

## ON THE NEED FOR SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY TODAY

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ABSTRACT: ‘On the Need for Speculative Philosophy Today’ takes seriously Hegel’s claims that speculative philosophy begins in diremption and ends in higher-order conceptualization. To make Hegel’s theses more perspicuous, I examine the set of modern life needs—historical, metaphysical, phenomenological, and political—that give rise to speculative philosophy. I then attempt to show that speculative philosophy’s ultimate aim is to provide us with higher-order consolation. In the final section, I mean to draw on the second sense of speculation, conjecturing that rational form of inquiry I have undertaken is a propaedeutic to ‘philosophies of action’: philosophy of life and public philosophy.

KEYWORDS: Speculative Philosophy; Hegel; Reason

### 1. THREE PHILOSOPHICAL FIGURES

‘The task of philosophy is impiety and corruption’. So proclaimed Simon Critchley during a public event sponsored by the New York Public Library and held at the New School for Social Research on January 26, 2011. The occasion was the projected release of James Miller’s book *Examined Lives: From Socrates to Nietzsche* at the end of January. The title of the panel was ‘Does Philosophy Still Matter?’

A few things are noteworthy about Critchley’s remark. To begin with, there is the tone in which he utters it, a calmness that seems to belie the fact that his is a minority position today. He knows this, of course. Then there is his mood, which is one of

melancholy but also of anxiety. Despite the generally held view among most Americans that philosophy is essentially useless since it doesn't do much of anything, those of us who still believe in the life of the mind should regard philosophy's *true calling*, Critchley seems to be saying, as the ruthless criticism of all staid verities. Yet (and this is something he also knows) the philosopher as provocateur—the Socratic gadfly, the Spinozistic heretic, the Sartrean militant—seems to be a thing of the past and is now, for all intents and purposes, a 'tenured radical', as Roger Kimball eloquently but also misleadingly put it: tenured in some cases, radical in name only. But that was also what made Kimball's joke so amusing, albeit so disconcerting. Now that May 68 is no longer 'philosophy in the streets' but a Wikipedia entry in need to fact-checking and disambiguation, the aged anarchist is relegated to feeding his resentment of statism and capitalism with each scholarly monograph he writes and to feeling a slight touch of envy for his more successful philosophical rival, the theoretician.

The philosopher as theoretician has, of course, been with us from the very beginning. We need only recall the well-worn cautionary tale that has come down to us from Plato and Diogenes Laertes. In his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Diogenes recounts how on a walk beneath a canopy of stars, the Presocratic philosopher Thales has been musing pleasantly about the cosmos—musing, that is, until he falls into a well. Soon afterward, a servant girl comes upon him and says, 'Thales, how can you expect to know about all the heavens when you can't even see what's just beneath your feet?' The story illustrates a general point, but it is not simply the one about absentmindedness dogging the one wrapped in contemplation. It is that one's mastery of theory may have no bearing on one's living well and, more emphatically, that sometimes such mastery can preclude one's sharing the world with others.

Standing before us is the now-regnant philosophical figure, that of the theoretician, someone who seeks to know how the cosmos works and who manages to tune out the buzzing of practical questions. Amid the contemplation afforded him by leisure and wealth, he invokes general concepts and constructs sophisticated models. In his heart, he is a logician with regard to the general furniture of the mind, a mathematician with regard to systematic coherence, a methaethicist with regard to the fundamental principles of morality, a linguist with regard to the semantic properties of language, and, not the least, a physicist with regard to the general laws governing the natural world. In short, he's an analytic philosopher.

That the theoretician has become the marquee figure on the philosophical stage is a relatively new phenomenon in the history of the West. As Pierre Hadot has shown in *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, it is only after two successive waves that he happened to

become the master figure of modern philosophy.<sup>1</sup> During the first wave, which occurs sometime near the end of the thirteenth century, both the liberal arts and the theology wings of the medieval university split spiritual exercises off from philosophical commentary. As a purely theoretical discourse, philosophy thereby came to supply theology with the argumentative rigor it needed in order to wage war against rival doctrines and to secure agreement among believers. The *telos* of the university—the student’s mastery of theological doctrine—thus grew in tandem with, and was aided by, the theoretical nature of the medieval curriculum. Some 200 years later, scholasticism was the very thing Montaigne railed against in his stunning essays on education. Deeds, not words; judgment, not dogma; virtue, not pedantry: the proper end of education, by Montaigne’s lights, was wisdom—or it was nothing at all.

