

**The Arc of My Philosophy**

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Yale University

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First I would like to thank Shelly Kagan and Michael della Rocca for organizing this symposium. I would like to thank the many former students who have made the effort to come to New Haven to join in this celebration. And I would like to thank my colleagues, students, and friends, who are with us today.

Today I feel a bit like an old gardener whose labors over the years have been rewarded. I am thinking especially of the many dissertations I have directed. Directing dissertations is a bit like pruning: keep the good growth; get rid of what is not wanted. I have experienced no significant tension between my teaching and my own work. My articles and books have, with only a few exceptions, all grown out of my teaching. Interaction with students has been indispensable.

I only became seriously interested in philosophy as an undergraduate here at Yale. That time — I arrived as a freshman in 1954 — now seems both very close and very distant. Less than three years had passed since my family left then still war-torn Germany. Memories of nightly air raids, images of the burning Berlin, which we children could watch night after night from the attic of our house, of the bunker we built in our garden, of glittering sharp bomb splinters that we children found beautiful and collected, that tore the pockets of our pants, of strafing planes, of a prison camp on which we children stumbled in the woods, horrified by the look of the prisoners; and then, after the war, of war-torn Munich, of hunger and living in the last, almost inhabitable story of an apartment house that had lost its roof, these and countless other memories were still fresh in my mind then and remain very much with me, especially when I watch the news from Syria and Iraq; also much more positive images of a land still very beautiful, despite all that had ravaged it, of rococo churches that still have lost nothing of their magic, of Munich's Maxgymnasium, which even though I attended it only for four years, laid a firm foundation on which I could build. That school and its teachers were one reason why I did not want to leave Germany.

What made me turn to philosophy? Aristotle's account of what lets human beings turn to philosophy fits my own case: "For it is owing to their wonder that men both now begin and at first began to philosophize; they wondered originally at the obvious difficulties, then advanced little by little and stated difficulties about the greater matters, e.g. about the phenomena of the moon and those of the sun and the stars, and about the genesis of the universe." As a boy I was interested in how things worked; watermills especially fascinated me; so did animals and trees. I dreamed of becoming a forester. As a young teenager I became interested in astronomy. Still in Germany, I got hold of a volume I still own that included an essay by Pascual Jordan on the expanding universe.<sup>1</sup> The questions about the genesis of the universe it raised have stayed with me. Such questions led me to wonder even then about the legitimacy and limits of the objectifying reason that, presiding over our science and technology, is shaping our life-world ever more decisively. That has remained a central concern. As an undergraduate I thus drifted, after considering mathematics and history as possible majors, towards philosophy.

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In this connection a course in freehand drawing I took with Josef Albers in my sophomore year deserves special mention. My interest in art and architecture goes back to my childhood and has remained a central part of my life. As far back as I can remember, I have loved to draw and paint. I saved nothing of what I produced in that class. But some of my work, as I just learned, has survived in the Archive of the Albers Foundation.<sup>2</sup> What I remember about the class are first of all some of the exercises. On large sheets of cheap newsprint paper that soon turned yellow and became very brittle, we were asked, e.g., to recreate with our pencil the texture of a newspaper, just with vertical lines parallel to the paper edge. We were then asked to paste what we had come

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<sup>1</sup> Jordan, Pascual, "Kosmogonische Anschauungen der modernen Physik," *Naturwissenschaft - Religion - Weltanschauung. Clausthaler Gespräch 1948* (Clausthal-Zellerfeld, 1949), pp. 25 – 33.

<sup>2</sup> See Anoka Faruqee, *Search Versus Re-Search: Recollections of Josef Albers at Yale, a film by Anoka Faruqee*, Published July 1, 2016.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cC7671N76\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cC7671N76_Q)

up with into the newspaper to judge how well we had succeeded. There were exercises where just with bands of differently spaced parallel lines we were to create a vibrating surface; we were asked to rotate some geometric figure; or to capture the texture of a certain kind of wood, say of beech as opposed to oak. And once Albers asked us to draw the essence of daffodils, daffodility if you want, without drawing a clearly recognizable daffodil. I found this a particularly memorable exercise.

