

# The “Vita Activa” and the Modern Age

## Hannah Arendt

### I *Vita Activa* and the Human Condition

With the term *vita activa*, I propose to designate three fundamental human activities: labor, work, and action. They are fundamental because each corresponds to one of the basic conditions under which life on earth has been given to man.

Labor is the activity which corresponds to the biological process of the human body, whose spontaneous growth, metabolism, and eventual decay are bound to the vital necessities produced and fed into the life process by labor. The human condition of labor is life itself.

Work is the activity which corresponds to the unnaturalness of human existence, which is not imbedded in, and whose mortality is not compensated by, the species' ever-recurring life cycle. Work provides an “artificial” world of things, distinctly different from all natural surroundings. Within its borders each individual life is housed, while this world itself is meant to outlast and transcend them all. The human condition of work is worldliness.

Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality, to the fact that men, not Man, live on the earth and inhabit the world. While all aspects of the human condition are somehow related to politics, this plurality is specifically *the* condition

— not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* — of all political life. Thus the language of the Romans, perhaps the most political people we have known, used the words “to live” and “to be among men” (*inter homines esse*) or “to die” and “to cease to be among men” (*inter homines esse desinere*) as synonyms. But in its most elementary form, the human condition of action is implicit even in Genesis (“Male and female created He *them*”), if we understand that this story of man's creation is distinguished in principle from the one according to which God originally created Man (*adam*), “him” and not “them,” so that the multitude of human beings becomes the result of multiplication. Action would be an unnecessary luxury, a capricious interference with general laws of behavior, if men were endlessly reproducible repetitions of the same model, whose nature or essence was the same for all and as predictable as the nature or essence of any other thing. Plurality is the condition of human action because we are all the same, that is, human, in such a way that nobody is ever the same as anyone else who ever lived, lives, or will live.

All three activities and their corresponding conditions are intimately connected with the most general condition of human existence: birth and death, natality and mortality. Labor assures not only individual survival, but the life of the species. Work and its product, the human artifact, bestow a measure of permanence and durability upon the futility of mortal life and the fleeting character of human time. Action, in so far as it engages in founding and preserving political bodies, creates the condition for remembrance, that is, for history.

Labor and work, as well as action, are also rooted in natality in so far as they have the task to provide and preserve the world for, to foresee and reckon with, the constant influx of newcomers who are born into the world as strangers. However, of the three, action has the closest connection with the human condition of natality; the new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something anew, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities. Moreover, since action is the political activity par excellence, natality, and not mortality, may be the central category of political, as distinguished from metaphysical, thought.

The human condition comprehends more than the conditions under which life has been given to man. Men are conditioned beings because everything they come in contact with turns immediately into a condition of their existence. The world in which the *vita activa* spends itself consists of things produced by human activities; but the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers. In addition to the conditions under which life is given to man on earth, and partly out of them, men constantly create their own, self-made conditions, which, their human origin and their variability notwithstanding, possess the same conditioning power as natural things. Whatever touches or enters into a sustained relationship with human life immediately assumes the character of a condition of human existence. This is why men, no matter what they do, are always conditioned beings. Whatever enters the human world of its own accord or is drawn into it by human effort becomes part of the human condition. The impact of the world's reality upon human existence is felt and received as a conditioning force. The objectivity of the world — its object- or thing-character — and the human condition supplement each other; because human existence is conditioned existence, it would be impossible without things, and things would be a heap of unrelated articles, a non-world, if they were not the conditioners of human existence.

To avoid misunderstanding: the human condition is not the same as human nature, and the sum total of human activities and capabilities which correspond to the human condition does not constitute anything like human nature. For neither those we discuss here nor those we leave out, like thought and reason, and not even the most

meticulous enumeration of them all, constitute essential characteristics of human existence in the sense that without them this existence would no longer be human. The most radical change in the human condition we can imagine would be an emigration of men from the earth to some other planet. Such an event, no longer totally impossible, would imply that man would have to live under man-made conditions, radically different from those the earth offers him. Neither labor nor work nor action nor, indeed, thought as we know it would then make sense any longer. Yet even these hypothetical wanderers from the earth would still be human; but the only statement we could make regarding their “nature” is that they still are conditioned beings, even though their condition is now self-made to a considerable extent.

The problem of human nature, the Augustinian *quaestio mihi factus sum* (“a question have I become for myself”), seems unanswerable in both its individual psychological sense and its general philosophical sense. It is highly unlikely that we, who can know, determine, and define the natural essences of all things surrounding us, which we are not, should ever be able to do the same for ourselves — this would be like jumping over our own shadows. Moreover, nothing entitles us to assume that man has a nature or essence in the same sense as other things. In other words, if we have a nature or essence, then surely only a god could know and define it, and the first prerequisite would be that he be able to speak about a “who” as though it were a “what.”<sup>1</sup> The perplexity is that the modes of human cognition applicable to things with “natural” qualities, including ourselves to the limited extent that we are specimens of the most highly developed species of organic life, fail us when we raise the question: And *who* are we? This is why attempts to define human nature almost invariably end with some construction of a deity, that is, with the god of the philosophers, who, since Plato, has revealed himself upon closer inspection to be a kind of Platonic idea of man. Of course, to demask such philosophic concepts of the divine as conceptualizations of human capabilities and qualities is not a demonstration of, not even an argument for, the non-existence of God; but the fact that attempts to define the nature of man lead so easily into an idea which definitely strikes us as “super-human” and therefore is identified with the divine may cast suspicion upon the very concept of “human nature.”

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On the other hand, the conditions of human existence – life itself, natality and mortality, worldliness, plurality, and the earth – can never “explain” what we are or answer the question of who we are for the simple reason that they never condition us absolutely. This has always been the opinion of philosophy, in distinction from the sciences – anthropology, psychology, biology, etc. – which also concern themselves with man. But today we may almost say that we have demonstrated even scientifically that, though we live now, and probably always will, under the earth’s conditions, we are not mere earth-bound creatures. Modern natural science owes its great triumphs to having looked upon and treated earth-bound nature from a truly universal viewpoint, that is, from an Archimedean standpoint taken, wilfully and explicitly, outside the earth.

### 39 Introspection and the Loss of Common Sense

Introspection, as a matter of fact, not the reflection of man’s mind on the state of his soul or body but the sheer cognitive concern of consciousness with its own content (and this is the essence of the Cartesian *cogitatio*, where *cogito* always means *cogito me cogitare*) must yield certainty, because here nothing is involved except what the mind has produced itself; nobody is interfering but the producer of the product, man is confronted with nothing and nobody but himself. Long before the natural and physical sciences began to wonder if man is capable of encountering, knowing, and comprehending anything except himself, modern philosophy had made sure in introspection that man concerns himself only with himself. Descartes believed that the certainty yielded by his new method of introspection is the certainty of the I-am.<sup>2</sup> Man, in other words, carries his certainty, the certainty of his existence, within himself; the sheer functioning of consciousness, though it cannot possibly assure a worldly reality given to the senses and to reason, confirms beyond doubt the reality of sensations and of reasoning, that is, the reality of processes which go on in the mind. These are not unlike the biological processes that go on in the body and which, when one becomes aware of them, can also convince one of its working reality. In so far as even dreams are real, since they presuppose a dreamer and a dream, the world of consciousness is real enough. The trouble is only that just as it would be impos-

sible to infer from the awareness of bodily processes the actual shape of any body, including one’s own, so it is impossible to reach out from the mere consciousness of sensations, in which one senses his senses and in which even the sensed object becomes part of sensation, into reality with its shapes, forms, colors, and constellations. The seen tree may be real enough for the sensation of vision, just as the dreamed tree is real enough for the dreamer as long as the dream lasts, but neither can ever become a real tree.