After the birth of the modern period, the division of philosophy as theory and philosophy as spiritual practice grew apace. This can be seen in the Humboldtian research university which embodies a synthesis between the kind of instructor in charge of education, the structure of the institution, and the *telos* of a university education: the professor as a professional whose authority is grounded in an understanding of a particular body of knowledge or, in Kant’s case, in an exposition of the general principles governing various branches of knowledge; the institution built according to the ideals of scientific research; and the product of an education—the competent civil servant or, in our time, the skilled symbol worker. In the current philosophy curriculum, philosophy’s concern with conceptual analysis and argumentative rigor serves to cultivate the kind of procedural and instrumental thinking the knowledge worker will need to utilize in his business analyses, economic transactions, and daily communications.

The theoretician has crowded out not just the provocateur; he has also outflanked a third figure, the one whom the ancients identified as *the* philosopher: the therapist of the soul. For the Stoics as much as for the Epicureans and the Pyrrhonian skeptics, the pupil sought to understand logic (assent, denial, and suspension of judgment with regard to appearances) and physics (the basic features of reality) for the sake of living according to nature. Metaphysics and logic were thus the handmaidens of ethics, and ethics was a rational inquiry rooted in the life of the person and in that of the community. In the *Meditations*, for instance, Marcus Aurelius undertook a threefold discipline, seeking to reserve ‘good’ and ‘bad’ for what was within his power, to desire that events happen as they do happen, and to act according to duty and for the sake

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<sup>1</sup> See Pierre Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*, trans. Michael Chase, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2002. The following paragraphs are written in the ‘spirit’ of Hadot’s way of thinking.

of humanity.<sup>2</sup> Ethics only lived up to its calling, then, when it brought us harmony within and without.

On this construal, philosophy was nothing more but also nothing less than an art of consolation, an art treating everything from everyday negative emotions to life-altering crises as falling immediately within its ken. And what about the life of the philosopher? His ultimate duty was to remain faithful to something like a conversion experience: a lifelong rational quest—to be sure, one prone to relapses, hardships, and all manner of temptations—in search of wisdom.

In the modern world, the philosopher as consoler has been assaulted from all sides and, in consequence, has been forced underground. To the theoretician's ear, he sounds unabashedly melodramatic and unscientific. Since he doesn't 'adopt and emulate the methods of successful [natural] sciences' or 'operate *in tandem* with the sciences, as their abstract and reflective branch', he is best excused as a quaint antiquarian, an unhinged senior citizen who missed the naturalistic turn.<sup>3</sup> For the provocateur, he is nothing but a quietist, a Pollyanna or Pangloss, a 'Right Hegelian' whose psychic tranquility is achieved only by capitulating to the status quo, bending to the demands of the state, and turning away from the brute facts of human suffering and political injustice. And in the eyes of the common person, the conceit of 'the quest' reaches full expression only in other domains: in secular society as therapy, in the marketplace as self-help, and in the spiritual domain in the form of traditional religion.

Could it be, though, that we have lost something, something with which we are vaguely familiar and something for which we still hunger? And might that something be speculative philosophy, a mode of rational inquiry that places our suffering within the context of the modern world and seeks reconciliation through rational insight?

## 2. THE FATE OF REASON: CONTINGENCY IN THE MODERN WORLD

'Atoms or Gods'? asks Marcus Aurelius on a number of occasions in his personal notes, the later-named *Meditations*. The question, settled by Stoics in favor of the gods, returns with a vengeance during the modern age.

Many Enlightenment thinkers and some of their post-Enlightenment progeny displayed an optimism in the power of reason that most of us now find unfathomable

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<sup>2</sup> See Pierre Hadot, 'The Inner Citadel: The Meditations of Marcus Aurelius', trans. Michael Chase, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1998.

