. To be sure, the historical example of totalitarianism, fascism, and mass depersonalization give us warning about what awaits us when humans are stripped of individual autonomy—when, that is, the theory of determinism phases into political action. On the whole, however, these lessons have given little pause to the twentieth-century philosophic campaign against the Byronic excesses of metaphysical individualism.

Given the mass of antisubjectivist philosophies, it may seem that further demystification will smack of superfluity. And given the horrendous acts of dehumanization incurred by man in the killing fields of twentieth-century his-

tory, it also appears that calling for desubjectifying man will seem irresponsible.

That this present study is not superfluous stems from the intuition that the anti-Cartesian deconstruction of the self took the wrong road, that of *materializing* man. It mistakenly assumed that to destroy the centrality of man equates with denying his spiritual life, the part of his experience not readily translatable into formal or technical language. On the whole, it sought to abolish subjectivity either by reducing it to physical or behavioral mechanisms or else by sinking it into the thick glue of history and society—declaring, in the main, that there is no more to persons than the stuffing of impersonal programs known variously as Language, Power, or Ideology. The drift of the twentieth-century critique of subjectivity has thus been to substitute a “re-definition” for the previous “I-definition” of human experience. The trouble is that this move fails to transcend anthropocentric bias: it is multiplied or massified, but not overturned. For Language, Power, and Ideology are in the end products of a subjectivity writ large, indeed that covers the breadth and length of reality.

Overcoming anthropocentric bias, however, is a difficult business, perhaps an interminable labor. We have for our model philosopher Charles Taylor’s afterthought at the end of his masterly work of dispelling the myth of human importance: “The case against disengaged subjectivity,” he writes, “always has to be made anew.”³ Debunking the autonomous subjects of philosophers is work always to be done. We understand this endlessness to be in part a matter of structural necessity. Subjectivism can be overcome or disproven only by a mental process (obviously no tree or speck of sand is ever going to settle by theorem the existence or nonexistence of the autonomous self). By virtue of exercising reason, a philosopher bearing proof of the nullity of subjectivity therefore shows sign of clear subjectivity—one capable of free and autonomous reflection. The attempt to question subjectivity thus tends to confirm its centrality since it is by means of subjectivity that subjectivity casts doubt on itself. Assault on the citadel only thickens its walls.

The other reasons that make toppling the idol of subjectivity such a Sisyphean task are more empirical. We should assume that the social and economic

3. C. Taylor, *The Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 514.

forces that propelled the philosophic exaltation of individualism at the dawn of modernity are still alive and well. In spite of heady postmodernist theories of a subject dislocated by global commerce and technology (visions of *Homo cosmopolitanus* adrift in the cool bacchanalia of television and computers and jet travel and cyberspace and speed and fantasy life), there is good reason to assume that the forces of trade and industry still have us where they need us, in the mold of atomized individuality, the customer, the freelancer, the employee—in short, the single agent rewarded for pulling his economic weight but marginalized in his communal longings.

There is today a widespread modeling of the self-image that induces the individual to feel and think as follows: “I am here, entirely on my own; all the others are out there, outside me; each of them goes his way, just like me, with an inner self which is his true self, his pure ‘I,’ and an outward costume, his relations to other people.”⁴

Few are likely to dispute this picture. It is indeed who we are. Under the tutelage of psychoanalysis, or science or psycholinguistics, we may scoff at the rosy notion of a perfectly self-transparent ego. But this intellectual cutting-down-to-size, however, has little effect on the day-to-day life of individuals who on the whole carry on living as self-willed individuals, as persons with innate rights and entitlements, as firm believers that a life personally determined is preferable to one smothered in anonymity. Advertising, self-empowerment workshops, political liberalism, education, psychological counseling, “feel good” spirituality—they all in the end minister to one master, the disengaged self and maker of destiny. The philosopher may ponder the relevance of subjectivity, but the man on the street goes about his business with vigorous Cartesian confidence. The process of individualizing human destiny shows no sign of losing steam. Of course, the immersive appeal of communal life still runs deep. The individual also wants to feel that his life fits in a warmly inclusive scheme of things. But such activities designed to serve this need for a metaphysical home are generally kept for leisure time. They have been untwined from the strand of serious public life. Social training does not let our spiritual aspirations interfere with the business of keeping the self shipshape and singly competing against all others. The “I,” whether conceived as basic productive unit, as citizen, or as consumer, is generally geared to think of life as his life, his

4. N. Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 27–28.

exclusive business, his self-given tenure to which all other facts and values are more or less subordinate.