It is out of these perplexities that Descartes and Leibniz needed to prove, not the existence of God, but his goodness, the one demonstrating that no evil spirit rules the world and mocks man and the other that this world, including man, is the best of all possible worlds. The point about these exclusively modern justifications, known since Leibniz as theodicies, is that the doubt does not concern the existence of a highest being, which, on the contrary, is taken for granted, but concerns his revelation, as given in biblical tradition, and his intentions with respect to man and world, or rather the adequateness of the relationship between man and world. Of these two, the doubt that the Bible or nature contains divine revelation is a matter of course, once it has been shown that revelation as such, the disclosure of reality to the senses and of truth to reason, is no guaranty for either. Doubt of the goodness of God, however, the notion of a *Dieu trompeur*, arose out of the very experience of deception inherent in the acceptance of the new world view, a deception whose poignancy lies in its irremediable repetitiveness, for no knowledge about the heliocentric nature of our planetary system can change the fact that every day the sun is seen circling the earth, rising and setting at its preordained location. Only now, when it appeared as though man, if it had not been for the accident of the telescope, might have been deceived forever, did the ways of God really become wholly inscrutable; the more man learned about the universe, the less he could understand the intentions and purposes for which he should have been created. The goodness of the God of the theodicies, therefore, is strictly the quality of a *deus ex machina*; inexplicable goodness is ultimately the only thing that saves reality in Descartes’ philosophy (the coexistence of mind and extension, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*), as it saves the pre-stabilized harmony between man and world in Leibniz.

The very ingenuity of Cartesian introspection, and hence the reason why this philosophy became

so all-important to the spiritual and intellectual development of the modern age, lies first in that it had used the nightmare of non-reality as a means of submerging all worldly objects into the stream of consciousness and its processes. The “seen tree” found in consciousness through introspection is no longer the tree given in sight and touch, an entity in itself with an unalterable identical shape of its own. By being processed into an object of consciousness on the same level with a merely remembered or entirely imaginary thing, it becomes part and parcel of this process itself, of that consciousness, that is, which one knows only as an ever-moving stream. Nothing perhaps could prepare our minds better for the eventual dissolution of matter into energy, of objects into a whirl of atomic occurrences, than this dissolution of objective reality into subjective states of mind or, rather, into subjective mental processes. Second, and this was of even greater relevance to the initial stages of the modern age, the Cartesian method of securing certainty against universal doubt corresponded most precisely to the most obvious conclusion to be drawn from the new physical science: though one cannot know truth as something given and disclosed, man can at least know what he makes himself. This, indeed, became the most general and most generally accepted attitude of the modern age, and it is this conviction, rather than the doubt underlying it, that propelled one generation after another for more than three hundred years into an ever-quickenening pace of discovery and development.

Cartesian reason is entirely based “on the implicit assumption that the mind can only know that which it has itself produced and retains in some sense within itself.” Its highest ideal must therefore be mathematical knowledge as the modern age understands it, that is, not the knowledge of ideal forms given outside the mind but of forms produced by a mind which in this particular instance does not even need the stimulation – or, rather, the irritation – of the senses by objects other than itself. This theory is certainly what Whitehead calls it, “the outcome of common-sense in retreat.” For common sense, which once had been the one by which all other senses, with their intimately private sensations, were fitted into the common world, just as vision fitted man into the visible world, now became an inner faculty without any world relationship. This sense now was called common merely because it happened to be common to all. What men now have in common

is not the world but the structure of their minds, and this they cannot have in common, strictly speaking; their faculty of reasoning can only happen to be the same in everybody.<sup>3</sup> The fact that, given the problem of two plus two we all will come out with the same answer, four, is henceforth the very model of common-sense reasoning.

Reason, in Descartes no less than in Hobbes, becomes “reckoning with consequences,” the faculty of deducing and concluding, that is, of a process which man at any moment can let loose within himself. The mind of this man – to remain in the sphere of mathematics – no longer looks upon “two-and-two-are-four” as an equation in which two sides balance in a self-evident harmony, but understands the equation as the expression of a process in which two and two *become* four in order to generate further processes of addition which eventually will lead into the infinite. This faculty the modern age calls common-sense reasoning; it is the playing of the mind with itself, which comes to pass when the mind is shut off from all reality and “senses” only itself. The results of this play are compelling “truths” because the structure of one man’s mind is supposed to differ no more from that of another than the shape of his body. Whatever difference there may be is a difference of mental power, which can be tested and measured like horsepower. Here the old definition of man as an *animal rationale* acquires a terrible precision: deprived of the sense through which man’s five animal senses are fitted into a world common to all men, human beings are indeed no more than animals who are able to reason, “to reckon with consequences.”

The perplexity inherent in the discovery of the Archimedean point was and still is that the point outside the earth was found by an earth-bound creature, who found that he himself lived not only in a different but in a topsy-turvy world the moment he tried to apply his universal world view to his actual surroundings. The Cartesian solution of this perplexity was to move the Archimedean point into man himself, to choose as ultimate point of reference the pattern of the human mind itself, which assures itself of reality and certainty within a framework of mathematical formulas which are its own products. Here the famous *reductio scientiae ad mathematicam* permits replacement of what is sensuously given by a system of mathematical equations where all real relationships are dissolved into logical relations between man-made symbols. It is this replacement which permits modern science to



fulfil its "task of *producing*" the phenomena and objects it wishes to observe. And the assumption is that neither God nor an evil spirit can change the fact that two and two equal four.

#### 40 Thought and the Modern World View

The Cartesian removal of the Archimedean point into the mind of man, while it enabled man to carry it, as it were, within himself wherever he went and thus freed him from given reality altogether – that is, from the human condition of being an inhabitant of the earth – has perhaps never been as convincing as the universal doubt from which it sprang and which it was supposed to dispel. Today, at any rate, we find in the perplexities confronting natural scientists in the midst of their greatest triumphs the same nightmares which have haunted the philosophers from the beginning of the modern age. This nightmare is present in the fact that a mathematical equation, such as of mass and energy – which originally was destined only to save the phenomena, to be in agreement with observable facts that could also be explained differently, just as the Ptolemaic and Copernican systems originally differed only in simplicity and harmony – actually lends itself to a very real conversion of mass into energy and vice versa, so that the mathematical "conversion" implicit in every equation corresponds to convertibility in reality; it is present in the weird phenomenon that the systems of non-Euclidean mathematics were found without any forethought of applicability or even empirical meaning before they gained their surprising validity in Einstein's theory; and it is even more troubling in the inevitable conclusion that "the possibility of such an application must be held open for all, even the most remote constructions of pure mathematics." If it should be true that a whole universe, or rather any number of utterly different universes will spring into existence and "prove" whatever over-all pattern the human mind has constructed, then man may indeed, for a moment, rejoice in a reassertion of the "pre-established harmony between pure mathematics and physics,"<sup>4</sup> between mind and matter, between man and the universe. But it will be difficult to ward off the suspicion that this mathematically preconceived world may be a dream world where every dreamed vision man himself produces has the character of reality only as long as the dream

lasts. And his suspicions will be enforced when he must discover that the events and occurrences in the infinitely small, the atom, follow the same laws and regularities as in the infinitely large, the planetary systems.<sup>5</sup> What this seems to indicate is that if we inquire into nature from the standpoint of astronomy we receive planetary systems, while if we carry out our astronomical inquiries from the standpoint of the earth we receive geocentric, terrestrial systems.

In any event, wherever we try to transcend appearance beyond all sensual experience, even instrument-aided, in order to catch the ultimate secrets of Being, which according to our physical world view is so secretive that it never appears and still so tremendously powerful that it produces all appearance, we find that the same patterns rule the macrocosm and the microcosm alike, that we receive the same instrument readings. Here again, we may for a moment rejoice in a refound unity of the universe, only to fall prey to the suspicion that what we have found may have nothing to do with either the macrocosmos or the microcosmos, that we deal only with the patterns of our own mind, the mind which designed the instruments and put nature under its conditions in the experiment – prescribed its laws to nature, in Kant's phrase – in which case it is really as though we were in the hands of an evil spirit who mocks us and frustrates our thirst for knowledge, so that wherever we search for that which we are not, we encounter only the patterns of our own minds.