<sup>3</sup> Brian Leiter, 'Introduction', *The Future for Philosophy*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2004, p. 7.

and naive. Not so Kant. He held that reason was tasked with grounding science, morality, art, and religion on rational first principles. Yet already in the 1780s there were skeptics of the rationalist project who saw that the application of reason to practical concerns resulted in sundry monstrosities. As Frederick Beiser shows at considerable length in his magisterial work, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, skeptics and fideists advanced two related objections: first, that the logical conclusion to Kantian idealism was solipsism, the view that there is nothing beyond the circle of consciousness; and, second, that the path of Spinozistic naturalism leads of necessity to atheism.<sup>4</sup> But Kantianism and Spinozism were the very embodiments of reason. Hence, if either were true, then ‘why should we listen to our reason if it undermines all those beliefs necessary for the conduct of life?’<sup>5</sup> There may in fact be a divide between the true and the good that cannot be crossed.

The problem concerning the authority of reason gets carried over into twentieth century where it faces far graver charges. After World War II, reason is mired in what I shall term the ‘ineffectuality dilemma’. On one side of the dilemma, instrumental and utilitarian incarnations of reason seem to work *too well* at explaining away human suffering. Under Leninism and Stalinism, the dignity and sovereignty of the individual is trumped by utopian calls for sacrifice. Utilitarianism fares no better. In Ian McEwan’s *Atonement*, for instance, one reads Britain’s desire to win the Great War despite the heavy human toll. Among the government official Jack Tallis’s notes, there was a

series of arithmetical calculations.... Jack’s straight-backed, brown-ink copperplate told her [Jack’s wife Emily] to assume a multiplier of fifty. For every one tone of explosive dropped, assumed fifty casualties. Assume 100,000 tons of bombs dropped in two weeks. Result: five million casualties.<sup>6</sup>

Not far below this account of bureaucratic rationality lies the cold calculus of the sociopath. Where indeed is reason’s humility regarding the fallibility of its judgment, and where is its modesty concerning the exercise of its power?

Hubristic paternalism seems to be the conclusion to the first horn of the dilemma. On the other side, things look no better. According to Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*, trenchant moral disagreements observable throughout public life in the West seem to imply that there is no final answer to our moral problems, leading us to wonder whether reason has any normative force. When it is achieved, consensus

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<sup>4</sup> On the problem of solipsism, see also Andrew Taggart, ‘Unbounded Naturalism’, *Cosmos and History*, vol. 4, nos. 1-2, 2008, pp. 154-77.

<sup>5</sup> Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1987, p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Ian McEwan, *Atonement*, New York, Anchor, 2001, p. 127.

seems to be the product of stealth, the aligning of individual and group interests, and a great deal of luck. If the question of human dignity, the need to end useless suffering, the demand to confront climate change, and the nature of the common good represent some of the most pressing issues of the day and if reason seems to waver between theodicean immoralism and stuttering imbecility, then how are we to live according to the light of reason?

Reason's waning authority results, therefore, from its inability to answer for contingency and transience. 'Gods or atoms'? For us, the modern age is the work of atoms, not the handiwork of the gods. Yet insofar as this is the case, ours must be a tragic world saddled with the problem of nihilism.

As an intellectual shorthand, we might say that there are 'stoic', 'utopian', and 'tragic' ages. We can designate a 'stoic age' as one that embraces *amor fati*, an outpouring of love for all that exists. Not only does the stoic regard every event as divinely ordained so that each happening has a reason for being; he also takes ascent beyond the bounds of his finite self to 'a view from nowhere', to a *final view* of the cosmos, to be at once feasible and desirable. To the stoic, finitude is not a human condition so much as a limited perspective while infinitude expresses the true state of man: the way of reason leading to man's communion with god.

It should come as no surprise, then, that we are not stoics so understood nor can we hope to be for the reason that, as secular beings, we have rejected the notion of providence, we have lost faith in the capacity of reason to explain transience in general and contingency in particular, and we seem unable to pass beyond the principle of individuation in order to arrive at some collective spirit. We cannot tolerate metaphysics, be it religious or philosophical.

Perhaps we are utopians then? No, we are too old for all that except, perhaps, in our Promethean scientific pursuits. Unlike a tragic dispensation, a utopian one is grounded in the belief that the principle of self-assertion, the power of the will to bring the world into conformity with its wishes, holds sway. Closing the gap between how things are and how they should (or could) be remains a task for political radicals. Yet, for good or for ill, the chief historical lesson we have drawn from the utopian experiments of the past couple centuries is that the collective will cannot overcome reality save by resorting to terror. That divine ambition, that disastrous experiment in wholesale social engineering, is part of our history as well as our social imaginary. In social psychological terms, it could be said that we are now too timid, too chafed and chastened, too accustomed to our own fallibility and vulnerability to refashion the world in such a way that it accords with our most fundamental desires.