Can philosophy help? Let us say that philosophy can point the way but, for reasons already explained, cannot really go the distance. Every reasoned argument to overcome self-centered subjectivity is spoken from the standpoint of self-possessed reason. Philosophy cannot escape the contradiction that to speak against the ego is an egolike thing to do. Genuine self-emptying should begin by giving up the attempt. This type of surrender, however, is not within the ambit of philosophy. Philosophic work is discursive, willful, independent. It is ego-bound even when, in its most exalted moments, it glimpses a realm of being beyond subjectivity. Liberation from self-clinging selfhood is the province of devotional labor, charitable work, spiritual love, religious practice, silent meditation—activities that silence or humble or dispossess the self, that force it to attend to a compelling external reality more demanding or absolute than the inner voice. This is why—in accordance with the conviction that *doing* is a greater externalizing force than *saying*—the second half of this study turns to artists, that is, to doers rather than sayers, in search of examples of the life truly given to reality, to the practice and labor of love of attending to what is.



The challenge lies in finding a mode of being human that avoids excessive idealist self-assertion at one end and a dull materialist or deterministic denial of selfhood at the other. “What we have never had,” Iris Murdoch claims, “is a satisfactory Liberal theory of personality, a theory of man as free and separate and related to a rich and complicated world from which, as a moral being, he has much to learn.”⁵ The idea here is that philosophy has fallen under the temptation of dualism, depicting man either as free and autonomous or as sunk into biological historical mulch. Neither option, it seems, meets the demand of drawing a realistic, *livable* picture of human experience where the self is both separate and embedded, independent and dependent. We know where either extremity leads. Radical independence leads to solipsism and existential grandstanding, to an emptied universe where only the subject exists but, having nothing to exist next to, fades into an all-and-nothing twilight.

5. I. Murdoch, “Against Dryness,” *Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Peter Conradi (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 290.

At the other extreme, radical dependence leads to denial of free will, determinism, behaviorism, the liquidation of the first-person singular—the sort of thing that looks half-plausible *sub specie aeternitatis* but poorly matches the individual's everyday experience of making choices, planning his future, or reordering his affinities in light of his character, the sort of life he dreams of and wishes to lead. Moreover, neither the advocates of freedom nor those of determinism can satisfactorily defend their theory on its own terms. Anyone who would defend determinism on purely deterministic and naturalistic terms would have to say, in the end, that “he stands for determinism because he has been made to”—which, of course, does not prove determinism. As for the voluntarist, his defense of free will would ultimately have to take the circular form of “the theory of freedom is true because I will it”—notably less than a knockdown argument.

The issue therefore is to go beyond the fruitless alternatives of freedom and determinism or autonomy and heteronomy. There are indeed other ways of picturing existence than either standing up to the world or being swallowed by it, either vanquishing or being vanquished. Both attitudes seem to be the wide swings of an emotional pendulum which, incapable of holding the middle, veers off into either vainglorious self-claiming or macerating self-eradication. The root of this cyclotimic swinging is an unnecessarily dualistic understanding of self and world. Dualism leads to feelings of estrangement which, in the case of subjectivism, inspires rueful existential self-affirmation and, in the case of material determinism, the masochistic fantasy of melting into the object. The object, however, is actually not the enemy of the subject. Nor is it its estranged twin. It does not stand over there, apart from consciousness. To be aware of the world does not take us out of it. However ethereal its inner projections, consciousness lives and dies in a house of matter, the brain. The self is born, grows, and carries on in the thick of life. Consciousness may be a perspective or light cast on the world; nonetheless, such a perspective issues from the physical world to which it remains elementally entangled so long as it thinks. Consciousness is therefore a modality of matter. Whatever basic property or tendency is proper to the latter must of necessity be shared by the former. To wonder about the nature of consciousness leads therefore to ask about nature proper.