Cartesian doubt, logically the most plausible and chronologically the most immediate consequence of Galileo's discovery, was assuaged for centuries through the ingenious removal of the Archimedean point into man himself, at least so far as natural science was concerned. But the mathematization of physics, by which the absolute renunciation of the senses for the purpose of knowing was carried through, had in its last stages the unexpected and yet plausible consequence that every question man puts to nature is answered in terms of mathematical patterns to which no model can ever be adequate, since one would have to be shaped after our sense experiences.<sup>6</sup> At this point, the connection between thought and sense experience, inherent in the human condition, seems to take its revenge: while technology demonstrates the "truth" of modern science's most abstract concepts, it demonstrates no more than that man can always apply the results of his mind, that no matter which system he uses for the explanation of natural phenomena he will

always be able to adopt it as a guiding principle for making and acting. This possibility was latent even in the beginnings of modern mathematics, when it turned out that numerical truths can be fully translated into spatial relationships. If, therefore, present-day science in its perplexity points to technical achievements to "prove" that we deal with an "authentic order" given in nature,<sup>7</sup> it seems it has fallen into a vicious circle, which can be formulated as follows: scientists formulate their hypotheses to arrange their experiments and then use these experiments to verify their hypotheses; during this whole enterprise, they obviously deal with a hypothetical nature.

In other words, the world of the experiment seems always capable of becoming a man-made reality, and this, while it may increase man's power of making and acting, even of creating a world, far beyond what any previous age dared to imagine in dream and phantasy, unfortunately puts man back once more – and now even more forcefully – into the prison of his own mind, into the limitations of patterns he himself created. The moment he wants what all ages before him were capable of achieving, that is, to experience the reality of what he himself is not, he will find that nature and the universe "escape him" and that a universe construed according to the behavior of nature in the experiment and in accordance with the very principles which man can translate technically into a working reality lacks all possible representation. What is new here is not that things exist of which we cannot form an image – such "things" were always known and among them, for instance, belonged the "soul" – but that the material things we see and represent and against which we had measured immaterial things for which we can form no images should likewise be "unimaginable." With the disappearance of the sensually given world, the transcendent world disappears as well, and with it the possibility of transcending the material world in concept and thought. It is therefore not surprising that the new universe is not only "practically inaccessible but not even thinkable," for "however we think it, it is wrong; not perhaps quite as meaningless as a 'triangular circle,' but much more so than a 'winged lion.'"<sup>8</sup>

Cartesian universal doubt has now reached the heart of physical science itself; for the escape into the mind of man himself is closed if it turns out that the modern physical universe is not only beyond presentation, which is a matter of course under the

assumption that nature and Being do not reveal themselves to the senses, but is inconceivable, unthinkable in terms of pure reasoning as well.

#### 41 The Reversal of Contemplation and Action

Perhaps the most momentous of the spiritual consequences of the discoveries of the modern age and, at the same time, the only one that could not have been avoided, since it followed closely upon the discovery of the Archimedean point and the concomitant rise of Cartesian doubt, has been the reversal of the hierarchical order between the *vita contemplativa* and the *vita activa*.

In order to understand how compelling the motives for this reversal were, it is first of all necessary to rid ourselves of the current prejudice which ascribes the development of modern science, because of its applicability, to a pragmatic desire to improve conditions and better human life on earth. It is a matter of historical record that modern technology has its origins not in the evolution of those tools man had always devised for the twofold purpose of easing his labors and erecting the human artifice, but exclusively in an altogether non-practical search for useless knowledge. Thus, the watch, one of the first modern instruments, was not invented for purposes of practical life, but exclusively for the highly "theoretical" purpose of conducting certain experiments with nature. This invention, to be sure, once its practical usefulness became apparent, changed the whole rhythm and the very physiognomy of human life; but from the standpoint of the inventors, this was a mere incident. If we had to rely only on men's so-called practical instincts, there would never have been any technology to speak of, and although today the already existing technical inventions carry a certain momentum which will probably generate improvements up to a certain point, it is not likely that our technically conditioned world could survive, let alone develop further, if we ever succeeded in convincing ourselves that man is primarily a practical being.

However that may be, the fundamental experience behind the reversal of contemplation and action was precisely that man's thirst for knowledge could be assuaged only after he had put his trust into the ingenuity of his hands. The point was not that truth and knowledge were no longer important, but that they could be won only



by "action" and not by contemplation. It was an instrument, the telescope, a work of man's hands, which finally forced nature, or rather the universe, to yield its secrets. The reasons for trusting *doing* and for distrusting *contemplation* or *observation* became even more cogent after the results of the first active inquiries. After being and appearance had parted company and truth was no longer supposed to appear, to reveal and disclose itself to the mental eye of a beholder, there arose a veritable necessity to hunt for truth behind deceptive appearances. Nothing indeed could be less trustworthy for acquiring knowledge and approaching truth than passive observation or mere contemplation. In order to be certain one had to *make sure*, and in order to know one had to do. Certainty of knowledge could be reached only under a twofold condition: first, that knowledge concerned only what one had done himself – so that its ideal became mathematical knowledge, where we deal only with self-made entities of the mind – and second, that knowledge was of such a nature that it could be tested only through more doing.

Since then, scientific and philosophic truth have parted company; scientific truth not only need not be eternal, it need not even be comprehensible or adequate to human reason. It took many generations of scientists before the human mind grew bold enough to fully face this implication of modernity. If nature and the universe are products of a divine maker, and if the human mind is incapable of understanding what man has not made himself, then man cannot possibly expect to learn anything about nature that he can understand. He may be able, through ingenuity, to find out and even to imitate the devices of natural processes, but that does not mean these devices will ever make sense to him – they do not have to be intelligible. As a matter of fact, no supposedly suprarational divine revelation and no supposedly abstruse philosophic truth has ever offended human reason so glaringly as certain results of modern science. One can indeed say with Whitehead: "Heaven knows what seeming nonsense may not to-morrow be demonstrated truth."<sup>9</sup>

Actually, the change that took place in the seventeenth century was more radical than what a simple reversal of the established traditional order between contemplation and doing is apt to indicate. The reversal, strictly speaking, concerned only the relationship between thinking and doing, whereas contemplation, in the original sense of beholding the truth, was altogether eliminated.

For thought and contemplation are not the same. Traditionally, thought was conceived as the most direct and important way to lead to the contemplation of truth. Since Plato, and probably since Socrates, thinking was understood as the inner dialogue in which one speaks with himself (*eme emautō*, to recall the idiom current in Plato's dialogues); and although this dialogue lacks all outward manifestation and even requires a more or less complete cessation of all other activities, it constitutes in itself a highly active state. Its outward inactivity is clearly separated from the passivity, the complete stillness, in which truth is finally revealed to man. If medieval scholasticism looked upon philosophy as the handmaiden of theology, it could very well have appealed to Plato and Aristotle themselves; both, albeit in a very different context, considered this dialogical thought process to be the way to prepare the soul and lead the mind to a beholding of truth beyond thought and beyond speech – a truth that is *arrhēton*, incapable of being communicated through words, as Plato put it,<sup>10</sup> or beyond speech, as in Aristotle.<sup>11</sup>

The reversal of the modern age consisted then not in raising doing to the rank of contemplating as the highest state of which human beings are capable, as though henceforth doing was the ultimate meaning for the sake of which contemplation was to be performed, just as, up to that time, all activities of the *vita activa* had been judged and justified to the extent that they made the *vita contemplativa* possible. The reversal concerned only thinking, which from then on was the handmaiden of doing as it had been the *ancilla theologiae*, the handmaiden of contemplating divine truth in medieval philosophy and the handmaiden of contemplating the truth of Being in ancient philosophy. Contemplation itself became altogether meaningless.