Living during an uncertain period after the 'end of ideology', we have become used to believing that misfortune is an ineradicable feature of our metaphysical fate and that our most meaningful plans and projects can, in an instant, go under. If

contingency can neither be explained by means of reason (the stoical dispensation) nor overcome by means of an ongoing act of will (the utopian dispensation), then it will remain a problem of existence begging for provisional solutions.

This story has a strange Adornoian twist, however. It is that philosophy *of a certain kind*, whose instrument is reason *of a certain nature*, has become more, not less, important today. If Nietzsche is right that suffering cannot be endured unless we endow it with meaning, then we would do well to regard speculative philosophy as an indispensable activity of reason in search of satisfaction. To say, therefore, that there is a *need* for philosophy is just to say that philosophical inquiry is tied not to theory but to life: genuine philosophizing only gets under way once a concrete problem of sufficient conceptual weight arises in a particular context. But this just means that practical philosophy begins in horror, not in wonder; that it is motivated not by choice but by necessity. At certain moments, when action alone won't do (call this a 'utopian block') and when that which presses upon us won't go away (call this a 'stoical impulse'), we feel compelled to examine our standing in the social world. In a world shorn of chance, speculative philosophy would be both unnecessary and useless; in ours, however, it is something we can't do without.

### 3. THE METAPHYSICAL CONDITIONS UNDERLYING THE NEED FOR SPECULATIVE PHILOSOPHY

Under what metaphysical conditions does the need for speculative philosophy first arise? When an event is construed, however dimly, as an intimation of injustice, there philosophy first comes on the scene. As biological organisms firmly rooted in our natural world, we have among our earliest experiences the vague intuition that the natural order of things is just. Good, whether scarce or plentiful, is rewarded while evil is punished. This is a pre-philosophical 'natural consciousness' that perceives harmony in all things. According to Raymond Geuss, 'A kind of order which is both moral and 'natural' prevails in the world, and this order will eventually, but necessarily... reestablish itself.'<sup>7</sup> Natural justice, then, is grounded in a fully enchanted world in which the distinctions between the natural and the moral, fact and value, involuntary and voluntary have yet to reach consciousness. When natural consciousness is disturbed by something that fails to make sense, it associates this event with dissatisfaction. With diremption from natural life, Hegel notes in his *Early Theological Writings*, also comes a certain hostility toward life itself. Modernity, consciousness coming to an awareness of itself, coincides with the splitting of the

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<sup>7</sup> Raymond Geuss, *Politics and the Imagination*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2010, p. vii.

moral order from the natural state of affairs, the severing of *is* from *ought*.<sup>8</sup> Yet this splitting also leaves us longing for higher order, hard-won reconciliation. In what basic forms does natural injustice first appear, and how should we chart the path from natural to mature consciousness?

Childhood gives us our first taste of worldly dissatisfaction. Psychodynamic theory holds that the child begins to mature once she discovers the Reality Principle. During this period, the child is confronted with the stark fact that her wishes do not conform to reality: her instincts, desires, and demands, left unsatisfied, ultimately compel her to acknowledge that her ideas do not have the magical property of making her desires real and to recognise that her will isn't absolute in its nature or in the scope of its application. That is, her capacity to make or remake the world in her own image as well as her protracted attempt to have the world do her bidding must at some point be met with a certain ontological recalcitrance. Not without melancholy, she concludes either that the world does not work that way or that there is no way of getting around this: her caretakers' refusal symbolizes a world where not all desires are or can be met. The hard-edged lesson for the maturing child is that the world is not as she would *like* it to be; it exists and persists independently of her bidding.

Natural injustice first appears as the severing of desire from satisfaction. In its second form, it shows up as the failure to provide for fundamental human needs. We may lack the freedom to do as we wish or to actualize ourselves in the world. Or we may not have access to basic resources vital for nourishment and self-development. Or our parents may fail to provide us with the nurturance we need in order to become psychologically and emotionally mature creatures. Or we may have few opportunities for cultivating our skills and talents. Or, finally, we may lack the intellectual and physical space—Woolf's room of one's own, Forster's room with a view—indispensable for learning how to think for ourselves as well as how to care about the overall shape of our lives. In all of these ways, our fears and anxieties, our sadness, frustration, and resentment are indicative of a world we have been thrown into, one that is not as it ought to be.