Now, it seems that, for all its infinite forms, nature follows one sure tendency: to keep being, to weave life into life, to hold together rather than to fly apart. Being is indefatigably interested in affirming itself. A thing of be-

ing, consciousness must like all living things participate in the work of being. Indeed, consciousness must be that by which matter carries on its in-drawing process through other means. Thinking is, as it were, another instrument of the world's self-embrace, of its tireless interest in being rather than not being.

Of course, though consciousness is a modality of the physical world, it is not blindly sunk in matter. For if it obeyed matter in every respect, it could never contemplate false, fictional, or hypothetical ideas that have no existing content—no more than, for instance, a stone or a tree can ever swerve into hypothetical states of being. Either a stone is or is not. Consciousness, by contrast, can trespass into the nonexistent without ceasing to be; it can entertain states of being that paradoxically do not exist, such as future plans, memories of things gone by, or fictional worlds, or again wrong ideas. This swerve is, to thinkers like Hegel or Jean-Paul Sartre, cause for describing consciousness as a kind of loosening of the fabric of being. On their view, consciousness breaks up the organic continuity of life with a gap of negativity, or nothingness, across the distance of which life looks back at itself, represents itself, indeed at times even misrepresents itself or falls out of step with itself (such as when, through us, life claimed that the Earth was flat).

This gap of negativity in the otherwise full immanent fabric of being in no way authorizes us to suppose ourselves transcendental entities independent of nature. The proof is still forthcoming of a consciousness that would supernaturally exist outside brain, body, or machine, that is, outside matter. So if consciousness is indeed a loosening of being, this gap in the weave is, rather than a radical negation of being, a process of being. Now, as argued above, being seems to lean toward only one purpose: to be. We have for proof the overwhelming logical necessity of the fact that being has always been and will never cease. (It is inconceivable that being ever began since it would have had to issue from a preexisting world that therefore was alive, and therefore part of being. And likewise it cannot end for the simple reason that the universe has nowhere to go where it isn't already.) Inasmuch as being always thrives to be, that it is always fully itself and never abides interruption, it follows that the gap of negativity of consciousness, which seemed so impressively absolute to a philosopher like Sartre, is in fact another stitch in the infinitely woven fabric of being. The tiny crack of consciousness must consequently be a modality by which being enhances its work and finds a way of being ever more itself. Con-

consciousness is not a break in being but a step by which being manages to be ever more itself and pulls itself closer together.

The next step is to identify the mode of consciousness that comes nearest to its natural substance, the activity most germane to the being to which its every atom belongs. Of course, every act of consciousness is, so far as it goes, an act of life. This is most obvious in our everyday labor of doing and surviving and reproducing. Everything, from the hunter-gatherer's day's work to the writing of sonnets or the phrasing of a quantum mechanics problem, expresses a conscious organism's will to life, to endeavor in its own existence. Whether we call this endeavor "conatus," as Spinoza did, or "the pursuit of happiness" as the Enlightenment preferred, it seems that our every conscious activity aims at not only maintaining the organism alive, but ensuring its possessor the most beneficial allotment of life. (One could say that Sartre's idea of the "nothingness" or "nonnaturalness" of consciousness too is paradoxically a way to affirm the being of consciousness, to achieve a greater and more unfettered expression of being human.) Consciousness cannot go against being, anymore than a leaf cannot help turning toward light. This necessity applies also to acts of suicide which Schopenhauer was probably right to regard as not the renunciation of the will to life, but a lunge for life through other means.

Consciousness, however, is more than a device identifying what paths or actions will most enhance the organism's participation in being. It is also aware of performing those actions. Can we imagine a kind of conscious activity that, as all conscious activities, are acts of participation in being but whose energy moreover focuses on being aware of, and thus intensifying, this awareness? Acts of consciousness whose aim is to celebrate the life-participating force of consciousness? A baker uses his consciousness to make bread though his self-awareness may be elsewhere. A surgeon expertly mends the flesh without necessarily attending to the light of consciousness by which he works—that is, without using his consciousness not just to manipulate, but to realize its kinship with the flesh. All instrumental actions are affirmations of life. But obviously not all need be aware of the fact; that is, not every action directs consciousness to celebrating its life-participating flow. So the question is, Is there a mode of being conscious devoted to the celebration of life-seeking consciousness? An activity of consciousness wherein the aim is not only to pursue life through external means (e.g., baking bread, reattaching a ligament), but to intensify the awareness of life, or the fact that consciousness is a mode of life?