The radicality of this reversal is somehow obscured by another kind of reversal, with which it is frequently identified and which, since Plato, has dominated the history of Western thought. Whoever reads the Cave allegory in Plato's *Republic* in the light of Greek history will soon be aware that the *periagōgē*, the turning-about that Plato demands of the philosopher, actually amounts to a reversal of the Homeric world order. Not life after death, as in the Homeric Hades, but ordinary life on earth, is located in a "cave," in an underworld; the soul is not the shadow of the body, but the body the shadow of the soul; and the senseless, ghostlike motion ascribed by Homer to the lifeless

existence of the soul after death in Hades is now ascribed to the senseless doings of men who do not leave the cave of human existence to behold the eternal ideas visible in the sky.

In this context, I am concerned only with the fact that the Platonic tradition of philosophical as well as political thought started with a reversal, and that this original reversal determined to a large extent the thought patterns into which Western philosophy almost automatically fell wherever it was not animated by a great and original philosophical impetus. Academic philosophy, as a matter of fact, has ever since been dominated by the never-ending reversals of idealism and materialism, of transcendentalism and immanentism, of realism and nominalism, of hedonism and asceticism, and so on. What matters here is the reversibility of all these systems, that they can be turned "upside down" or "downside up" at any moment in history without requiring for such reversal either historical events or changes in the structural elements involved. The concepts themselves remain the same no matter where they are placed in the various systematic orders. Once Plato had succeeded in making these structural elements and concepts reversible, reversals within the course of intellectual history no longer needed more than purely intellectual experience, and experience within the framework of conceptual thinking itself. These reversals already began with the philosophical schools in late antiquity and have remained part of the Western tradition. It is still the same tradition, the same intellectual game with paired antitheses that rules, to an extent, the famous modern reversals of spiritual hierarchies, such as Marx's turning Hegelian dialectic upside down or Nietzsche's revaluation of the sensual and natural as against the supersensual and supernatural.

The reversal we deal with here, the spiritual consequence of Galileo's discoveries, although it has frequently been interpreted in terms of the traditional reversals and hence as integral to the Western history of ideas, is of an altogether different nature. The conviction that objective truth is not given to man but that he can know only what he makes himself is not the result of skepticism but of a demonstrable discovery, and therefore does not lead to resignation but either to redoubled activity or to despair. The world loss of modern philosophy, whose introspection discovered consciousness as the inner sense with which one senses his senses and found it to be the only guaranty of reality, is different not only in degree from the age-old sus-

picion of the philosophers toward the world and toward the others with whom they shared the world; the philosopher no longer turns from the world of deceptive perishability to another world of eternal truth, but turns away from both and withdraws into himself. What he discovers in the region of the inner self is, again, not an image whose permanence can be beheld and contemplated, but, on the contrary, the constant movement of sensual perceptions and the no less constantly moving activity of the mind. Since the seventeenth century, philosophy has produced the best and least disputed results when it has investigated, through a supreme effort of self-inspection, the processes of the senses and of the mind. In this aspect, most of modern philosophy is indeed theory of cognition and psychology, and in the few instances where the potentialities of the Cartesian method of introspection were fully realized by men like Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche, one is tempted to say that philosophers have experimented with their own selves no less radically and perhaps even more fearlessly than the scientists experimented with nature.

Much as we may admire the courage and respect the extraordinary ingenuity of philosophers throughout the modern age, it can hardly be denied that their influence and importance decreased as never before. It was not in the Middle Ages but in modern thinking that philosophy came to play second and even third fiddle. After Descartes based his own philosophy upon the discoveries of Galileo, philosophy has seemed condemned to be always one step behind the scientists and their ever more amazing discoveries, whose principles it has strived ardently to discover *ex post facto* and to fit into some over-all interpretation of the nature of human knowledge. As such, however, philosophy was not needed by the scientists, who – up to our time, at least – believed that they had no use for a handmaiden, let alone one who would "carry the torch in front of her gracious lady" (Kant): The philosophers became either epistemologists, worrying about an over-all theory of science which the scientists did not need, or they became, indeed, what Hegel wanted them to be, the organs of the *Zeitgeist*, the mouthpieces in which the general mood of the time was expressed with conceptual clarity. In both instances, whether they looked upon nature or upon history, they tried to understand and come to terms with what happened without them. Obviously, philosophy suffered more from modernity than any other field of human endeavor;



and it is difficult to say whether it suffered more from the almost automatic rise of activity to an altogether unexpected and unprecedented dignity or from the loss of traditional truth, that is, of the concept of truth underlying our whole tradition.

#### 42 The Reversal within the *Vita Activa* and the Victory of *Homo Faber*

First among the activities within the *vita activa* to rise to the position formerly occupied by contemplation were the activities of making and fabricating – the prerogatives of *homo faber*. This was natural enough, since it had been an instrument and therefore man in so far as he is a toolmaker that led to the modern revolution. From then on, all scientific progress has been most intimately tied up with the ever more refined development in the manufacture of new tools and instruments. While, for instance, Galileo's experiments with the fall of heavy bodies could have been made at any time in history if men had been inclined to seek truth through experiments, Michelson's experiment with the interferometer at the end of the nineteenth century relied not merely on his "experimental genius" but "required the general advance in technology," and therefore "could not have been made earlier than it was."<sup>12</sup>

It is not only the paraphernalia of instruments and hence the help man had to enlist from *homo faber* to acquire knowledge that caused these activities to rise from their former humble place in the hierarchy of human capacities. Even more decisive was the element of making and fabricating present in the experiment itself, which produces its own phenomena of observation and therefore depends from the very outset upon man's productive capacities. The use of the experiment for the purpose of knowledge was already the consequence of the conviction that one can know only what he has made himself, for this conviction meant that one might learn about those things man did not make by figuring out and imitating the processes through which they had come into being. The much discussed shift of emphasis in the history of science from the old questions of "what" or "why" something is to the new question of "how" it came into being is a direct consequence of this conviction, and its answer can only be found in the experiment. The experiment repeats the natural process as though man himself were about to make nature's objects, and although in the early

stages of the modern age no responsible scientist would have dreamt of the extent to which man actually is capable of "making" nature, he nevertheless from the onset approached it from the standpoint of the One who made it, and this not for practical reasons of technical applicability but exclusively for the "theoretical" reason that certainty in knowledge could not be gained otherwise: "Give me matter and I will build a world from it, that is, give me matter and I will show you how a world developed from it." These words of Kant show in a nutshell the modern blending of making and knowing, whereby it is as though a few centuries of knowing in the mode of making were needed as the apprenticeship to prepare modern man for making what he wanted to know.

Productivity and creativity, which were to become the highest ideals and even the idols of the modern age in its initial stages, are inherent standards of *homo faber*, of man as a builder and fabricator. However, there is another and perhaps even more significant element noticeable in the modern version of these faculties. The shift from the "why" and "what" to the "how" implies that the actual objects of knowledge can no longer be things or eternal motions but must be processes, and that the object of science therefore is no longer nature or the universe but the history, the story of the coming into being, of nature or life or the universe. Long before the modern age developed its unprecedented historical consciousness and the concept of history became dominant in modern philosophy, the natural sciences had developed into historical disciplines, until in the nineteenth century they added to the older disciplines of physics and chemistry, of zoology and botany, the new natural sciences of geology or history of the earth, biology or the history of life, anthropology or the history of human life, and, generally, natural history. In all these instances, development, the key concept of the historical sciences, became the central concept of the physical sciences as well. Nature, because it could be known only in processes which human ingenuity, the ingeniousness of *homo faber*, could repeat and remake in the experiment, became a process, and all particular natural things derived their significance and meaning solely from their functions in the over-all process. In the place of the concept of Being we now find the concept of Process. And whereas it is in the nature of Being to appear and thus disclose itself, it is in the nature of Process to remain invisible, to be something whose existence can only be

inferred from the presence of certain phenomena. This process was originally the fabrication process which "disappears in the product," and it was based on the experience of *homo faber*, who knew that a production process necessarily precedes the actual existence of every object.