Just as devastating as the realization that our basic needs can go unfulfilled is the thought that what we care most about can perish. This is the third manifestation of natural injustice, the failure of second-order desires. No one saw this more clearly than Schopenhauer who insisted that as individual egos we are unable to imagine our own deaths—to put our extinction immediately before our mind's eye—despite the fact that death is more metaphysically real than anything else we can conceive. What reason do we have to think that our most highly valued projects could be exempt from

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<sup>8</sup> See Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2004.



this same metaphysical blindness? Aristotle also saw that there is a certain dramatic or verbal irony that accompanies the hero's most cherished actions. As spectators, we may foresee the disaster awaiting the hero, but he cannot. He can only love what he is committed to bringing about and then reflect upon his commitment a moment or two too late.

That is, once I am wholeheartedly committed to anything or anyone, I cannot overcome the tragic character of commitment. If I bind myself to someone I care about or if I stake myself to something that is of unconditional worth, then I am also committed to believing two fundamental and non-negotiable things at once: first, that the relationship or project before me is logically but also practically possible; and, second, that I have staked my whole self in the bargain. In any commitment worthy of the name, you cannot have recourse to buyer's remorse. In what, then, does my tragic, retrospective education in suffering for what matters most consist? In nothing less than the realization that the world is not as it *could* be and that I am not the sort of person I *genuinely want* to be. The kind of person I want to be is not exemplified here and now in my desires and my actions. Because of this, I may become horrified and disgusted with myself.

The practical justification for speculative philosophy can be sought in these three metaphysical conditions thrown up by life itself. Our dissatisfaction springs from things not being as we would like them to be, from their being not as they should be, and from their being at odds with the kinds of person we want to be. As a result, when I suffer something of a world-sundering nature, I set before myself a problem of an intrinsically practical nature. In order to make sense of suffering, I will need to ascend to a standpoint from which I can conceivably grasp what has befallen me.

#### 4. THE HISTORICAL CONDITIONS: SOCIAL ALIENATION AND NIHILISTIC DESPAIR

So far, I have offered one long exposition on the concept of 'life need'. At the most abstract level, I have argued that reason lost its authority to stand as a secular theodicy in the modern age. At the metaphysical and phenomenological level, I have urged that modern life presents us with a series of primitive dissatisfactions, a set of dissonances between our basic desires, needs, and self-conceptions on one side and the recalcitrance of the world on the other. In this section, I want to explore the historical conditions that are unique to our age and that give rise to speculative philosophy. The usual suspects, social alienation and nihilistic despair, should be familiar to us.

Alienation seems to be a historical fact of our existence. By my lights, we have reached a certain critical mass that is nicely captured in Mark Lilla's quip that '[w]e

are all individualists now'.<sup>9</sup> Even though he makes this claim in the context of our post-1960s political morass, a conundrum I will return to below, it seems to me that what he says covers considerably more ground. Let the following three exhibits serve as evidence for this thesis.

Exhibit A: Progressive pedagogical theory has been so successful that, as Richard Hofstadter has shown, American public education has been awash in hand-me-down Deweyian ideas.<sup>10</sup> Each child, Dewey wrote, is born with a set of potentialities that get actualized in their own ways and in their own time. As a result, top-down, one-size-fits-all curriculum can only stunt the individual's growth, restrict his freedom, and obstruct his creative potential. Educational priorities must henceforth be reversed: we need to throw out general curricula; give children as many ways to experiment as possible; allow them to grow as organically as redwood trees; train a new generation of teachers who will not exemplify authoritarian personalities but who shall believe in nurturant facilitation; instruct teachers in the art of doling out praise so that our children will learn to value themselves highly. Under this new ethos, it soon became self-evident that the chief aim of education was not the cultivation of moral character but the breeding of something altogether new: self-esteem.

Exhibit B: The American health care system is grounded on the nineteenth century notion that the individual is autonomous. Yet the problem with insisting that autonomy is the *highest* good is nicely revealed by the Nadya Suleman case. In 2009, Suleman decided to undergo *in vitro* fertilization despite the fact that she was then receiving disability payments as well as caring for six small children. During doctor-patient consultations, the moral considerations, we are told, remained at the level of whether or not this was her choice. Whether her choice was choiceworthy—whether, that is, any rational person who already had sextuplets would regard giving birth to octuplets as an integral part of human flourishing—seems to have fallen outside the bounds of medical deliberation. All gave way to the sovereignty of electing to make what MSNBC rather blandly referred to as an 'unconventional choice'.