This would be an activity in which the means would also be the end, where consciousness would seek not just to maintain the body in life, but to draw consciousness nearer to being for the sole purpose of being close to being, embracing being, knowing oneself alive.

The second half of this study, “The Religion of Reality,” argues that such an activity is found in art. By art, we understand here the endeavor that seeks maximum awareness of being, that is, the utmost exercise of the awareness of being. From this activity issue objects, forms, colors, sounds that state, in singing tones, the participation of consciousness in being and the plentiful presence of being in consciousness. Art is a way of being awake and this being awake creates beautiful objects. *Beauty* is a word for describing that creature or object that most consciously and positively partakes of being. That thing or activity is art whose making is suffused by the awareness of being and the knowledge that awareness of being is a mode of being. Through art, consciousness revels in being alive. The artistic process seeks not to use consciousness to maintain life (as when baking bread or fixing ligaments or engaging in other instrumental actions where life is fought for). In fact, art does not *use* consciousness at all but *is in* consciousness, stays with it, attends to its vitality. It is life knowing and beholding itself. In art the consciousness of being and the being of consciousness coincide. Less aphoristically, awareness of being is the means and the purpose of art. It is life shining consciousness upon itself.

For this reason it is often said that art is useless; that it does not feed, shelter, cure diseases, build cities and roads, or increase knowledge; that its connection to the hurly-burly of survival is otiose and distant; and that it is therefore an activity of the mind at rest, of the mind such as it settles when not fending for the organism. In part, this opinion cannot be true for the reason that consciousness, like a vein carrying blood or sap, never stops being a process in and for life. Thus artistic consciousness too belongs in the mechanism of life on a par with others even if, like rest or play, it does not appear to contend and compete directly in the bustle of life forms. Through art, life seeks a form of self-union through means other than organic sustenance. These means, however, are no less essential to life, or else art would not exist or would fail to exist in some societies—a failure so far denied by anthropological evidence. The universal existence of art proves that, as essential to life as food and light, is the consciousness that dwells on remarking the being of things.

Now the foregoing is of course a very sweeping, deeply abstract proposi-

tion much in need of practical show-how. Such demonstration provides the meat and labor of Part II of this study which, by studying artworks and the testimonies of their makers, defends the view that, against an age-old prejudice that lumps art with artifice and make-believe, artworks are really acts of bonding to reality. Art is oriented toward reality, not fantasy. For however fanciful, art's plunge into the rabbit hole leads eventually to a refreshed contact with tangible life. Of course, art is a conceptual activity inasmuch as its building blocks are symbolic forms, ideas, elements of language and meaning. For all that, however, the intellectuality of art differs from the other products of reason. Art seeks concrete embodiment in specific forms; it does not succumb to the mind's tendency toward generality and abstraction. Knowledge, not art, lives in the realm of illusions and pictures. For knowledge is synthetic and generalizing, and therefore draws away from particulars that it condenses into unifying schemes, mental pictures, concepts. Not so art, which, in the opposite direction, casts ideas into uniquely limited objects. This is why artistic pictures of imaginary persons or things often give off a more vibrant, deep, and plausible flavor than *theoretical* disquisitions on the same entities, be they philosophical, scientific, or political. Science and philosophy talk about things in a language that drains them of pigment; whereas art talks about imaginary beings in ways that make them more tangibly present. Thus is it no surprise to find more incarnation in one of Anna Karenina's most listless moments than in the whole of Descartes's *Meditations*; or to find Kant's "Consciousness," Heidegger's "Dasein," Freud's id-ego-superego, or Marx's proletariat to be somewhat pale and tottering things next to, say, Vermeer's tiny *Girl with Pearl Earring*. This is less a disparagement of conceptual knowledge than a statement regarding its limitation. By dealing with generalities, knowledge gains in scope and prediction but loses in texture and grain. Knowledge is an aesthetic in the sense that it contemplates from far away; and distance turns whatever appears into an image.