Yet while this insistence on the process of making or the insistence upon considering every thing as the result of a fabrication process is highly characteristic of *homo faber* and his sphere of experience, the exclusive emphasis the modern age placed on it at the expense of all interest in the things, the products themselves, is quite new. It actually transcends the mentality of man as a toolmaker and fabricator, for whom, on the contrary, the production process was a mere means to an end. Here, from the standpoint of *homo faber*, it was as though the means, the production process or development, was more important than the end, the finished product. The reason for this shift of emphasis is obvious: the scientist made only in order to know, not in order to produce things, and the product was a mere by-product, a side effect. Even today all true scientists will agree that the technical applicability of what they are doing is a mere by-product of their endeavor.

The full significance of this reversal of means and ends remained latent as long as the mechanistic world view, the world view of *homo faber* par excellence, was predominant. This view found its most plausible theory in the famous analogy of the relationship between nature and God with the relationship between the watch and the watchmaker. The point in our context is not so much that the eighteenth-century idea of God was obviously formed in the image of *homo faber* as that in this instance the process character of nature was still limited. Although all particular natural things had already been engulfed in the process from which they had come into being, nature as a whole was not yet a process but the more or less stable end product of a divine maker. The image of watch and watchmaker is so strikingly apposite precisely because it contains both the notion of a process character of nature in the image of the movements of the watch and the notion of its still intact object character in the image of the watch itself and its maker.

It is important at this point to remember that the specifically modern suspicion toward man's truth-receiving capacities, the mistrust of the given, and hence the new confidence in making and introspection which was inspired by the hope that in human

consciousness there was a realm where knowing and producing would coincide, did not arise directly from the discovery of the Archimedean point outside the earth in the universe. They were, rather, the necessary consequences of this discovery for the discoverer himself, in so far as he was and remained an earth-bound creature. This close relationship of the modern mentality with philosophical reflection naturally implies that the victory of *homo faber* could not remain restricted to the employment of new methods in the natural sciences, the experiment and the mathematization of scientific inquiry. One of the most plausible consequences to be drawn from Cartesian doubt was to abandon the attempt to understand nature and generally to know about things not produced by man, and to turn instead exclusively to things that owed their existence to man. This kind of argument, in fact, made Vico turn his attention from natural science to history, which he thought to be the only sphere where man could obtain certain knowledge, precisely because he dealt here only with the products of human activity. The modern discovery of history and historical consciousness owed one of its greatest impulses neither to a new enthusiasm for the greatness of man, his doings and sufferings, nor to the belief that the meaning of human existence can be found in the story of mankind, but to the despair of human reason, which seemed adequate only when confronted with man-made objects.

Prior to the modern discovery of history but closely connected with it in its impulses are the seventeenth-century attempts to formulate new political philosophies or, rather, to invent the means and instruments with which to "make an artificial animal ... called a Commonwealth, or State."<sup>13</sup> With Hobbes as with Descartes "the prime mover was doubt,"<sup>14</sup> and the chosen method to establish the "art of man," by which he would make and rule his own world as "God hath made and governs the world" by the art of nature, is also introspection, "to read in himself," since this reading will show him "the similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man to the thoughts and passions of another." Here, too, the rules and standards by which to build and judge this most human of human "works of art"<sup>15</sup> do not lie outside of men, are not something men have in common in a worldly reality perceived by the senses or by the mind. They are, rather, inclosed in the inwardness of man, open only to introspection, so that their very validity rests on the assumption that "not ...



the objects of the passions" but the passions themselves are the same in every specimen of the species man-kind. Here again we find the image of the watch, this time applied to the human body and then used for the movements of the passions. The establishment of the Commonwealth, the human creation of "an artificial man," amounts to the building of an "automaton [an engine] that moves [itself] by springs and wheels as doth a watch."

In other words, the process which, as we saw, invaded the natural sciences through the experiment, through the attempt to imitate under artificial conditions the process of "making" by which a natural thing came into existence, serves as well or even better as the principle for doing in the realm of human affairs. For here the processes of inner life, found in the passions through introspection, can become the standards and rules for the creation of the "automatic" life of that "artificial man" who is "the great Leviathan." The results yielded by introspection, the only method likely to deliver certain knowledge, are in the nature of movements: only the objects of the senses remain as they are and endure, precede and survive, the act of sensation; only the objects of the passions are permanent and fixed to the extent that they are not devoured by the attainment of some passionate desire; only the objects of thoughts, but never thinking itself, are beyond motion and perishability. Processes, therefore, and not ideas, the models and shapes of the things to be, become the guide for the making and fabricating activities of *homo faber* in the modern age.

Hobbes's attempt to introduce the new concepts of making and reckoning into political philosophy – or, rather, his attempt to apply the newly discovered aptitudes of making to the realm of human affairs – was of the greatest importance; modern rationalism as it is currently known, with the assumed antagonism of reason and passion as its stock-in-trade, has never found a clearer and more uncompromising representative. Yet it was precisely the realm of human affairs where the new philosophy was first found wanting, because by its very nature it could not understand or even believe in reality. The idea that only what I am going to make will be real – perfectly true and legitimate in the realm of fabrication – is forever defeated by the actual course of events, where nothing happens more frequently than the totally unexpected. To act in the form of making, to reason in the form of "reckoning with consequences," means to leave out the unexpected, the event itself, since it

would be unreasonable or irrational to expect what is no more than an "infinite improbability." Since, however, the event constitutes the very texture of reality within the realm of human affairs, where the "wholly improbable happens regularly," it is highly unrealistic not to reckon with it, that is, not to reckon with something with which nobody can safely reckon. The political philosophy of the modern age, whose greatest representative is still Hobbes, founders on the perplexity that modern rationalism is unreal and modern realism is irrational – which is only another way of saying that reality and human reason have parted company. Hegel's gigantic enterprise to reconcile spirit with reality (*den Geist mit der Wirklichkeit zu versöhnen*), a reconciliation that is the deepest concern of all modern theories of history, rested on the insight that modern reason foundered on the rock of reality.

The fact that modern world alienation was radical enough to extend even to the most worldly of human activities, to work and reification, the making of things and the building of a world, distinguishes modern attitudes and evaluations even more sharply from those of tradition than a mere reversal of contemplation and action, of thinking and doing, would indicate. The break with contemplation was consummated not with the elevation of man the maker to the position formerly held by man the contemplator, but with the introduction of the concept of process into making. Compared with this, the striking new arrangement of hierarchical order within the *vita activa*, where fabrication now came to occupy a rank formerly held by political action, is of minor importance. We saw before that this hierarchy had in fact, though not expressly, already been overruled in the very beginnings of political philosophy by the philosophers' deep-rooted suspicion of politics in general and action in particular.