Or, more precisely, to what Michael Sandel has called the 'voluntarist self'. Through his work, Sandel has argued against our fascination with the 'unencumbered self', a rational being for whom the power of choosing (the sovereignty of electing to do this or that) is of the first importance while the question concerning the choiceworthy nature of the items before us becomes secondary. On this understanding, the faculty of choosing is a fundamental feature of my personality whereas the ends chosen remain absolutely independent.

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<sup>9</sup> 'Tea Party Jacobins', *The New York Review of Books*, May 27, 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, New York, Vintage, 1962.

The emergence of a purportedly new period in individual development, the cohort of 18-25-year-olds who fall into the category of ‘pre-adults’ or ‘emerging adults’, gives further credence to Sandel’s view. For ‘emerging adults’, deferring adult responsibilities such as finding steady work, selecting suitable life partners, starting families, and contributing to the welfare of the elderly affords young persons the time and space they need in order to sort out who they are, what they want, and what they care most about. Conservatives call them slackers, liberals laud them as free spirits, but the truth is more banal but also more poignant: they are unwitting embodiments of a form of voluntarist consciousness as well as the tragic figures of a supermarket with too much choices.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Exhibit C: The bounds of our modern political universe are circumscribed by our predilection for individualism. Since the 1960s, Lilla argues, political discourse has taken atomistic premises on board. He thinks it is no coincidence that the 1960s New Left political agenda dovetailed seamlessly with the Reagan and Thatcherite revolution. This is because the former’s calls for private autonomy were carried forward in the latter’s pleas for economic autonomy. What were sixties radicals, Lilla asks rhetorically, but true liberals longing to be set free from government edicts bearing on their private lives? And what were 80s Reaganites and Thatcherites but thoroughgoing libertarians who sought to make the pursuit of self-interest paramount and, in so doing, pushed forcefully for the deregulation of the domestic economy?

The upshot of this two-fold, antipaternalistic development, Lilla maintains, was a strange neoliberal consensus. The individual’s negative freedom was proclaimed even as his commitment to, engagement with, and trust in civil society and public institutions waned. The result, in Hegelese, is the loss of ‘objective spirit’: we cannot see how our individual or collective interests could conceivably be embodied in government or in the social institutions we nonetheless rely upon. Consequently, we are left with an atomistic society where half-enlightened egoism and social alienation abound.

We feel the implications of social alienation in the loss of social norms that had traditionally bound previous cultures together; in the emergence of a value-neutral pluralism that accords you the right to live your way and I mine presumably without yours being better or worse than mine; in the coarsening of objective standards of moral and aesthetic taste; and, above all, in our collective inability to entertain the possibility of a common good. As a result, our common vocabulary has become impoverished, not least because doing what I want to do cannot be the first premise of an argument whose conclusion is that I see myself or my actions as somehow

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<sup>11</sup> See Barry Schwartz, *The Paradox of Choice: Why More is Less*, New York, Harper, 2005.

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actualized in the lifeblood of a people. In our public discourse, ‘we’, ‘us’, and ‘ours’ tend to designate tribal affiliations, not cosmopolitan imaginings.

Let’s say that social alienation is a hydraulic that pulls us apart in three ways. First, I *exist* separately from you and you from me. Second, I *imagine* differently, conceiving my best self as occupying a room with a view. Finally, I *fantasize* about attachments that are lighter and airier, more subject to my control and more easily dispensed with when this proves convenient. Social media is the name we give to this last.

The first moment of social alienation ultimately leads to a second moment, an abiding sense of nihilism. Our separate existences, our hived-off imaginations, our thinned-out fantasies: these modes of social alienation, over time, will call our capacity as value-positing animals into question. To be sure, it is not that we *can’t* value anything any longer; we certainly can. Nor is it that there aren’t objects to which we can attach some value; there definitely are. It is rather that we are unsure what, if anything, merits our *ultimate concern*, what is ultimately worth our valuing, what activities we should ultimately initiate on the assumption that they will hook us up to some larger, intrinsically valuable whole.<sup>12</sup> I would wager that our preoccupation with wasting our lives is simply the other side of the nihilistic coin. Maybe we are all Prodigal Sons.