Art—this has the appearance of paradox—reaches beyond the image. Artistic imagination leads the mind to the sensual, the perceptual, and the specific. From a commonsense perspective, artistic works are images only; but the artistic intention is not illusionistic. In general, art does not urge us to believe the illusion—this is where it parts ways with entertainment, fantasy, oratory, advertising, and propaganda. These latter make use of images to lull us into the sleep of forgetting and compliance. The advertising image weaves an all-

encompassing tapestry of unreality into which we are meant to trip from illusion to illusion, driven by the carrot of promised satisfaction and the dancing projections of our desire. This is all fantasy life in the service of another fiction, namely, the symbolic exchange system of money. The advertising image, in itself, has no substance; it is all gleam and surface seeking to capture the attention, not so that it dwells there, but to bounce it off to the publicized product or lifestyle. The work of art, by contrast, is an image that insists on its concrete life. It does not serve hidden masters and purposes. Art in fact becomes propaganda, and therefore clips its own wings, when it embarrasses itself by acting as mouthpiece or mere window. Then it betrays its mission to attend to what exists and becomes mere illustration. This is not to say that art should be devoid of conceptual content or that when it points to a person, an event, or a cause beyond itself it necessarily ceases to be art. But when art advertises beyond itself, the values it defends must be those practiced by artworks: art preaches only by example. To take a famous example, Picasso's painting *Guernica* evokes the wartime massacre of a Spanish village. It is art sending out a cry of moral and political protest. But the painting is not merely an instrument of that protest. The brutal destruction of life at Guernica also squashes art. Whatever kills, maims, diminishes, or hampers life does the same to art. The painting does not just say "This is what happened in a corner of northern Spain," but "This is what is happening to us, to consciousness, to art." Art is empathic; it does not demonstrate or agitate from outside. Instead it takes on the qualities of the represented. An artifact works as art if and when it speaks from the standpoint of that which is shown. This sets it apart from sentimental rhetoric and grandstanding.

But does not art glorify its patrons, the princes of this world, the ruling ideologies? For instance, doesn't Raphael's portrait of Pope Julius II elevate the man in spite of, it is said, a notably querulous papal tenure? Of course, it does. But because it is a great work of art, it elevates the man in spite of the office. Whereas lesser art would have propped up the man by means of his fame, the great work of art uncovers the human life inside the regalia. Its defense of the patron on the social and political stage is conditional on having found a positive reality to inhabit, a face behind the mask, a reality behind the illusion. Sometimes, when the artist can find no reality in the face, as in Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII, he will dwell on the tangible radiance of his clothes and somehow a reality will be rescued and witnessed, though it may in the end eclipse the man.

The point is that it is not enough for a work of art to sponsor the right idea or ruling ideology in order to succeed. Indeed, it succeeds in sponsoring an ideology only if it succeeds as art first. But such artistic success actually limits the range of ideologies it can defend. For clearly an activity of heightened generous consciousness, of careful and tender attention to the given, cannot go to celebrate that power or action that scorns or brutalizes life. The spiritual values that create and sustain a work of art are rarely those by which the likes of Julius II or Henry VIII set their life.



Art's attention to the varying thingness of reality gives it a far less theoretical cast than the other products of mind. This shows up best in its making. Whereas works of reason require only logical coherence among conceptual categories, art making pits human intention against realization. It brings imagination to the test of concrete matter. Thinking is almost infinitely plastic, but not so concrete things. We need to consider what art is in terms of how it is made, its nature in the light of what artists do. And what artists do is work with their hands on solid material, the stuff of colors, clay, marble, rock, wood, plastic, sound, and words and rhythm. There is no theoretical labor. It is not enough to have great ideas to make art; one must bring them to the test of practical application. A good pair of boots, not just a head high in the cloud, is needed to walk the path of art. In the end, the artist must be possessed with unwavering attention to the minutest reality. Abstract schemes he may indulge; but in the end even the most cerebral artist must submit his ideas to the test of fact. Ideas may exist in the mind only; artworks dwell in the three-dimensional world. This condition is the source of art's kinship with reality. It licenses this study's suggestion that art is less fabricational, fabulistic, unfettered, contriving, in a word, less *aesthetic*, than the works of pure reason.⁶ The latter kick themselves free of matter by way of beginning; they are answerable mostly to man-made rules of sense and logic. They are therefore plastic or "aesthetic." Works of art have form and size and weight and balance to reckon with. They submit to laws other than those of reason. Though plastic, they are limited by matter. They cannot blithely speak of transcendence, unconditioned existence, or pure mental life. "The Real is the rational" has no mean-

6. Here the word "aesthetic" is used with postmodern, rather than modern, overtones: to designate less food for the senses than man's freewheeling Pygmalion-like shaping of the given.

ing to a work of art. Its mission is to bring the mind to dwell in reality. It is less vision than actualization.