The matter is somewhat confused because Greek political philosophy still follows the order laid down by the *polis* even when it turns against it; but in their strictly philosophical writings (to which, of course, one must turn if he wants to know their innermost thoughts), Plato as well as Aristotle tends to invert the relationship between work and action in favor of work. Thus Aristotle, in a discussion of the different kinds of cognition in his *Metaphysics*, places *dianoia* and *epistēmē praktikē*, practical insight and political science, at the lowest rank of his order, and puts above them the science of fabrication, *epistēmē poiētikē*, which im-

mediately precedes and leads to *theōria*, the contemplation of truth.<sup>16</sup> And the reason for this predilection in philosophy is by no means the politically inspired suspicion of action which we mentioned before, but the philosophically much more compelling one that contemplation and fabrication (*theōria* and *poiēsis*) have an inner affinity and do not stand in the same unequivocal opposition to each other as contemplation and action. The decisive point of similarity, at least in Greek philosophy, was that contemplation, the beholding of something, was considered to be an inherent element in fabrication as well, inasmuch as the work of the craftsman was guided by the "idea," the model beheld by him before the fabrication process had started as well as after it had ended, first to tell him what to make and then to enable him to judge the finished product.

Historically, the source of this contemplation, which we find for the first time described in the Socratic school, is at least twofold. On one hand, it stands in obvious and consistent connection with the famous contention of Plato, quoted by Aristotle, that *thaumazein*, the shocked wonder at the miracle of Being, is the beginning of all philosophy.<sup>17</sup> It seems to me highly probable that this Platonic contention is the immediate result of an experience, perhaps the most striking one, that Socrates offered his disciples: the sight of him time and again suddenly overcome by his thoughts and thrown into a state of absorption to the point of perfect motionlessness for many hours. It seems no less plausible that this shocked wonder should be essentially speechless, that is, that its actual content should be untranslatable into words. This, at least, would explain why Plato and Aristotle, who held *thaumazein* to be the beginning of philosophy, should also agree – despite so many and such decisive disagreements – that some state of speechlessness, the essentially speechless state of contemplation, was the end of philosophy. *Theōria*, in fact, is only another word for *thaumazein*; the contemplation of truth at which the philosopher ultimately arrives is the philosophically purified speechless wonder with which he began.

There is, however, another side to this matter, which shows itself most articulately in Plato's doctrine of ideas, in its content as well as in its terminology and exemplifications. These reside in the experiences of the craftsman, who sees before his inner eye the shape of the model according to which he fabricates his object. To Plato, this model, which craftsmanship can only imitate but not create, is no

product of the human mind but given to it. As such it possesses a degree of permanence and excellence which is not actualized but on the contrary spoiled in its materialization through the work of human hands. Work makes perishable and spoils the excellence of what remained eternal so long as it was the object of mere contemplation. Therefore, the proper attitude toward the models which guide work and fabrication, that is, toward Platonic ideas, is to leave them as they are and appeal to the inner eye of the mind. If man only renounces his capacity for work and does not do anything, he can behold them and thus participate in their eternity. Contemplation, in this respect, is quite unlike the enraptured state of wonder with which man responds to the miracle of Being as a whole. It is and remains part and parcel of a fabrication process even though it has divorced itself from all work and all doing; in it, the beholding of the model, which now no longer is to guide any doing, is prolonged and enjoyed for its own sake.

In the tradition of philosophy, it is this second kind of contemplation that became the predominant one. Therefore the motionlessness which in the state of speechless wonder is no more than an incidental, unintended result of absorption, becomes now the condition and hence the outstanding characteristic of the *vita contemplativa*. It is not wonder that overcomes and throws man into motionlessness, but it is through the conscious cessation of activity, the activity of making, that the contemplative state is reached. If one reads medieval sources on the joys and delights of contemplation, it is as though the philosophers wanted to make sure that *homo faber* would heed the call and let his arms drop, finally realizing that his greatest desire, the desire for permanence and immortality, cannot be fulfilled by his doings, but only when he realizes that the beautiful and eternal cannot be made. In Plato's philosophy, speechless wonder, the beginning and the end of philosophy, together with the philosopher's love for the eternal and the craftsman's desire for permanence and immortality, permeate each other until they are almost indistinguishable. Yet the very fact that the philosophers' speechless wonder seemed to be an experience reserved for the few, while the craftsmen's contemplative glance was known by many, weighed heavily in favor of a contemplation primarily derived from the experiences of *homo faber*. It already weighed heavily with Plato, who drew his examples from the realm of making because they were closer to a more general human



experience, and it weighed even more heavily where some kind of contemplation and meditation was required of everybody, as in medieval Christianity.

Thus it was not primarily the philosopher and philosophic speechless wonder that molded the concept and practice of contemplation and the *vita contemplativa*, but rather *homo faber* in disguise; it was man the maker and fabricator, whose job it is to do violence to nature in order to build a permanent home for himself, and who now was persuaded to renounce violence together with all activity, to leave things as they are, and to find his home in the contemplative dwelling in the neighborhood of the imperishable and eternal. *Homo faber* could be persuaded to this change of attitude because he knew contemplation and some of its delights from his own experience; he did not need a complete change of heart, a true *periagōgē*, a radical turnabout. All he had to do was let his arms drop and prolong indefinitely the act of beholding the *eidos*, the eternal shape and model he had formerly wanted to imitate and whose excellence and beauty he now knew he could only spoil through any attempt at reification.

If, therefore, the modern challenge to the priority of contemplation over every kind of activity had done no more than turn upside down the established order between making and beholding, it would still have remained in the traditional framework. This framework was forced wide open, however, when in the understanding of fabrication itself the emphasis shifted entirely away from the product and from the permanent, guiding model to the fabrication process, away from the question of what a thing is and what kind of thing was to be produced to the question of how and through which means and processes it had come into being and could be reproduced. For this implied both that contemplation was no longer believed to yield truth and that it had lost its position in the *vita activa* itself and hence within the range of ordinary human experience.

### 43 The Defeat of *Homo Faber* and the Principle of Happiness

If one considers only the events that led into the modern age and reflects solely upon the immediate consequences of Galileo's discovery, which must have struck the great minds of the seventeenth century with the compelling force of self-evident truth, the reversal of contemplation and fabrica-

tion, or rather the elimination of contemplation from the range of meaningful human capacities, is almost a matter of course. It seems equally plausible that this reversal should have elevated *homo faber*, the maker and fabricator, rather than man the actor or man as *animal laborans*, to the highest range of human possibilities.

And, indeed, among the outstanding characteristics of the modern age from its beginning to our own time we find the typical attitudes of *homo faber*: his instrumentalization of the world, his confidence in tools and in the productivity of the maker of artificial objects; his trust in the all-comprehensive range of the means-end category, his conviction that every issue can be solved and every human motivation reduced to the principle of utility; his sovereignty, which regards everything given as material and thinks of the whole of nature as of "an immense fabric from which we can cut out whatever we want to reweave it however we like";<sup>18</sup> his equation of intelligence with ingenuity, that is, his contempt for all thought which cannot be considered to be "the first step ... for the fabrication of artificial objects, particularly of tools to make tools, and to vary their fabrication indefinitely";<sup>19</sup> finally, his matter-of-course identification of fabrication with action.

It would lead us too far afield to follow the ramifications of this mentality, and it is not necessary, for they are easily detected in the natural sciences, where the purely theoretical effort is understood to spring from the desire to create order out of "mere disorder," the "wild variety of nature," and where therefore *homo faber's* predilection for patterns for things to be produced replaces the older notions of harmony and simplicity. It can be found in classical economics, whose highest standard is productivity and whose prejudice against non-productive activities is so strong that even Marx could justify his plea for justice for laborers only by misrepresenting the laboring, non-productive activity in terms of work and fabrication. It is most articulate, of course, in the pragmatic trends of modern philosophy, which are not only characterized by Cartesian world alienation but also by the unanimity with which English philosophy from the seventeenth century onward and French philosophy in the eighteenth century adopted the principle of utility as the key which would open all doors to the explanation of human motivation and behavior. Generally speaking, the oldest conviction of *homo faber* – that "man is the measure of all things" – advanced to the rank of a universally accepted commonplace.