Not just the metaphysical shape of the modern world but also our unique historical situation is best understood in tragic terms. We are free to the extent that we live under the idea of unrestraint, yet we remain unfree insofar as we are uncertain whether we can write the scripts for ultimately fulfilling lives. Then too we are individuals from first to last, yet each of us lives in exile. Furthermore, we can indulge as many of our wants as our resources allow and the law permits, but wanting what we should want remains a puzzle we have yet to individually or collectively solve. In short, we can lead any life we can afford, but it remains unclear what the point of any life should be. Given the intensity and the scope of our life needs, we could do worse than turn to speculative philosophy.

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<sup>12</sup> On the distinction between ‘value’ and ‘meaning’, see Robert Nozick’s excellent ‘Value and Meaning’, *The Examined Life: Philosophical Meditations*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1989, pp. 162-9.

## 5. THE RATIONAL QUEST FOR A SYNOPTIC VIEW

The early Hegel wrote that ‘dichotomy is the source of *the need of philosophy*’, to which the later Hegel added that ‘philosophy is its time comprehended in thought’.<sup>13</sup> Together, these theses represent the locus of speculative philosophy, its starting point in the first case, its aspiration in the second. Speculative philosophy shares with mysticism the attempt to ‘dilate’ the self beyond its finite dimensions. Yet while both the speculative philosopher and the mystic strike out on a spiritual quest, they soon discover that, despite their shared *telos*, they differ remarkably in their approaches.

Hard-won consolation is what we as speculative philosophers are after, but not the kind that is achieved through self-deception or through leaving things as we found them. If we are lucky, ours will be the consolation that results from reorienting ourselves to the world such that our self-conception *and* our world-conception have both changed.

To a large extent, we have already been doing speculative philosophy, albeit unreflectively, in the previous sections. In order to overcome our sense of alienation, we have ascended beyond our finite egos through various ‘levels’ of reality. The historical plane was characterized by atomistic individualism, the metaphysico-phenomenological by kinds of natural injustice, and the structural by the loss of rational authority. Once we ascend to some provisional whole, we then need to descend to concrete reality. The task of descent is to subsume each level under one concept, providing the whole with unity and integrity. I have argued that the concept that unifies each level of the modern world is the tragic sense running from the individual through institutional and political life.

It is only an apparent paradox that we gain a certain pleasure from recognizing that the modern world is tragic. To understand something in the broadest possible sense is to become consoled. It is as if the mind revealed its resilience in the face of the Kantianly sublime moment that was initially incomprehensible yet that ultimately yielded to cognition. For our part, we followed the path of intellectualization because we wished to achieve mental clarity. And so we have. After we ascended from particularity (‘This happened to me for no apparent reason’) to generality (‘I can see how this happens to us’) and after we descended from the diagnosis (‘These led to the predicament in which we find ourselves in’) to reintegration (‘This is the world to which, for better or worse, I belong’.), we should feel as if we have taken the ‘edge’ out of the disturbance.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy*, H.S. Harris (ed.), trans. Walter Cerf, Albany, SUNY Press, 2007, p. 89; *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox, New York, Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 11.

This is not to suggest that the problem has disappeared entirely, only that it has been transformed. Nor is it to imply that nihilism has been swept aside; in fact, nihilism is still very much with us. To overcome nihilism, I want to speculate, we will need to satisfy two stringent conditions. First, as Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, we will need to discover a single *telos* to human life, one that is broad enough to allow each of us to strive in different ways but also one that is also narrow enough to make possible the evaluative activity of distinguishing well-led lives from those unfortunately wasted. Second, we will have to create an ethical vision of the common good whose central features would be mutual commitment, civic participation, and genuine friendship.

Admittedly, pluralism has unleashed people's capacities in ways hitherto unimaginable, yet it has also entrenched us in a seemingly unending game of skepticism. Meanwhile, atomism has debarred us from thinking seriously about the common good except insofar as the latter makes an appearance as a vague point of reference. Speculative philosophy thereby paves the way for two other branches of philosophy: philosophy of life and public philosophy. My conjecture is that our hope for overcoming alienation and nihilism rests upon developing a philosophy of life whose essential ingredient is self-examination and whose aim is self-integration and upon crafting a public philosophy which is anchored in a robust conception of the common good.

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