It is a sort of miracle when art theory sheds light on a work of art because theory applied to art is like inhaling applied to exhaling. Their directions are opposite. Whereas art is mind's Orphic descent into the concrete, theory is Icarus's flight into the ether. Each direction is prey to its own defect. Orpheus can become consumed by his descent into blind matter where he is struck dumb, while Icarus sometimes gets intoxicated by the ether. In his drunkenness he speaks too mellifluously, oblivious of the air that gives him lift, and falls. The ideal critic would be a hybrid of Orpheus and Icarus: like the former, he can sink deep into the thick of things and yet, like the latter, keep the will to survey, to see things from above, from the light of the sun. Only one type of personality seems to combine these two drives: the artist who speaks about his art.

Here I need defend Part II's choice of having given pride of place to the words of artists. Artists on art are often less charming and fluent than critics; they frequently mumble when we want them to explicate; they mystify, aphorize, or chant when they should be clarifying. They frustrate our hunger for systems, principles, axioms. We know them to be architects, so why must they speak like bricklayers? This has often led the critic to dismiss the artist as a spoilsport. Really, says the critic, we do not need an artist to guide our understanding of art. Artists, like parents, stand too near their offspring to make good appraisers. A mother may know every freckle on her son's nose, but what is that freckle in the giant tapestry of historic and social pressures that mold the boy's identity through his upbringing, the language he speaks, the contemporaries he lives among, the ideas he consumes? The same goes for art. Our appreciation of an art piece is purblind and anecdotal unless enlightened by broad contextual knowledge—what fits it into the pyramid of history, the artistic tradition, the system of forms and ideas in which it is notched. The artist knows in detail but knowledge really is made up of the general, scraps arranged in constellation, networks, systems. So if we want to know, we need to step back. And surely the artist is of little help. He is as averse to stepping back as a mother is loath to generalize about her boy.

Now, shall we say that, because they are unable to draw back, the artist does not *know* his work and the mother does not *know* her son? Of course not. Only perhaps the artist knows not *about* his work, nor the mother *about* her

son. Their knowledge is too deep, too of a piece with their life, their sense of what supremely matters, too suffused with love and presence, for objective distance to wedge into the matter. A mother who holds forth too learnedly or psychologically about her child, like the artist who pontificates over his work, is suspect of listening to herself speak, of preferring her discourse to its object, of relishing her intellectual fluency at the expense of her love. Not that we expect love to be, like Cordelia's in *King Lear*, always speechless. It is just that articulacy savors of mastery, and mastery of cutting too high above the dense, asymmetrical, complex, irreducible ways of life.

What we learn from listening to artists on art is rarely historical generalities. It is generally not *about* art. It is *from* art. Even when it takes the form of axioms, their word is grounded in the specific. Art is love of the particular. Likewise their discourse inherits all that is awkward, unwieldy, muddled, and tongue-tied about the particular. It is easier to talk about trees than one tree, easier also to describe humanity in general than one person. But language is whittled to a finer and brighter edge against the touchstone of concrete reality; it takes on the chiseled contour of experience. Artists on art offer dispatches from the line where subjectivity has tussled and engaged and won and lost against the concrete life. This is what makes their reports so confused, often so inconsistent. But their confusion is really a token of their truth, their tongue-tiedness a proof of their depth, their unsystematicness the evidence that they have honored their commitment to the particular. To study the words of artists is, in a sense, to come closest to seeing knowledge grappling with its opposite, that is, the particular. And this seems, in the end, to be where the discourse on art comes closest to art itself.



Now, having dashed through a breathless overview, we come before the forest. Therein we go step by step.