What needs explanation is not the modern esteem of *homo faber* but the fact that this esteem was so quickly followed by the elevation of laboring to the highest position in the hierarchical order of the *vita activa*. This second reversal of hierarchy within the *vita activa* came about more gradually and less dramatically than either the reversal of contemplation and action in general or the reversal of action and fabrication in particular. The elevation of laboring was preceded by certain deviations and variations from the traditional mentality of *homo faber* which were highly characteristic of the modern age and which, indeed, arose almost automatically from the very nature of the events that ushered it in. What changed the mentality of *homo faber* was the central position of the concept of process in modernity. As far as *homo faber* was concerned, the modern shift of emphasis from the "what" to the "how," from the thing itself to its fabrication process, was by no means an unmixed blessing. It deprived man as maker and builder of those fixed and permanent standards and measurements which, prior to the modern age, have always served him as guides for his doing and criteria for his judgment. It is not only and perhaps not even primarily the development of commercial society that, with the triumphal victory of exchange value over use value, first introduced the principle of interchangeability, then the relativization, and finally the devaluation, of all values. For the mentality of modern man, as it was determined by the development of modern science and the concomitant unfolding of modern philosophy, it was at least as decisive that man began to consider himself part and parcel of the two superhuman, all-encompassing processes of nature and history, both of which seemed doomed to an infinite progress without ever reaching any inherent *telos* or approaching any pre-ordained idea.

*Homo faber*, in other words, as he arose from the great revolution of modernity, though he was to acquire an undreamed-of ingenuity in devising instruments to measure the infinitely large and the infinitely small, was deprived of those permanent measures that precede and outlast the fabrication process and form an authentic and reliable absolute with respect to the fabricating activity. Certainly, none of the activities of the *vita activa* stood to lose as much through the elimination of contemplation from the range of meaningful human capacities as fabrication. For unlike action, which partly consists in the unchaining of processes, and unlike laboring, which follows closely

the metabolic process of biological life, fabrication experiences processes, if it is aware of them at all, as mere means toward an end, that is, as something secondary and derivative. No other capacity, moreover, stood to lose as much through modern world alienation and the elevation of introspection into an omnipotent device to conquer nature as those faculties which are primarily directed toward the building of the world and the production of worldly things.

Nothing perhaps indicates clearer the ultimate failure of *homo faber* to assert himself than the rapidity with which the principle of utility, the very quintessence of his world view, was found wanting and was superseded by the principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number." When this happened it was manifest that the conviction of the age that man can know only what he makes himself – which seemingly was so eminently propitious to a full victory of *homo faber* – would be overruled and eventually destroyed by the even more modern principle of process, whose concepts and categories are altogether alien to the needs and ideals of *homo faber*. For the principle of utility, though its point of reference is clearly man, who uses matter to produce things, still presupposes a world of use objects by which man is surrounded and in which he moves. If this relationship between man and world is no longer secure, if worldly things are no longer primarily considered in their usefulness but as more or less incidental results of the production process which brought them into being, so that the end product of the production process is no longer a true end and the produced thing is valued not for the sake of its predetermined usage but "for its production of something else," then, obviously, the objection can be "raised that ... its value is secondary only, and a world that contains no primary values can contain no secondary ones either." This radical loss of values within the restricted frame of reference of *homo faber* himself occurs almost automatically as soon as he defines himself not as the maker of objects and the builder of the human artifice who incidentally invents tools, but considers himself primarily a toolmaker and "particularly [a maker] of tools to make tools" who only incidentally also produces things. If one applies the principle of utility in this context at all, then it refers primarily not to use objects and not to usage but to the production process. Now what helps stimulate productivity and lessens pain and effort is useful. In other words, the ultimate standard of measurement is



not utility and usage at all, but "happiness," that is, the amount of pain and pleasure experienced in the production or in the consumption of things.

Bentham's invention of the "pain and pleasure calculus" combined the advantage of seemingly introducing the mathematical method into the moral sciences with the even greater attraction of having found a principle which resided entirely on introspection. His "happiness," the sum total of pleasures minus pains, is as much an inner sense which senses sensations and remains unrelated to worldly objects as the Cartesian consciousness that is conscious of its own activity. Moreover, Bentham's basic assumption that what all men have in common is not the world but the sameness of their own nature, which manifests itself in the sameness of calculation and the sameness of being affected by pain and pleasure, is directly derived from the earlier philosophers of the modern age. For this philosophy, "hedonism" is even more of a misnomer than for the epicureanism of late antiquity, to which modern hedonism is only superficially related. The principle of all hedonism, as we saw before, is not pleasure but avoidance of pain, and Hume, who in contradistinction to Bentham was still a philosopher, knew quite well that he who wants to make pleasure the ultimate end of all human action is driven to admit that not pleasure but pain, not desire but fear, are his true guides. "If you...inquire, why [somebody] desires health, he will readily reply, because sickness is painful. If you push your inquiries further and desire a reason why he hates pain, it is impossible he can ever give any. This is an ultimate end, and is never referred to by any other object." The reason for this impossibility is that only pain is completely independent of any object, that only one who is in pain really senses nothing but himself; pleasure does not enjoy itself but something besides itself. Pain is the only inner sense found by introspection which can rival in independence from experienced objects the self-evident certainty of logical and arithmetical reasoning.

While this ultimate foundation of hedonism in the experience of pain is true for both its ancient and modern varieties, in the modern age it acquires an altogether different and much stronger emphasis. For here it is by no means the world, as in antiquity, that drives man into himself to escape the pains it may inflict, under which circumstance both pain and pleasure still retain a good deal of their worldly significance. Ancient world alienation in all its varieties – from stoicism to epicureanism down to

hedonism and cynicism – had been inspired by a deep mistrust of the world and moved by a vehement impulse to withdraw from worldly involvement, from the trouble and pain it inflicts, into the security of an inward realm in which the self is exposed to nothing but itself. Their modern counterparts – puritanism, sensualism, and Bentham's hedonism – on the contrary, were inspired by an equally deep mistrust of man as such; they were moved by doubt of the adequacy of the human senses to receive reality, the adequacy of human reason to receive truth, and hence by the conviction of the deficiency or even depravity of human nature.

This depravity is not Christian or biblical either in origin or in content, although it was of course interpreted in terms of original sin, and it is difficult to say whether it is more harmful and repulsive when puritans denounce man's corruptness or when Benthamites brazenly hail as virtues what men always have known to be vices. While the ancients had relied upon imagination and memory, the imagination of pains from which they were free or the memory of past pleasures in situations of acute painfulness, to convince themselves of their happiness, the moderns needed the calculus of pleasure or the puritan moral bookkeeping of merits and transgressions to arrive at some illusory mathematical certainty of happiness or salvation. (These moral arithmetics are, of course, quite alien to the spirit pervading the philosophic schools of late antiquity. Moreover, one need only reflect on the rigidity of self-imposed discipline and the concomitant nobility of character, so manifest in those who had been formed by ancient stoicism or epicureanism, to become aware of the gulf by which these versions of hedonism are separated from modern puritanism, sensualism, and hedonism. For this difference, it is almost irrelevant whether the modern character is still formed by the older narrow-minded, fanatic self-righteousness or has yielded to the more recent self-centered and self-indulgent egotism with its infinite variety of futile miseries.) It seems more than doubtful that the "greatest happiness principle" would have achieved its intellectual triumphs in the English-speaking world if no more had been involved than the questionable discovery that "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure,"<sup>20</sup> or the absurd idea of establishing morals as an exact science by isolating "in the human soul that feeling which seems to be the most easily measurable."

Hidden behind this as behind other, less interesting variations of the sacredness of egoism and the all-pervasive power of self-interest, which were current to the point of being commonplace in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, we find another point of reference which indeed forms a much more potent principle than any pain-pleasure calculus could ever offer, and that is the principle of life itself. What pain and pleasure, fear and desire, are actually supposed to achieve in all these systems is not happiness at all but the promotion of individual life or a guaranty of the survival of mankind. If modern egoism were the ruthless search for pleasure (called happiness) it pretends to be, it would not lack what in all truly hedonistic systems is an indispensable element of argumentation – a radical justification of suicide. This lack alone indicates that in fact we deal here with life philosophy in its most vulgar and least critical form. In the last resort, it is always life itself which is the supreme standard to which everything else is referred, and the interests of the individual as well as the interests of mankind are always equated with individual life or the life of the species as though it were a matter of course that life is the highest good.

The curious failure of *homo faber* to assert himself under conditions seemingly so extraordinarily propitious could also have been illustrated by another, philosophically even more relevant, revision of basic traditional beliefs. Hume's radical criticism of the causality principle, which prepared the way for the later adoption of the principle of evolution, has often been considered one of the origins of modern philosophy. The causality principle with its twofold central axiom – that everything that is must have a cause (*nihil sine causa*) and that the cause must be more perfect than its most perfect effect – obviously relies entirely on experiences in the realm of fabrication, where the maker is

superior to his products. Seen in this context, the turning point in the intellectual history of the modern age came when the image of organic life development – where the evolution of a lower being, for instance the ape, can cause the appearance of a higher being, for instance man – appeared in the place of the image of the watchmaker who must be superior to all watches whose cause he is.

Much more is implied in this change than the mere denial of the lifeless rigidity of a mechanistic world view. It is as though in the latent seventeenth-century conflict between the two possible methods to be derived from the Galilean discovery, the method of the experiment and of making on one hand and the method of introspection on the other, the latter was to achieve a somewhat belated victory. For the only tangible object introspection yields, if it is to yield more than an entirely empty consciousness of itself, is indeed the biological process. And since this biological life, accessible in self-observation, is at the same time a metabolic process between man and nature, it is as though introspection no longer needs to get lost in the ramifications of a consciousness without reality, but has found within man – not in his mind but in his bodily processes – enough outside matter to connect him again with the outer world. The split between subject and object, inherent in human consciousness and irremediable in the Cartesian opposition of man as a *res cogitans* to a surrounding world of *res extensae*, disappears altogether in the case of a living organism, whose very survival depends upon the incorporation, the consumption, of outside matter. Naturalism, the nineteenth-century version of materialism, seemed to find in life the way to solve the problems of Cartesian philosophy and at the same time to bridge the ever-widening chasm between philosophy and science.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Augustine, who is usually credited with having been the first to raise the so-called anthropological question in philosophy, knew this quite well. He distinguishes between the questions of "Who am I?" and "What am I?" the first being directed by man at himself ("And I directed myself at myself and said to me: You, who are you? And I answered: A man" – *tu, quis es?* [*Confessiones* x. 6]) and the second being addressed to God ("What then am I, my God? What is my

nature?" – *Quid ergo sum, Deus meus? Quae natura sum?* [x. 17]). For in the "great mystery," the *grande profundum*, which man is (iv. 14), there is "something of man [*aliquid hominis*]" which the spirit of man which is in him itself knoweth not. But Thou, Lord, who has made him [*fecisti eum*] knowest everything of him [*eius omnia*] (x. 5). Thus, the most familiar of these phrases which I quoted in the text, the *questio mihi factus sum*, is a question raised in the presence of



- God, "in whose eyes I have become a question for myself" (x. 33). In brief, the answer to the question "Who am I?" is simply: "You are a man – whatever that may be"; and the answer to the question "What am I?" can be given only by God who made man. The question about the nature of man is no less a theological question than the question about the nature of God; both can be settled only within the framework of a divinely revealed answer.
- 2 That the *cogito ergo sum* contains a logical error, that, as Nietzsche pointed out, it should read: *cogito, ergo cogitationes sunt*, and that therefore the mental awareness expressed in the *cogito* does not prove that I am, but only that consciousness is, is another matter and need not interest us here (see Nietzsche, *Wille zur Macht*, No. 484).
  - 3 This transformation of common sense into an inner sense is characteristic of the whole modern age; in the German language it is indicated by the difference between the older German word *Gemeinsinn* and the more recent expression *gesunder Menschenverstand* which replaced it.
  - 4 Hermann Minkowski, "Raum und Zeit," in Lorentz, Einstein, and Minkowski, *Das Relativitätsprinzip* (1913).
  - 5 And this doubt is not assuaged if another coincidence is added, the coincidence between logic and reality. Logically, it seems evident indeed that "the electrons if they were to explain the sensory qualities of matter could not very well possess these sensory qualities, since in that case the question for the cause of these qualities would simply have been removed one step farther, but not solved" (Heisenberg, *Wandlungen in den Grundlagen der Naturwissenschaft* [1935], p. 66). The reason why we become suspicious is that only when "in the course of time" the scientists became aware of this logical necessity did they discover that "matter" had no qualities and therefore could no longer be called matter.
  - 6 In the words of Erwin Schrödinger: "As our mental eye penetrates into smaller and smaller distances and shorter and shorter times, we find nature behaving so entirely differently from what we observe in visible and palpable bodies of our surrounding that no model shaped after our large-scale experiences can ever be 'true'" (*Science and Humanism* [1952], p. 25).
  - 7 Heisenberg, *Wandlungen in den Grundlagen*, p. 64.
  - 8 Schrödinger, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
  - 9 *Science and the Modern World* [1925], p. 116.
  - 10 In the *Seventh Letter* 341C: *rhēton gar oudamōs estin hōs alla mathēmata* ("for it is never to be expressed by words like other things we learn").
  - 11 See esp. *Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a25 ff. and 1143a36 ff. The current English translation distorts the meaning because it renders *logos* as "reason" or "argument."
  - 12 Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World*, pp. 116–17.
  - 13 Hobbes's Introduction to the *Leviathan*.
  - 14 See Michael Oakeshott's excellent Introduction to the *Leviathan* [1651] (Blackwell's Political Texts), p. xiv.
  - 15 *Ibid.*, p. lxiv.
  - 16 *Metaphysics* 1025b25 ff., 1064a17 ff.
  - 17 For Plato see *Theaetetus* 155: *Mala gar philosophou touto to pathos, to thaumazein; ou gar allē archē philosophias ē hautē* ("For wonder is what the philosopher endures most; for there is no other beginning of philosophy than this"). Aristotle, who at the beginning of the *Metaphysics* (982b12 ff.) seems to repeat Plato almost verbatim – "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize" – actually uses this wonder in an altogether different way; to him, the actual impulse to philosophize lies in the desire "to escape ignorance."
  - 18 Henri Bergson, *Évolution créatrice* (1948) p. 157.
  - 19 *Ibid.*, p. 140.
  - 20 This, of course, is the first sentence of the *Principles of Morals and Legislation* [1789].
  - 21 The greatest representatives of modern life philosophy are Marx, Nietzsche, and Bergson, inasmuch as all three equate Life and Being. For this equation, they rely on introspection, and life is indeed the only "being" man can possibly be aware of by looking merely into himself. The difference between these and the earlier philosophers of the modern age is that life appears to be more active and more productive than consciousness, which seems to be still too closely related to contemplation and the old ideal of truth. This last stage of modern philosophy is perhaps best described as the rebellion of the philosophers against philosophy, a rebellion which, beginning with Kierkegaard and ending in existentialism, appears at first glance to emphasize action as against contemplation. Upon closer inspection, however, none of these philosophers is actually concerned with action as such. We may leave aside here Kierkegaard and his non-worldly, inward-directed acting. Nietzsche and Bergson describe action in terms of fabrication – *homo faber* instead of *homo sapiens* – just as Marx thinks of acting in terms of making and describes labor in terms of work. But their ultimate point of reference is not work and worldliness any more than action; it is life and life's fertility.