Only after that course did I turn to philosophy. Is there a connection between what I learned from Albers and my later work in philosophy? It seems to me that there is. Studying with Albers opened one's eyes. Albers was not very interested in theorizing. No doubt his interaction of colors owes a debt to Johannes Itten, with whom he studied at the Bauhaus, before beginning to teach there. Also to Kandinsky. Itten in turn would seem to have owed a debt to Adolf Hoelzel, who looked back to Schopenhauer's and especially to Goethe's color theory.

Albers was not especially interested in developing a theory about color although his explorations, especially in the *Homage to the Square* series, offer material for such a theory. But Albers made one aware of how impoverished our color vocabulary is when compared to the infinite shades of color we experience. That insight into the incommensurability of what we perceive and what we are able to put into words has remained with me. My interest in the visual has taught me not to overestimate the power of language, taught me to be suspicious of theory, to be suspicious, especially of the claim that our science gives us somehow a more adequate access to reality than our eyes, or more generally than our senses. Thus this course raised for me the question: what do we mean by reality? Related is Heidegger's question of Being that much later came to preoccupy me. It is a question that I believe has no good answer. Albers helped me to appreciate the wisdom of Nietzsche's words:

Oh, those Greeks! They understood how to *live*. What you need for that is to be brave and stop at the surface, the fold, the skin, to worship appearance, to believe in tones, words, the whole Olympus of appearance. Those Greeks were superficial — out of profundity. (*Gay Science*, Preface; *Nietzsche contra Wagner*, conclusion)

The key to what makes life meaningful, I am convinced, is to be found in what Nietzsche here calls superficiality.

Albers was suspicious of words. I share that suspicion. I have thus long been very interested in, but also suspicious of the linguistic turn taken by philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am also suspicious of the claim that science gives us the most adequate access to reality. To recognize both the legitimacy, but also the limits of science has thus been a central concern of my work. To be sure, at least since Galileo and Descartes we have been taught to distinguish the subjective appearance of things from their objective reality. Science tells us that roses are not really red, grass not really green. They have properties that dispose us, having the kind of bodies and brains we happen to have, to see them that way. But once sufficiently developed, physics should be able to explain all that needs explaining. But can science really provide us with a fully adequate explanation of color, e.g. of how color functions in nature? Albers invited one to raise such questions. His work with color opens windows in the house of language. Heidegger called language the house of Being. Albers made one wonder whether Being is ever really at home in that house. That thought has remained with me.

As a child I wondered why we speak of high and low tones while the color spectrum can be arranged in a circle. There is no gap that separates the last visible red before we get to infra-red and the last visible violet before get to ultra violet. Why should there be this difference between the way we hear and the way we see? After all both, the tones we hear and the colors we see, depend on wave length. I was fascinated by how certain flowers seem to allow for all sorts of color variations, but often seem to resist one of the primary colors, often blue. A blue rose, a blue zinnia, seem almost contradictions. So does a geranium red iris. I am sure biochemists can come up with an explanation. But would such an explanation explain why just what we ordinarily consider the primary colors should thus be privileged? It is the discrepancy between the physical and physiological and the perceptual and psychological that has fascinated me, as it would seem to have fascinated Wittgenstein, who asks, "Why should there not be a psychological regularity to which *no* physiological regularity corresponds?" And

comments: "If this upsets our concepts of causality then it is high time they were upset."<sup>3</sup>

## 3

My interest in the arts antedates my interest in philosophy and in hindsight it seems almost inevitable that my philosophical thinking should have been shaped also by art and in recent years especially by architecture. This has made me very much a boundary crosser.

When I studied at Yale aesthetics was given no very significant place in the philosophy curriculum, although towards the end of his Yale career Paul Weiss did turn to art with extraordinary enthusiasm, beginning even to paint. But neither his art nor his philosophy of art, based on his metaphysics, could then excite me. I learned more from Louis Mackey who, however, like so many promising junior faculty members, soon was to leave Yale. Aesthetics had no very significant place in the department's understanding of its mission. In this respect things have hardly improved, a state of affairs hardly unique to Yale. And what need does a philosophy department have for the philosophy of art? Is it more than an ornament that may be nice to have, but is hardly essential in the way supposed core disciplines such as epistemology and metaphysics are today taken to be? Indeed, what does the philosophy of art matter — to philosophy, to art, to society? Quite a bit, as I will try to show.

Let me approach this question in quite personal terms: How has my interest in art and architecture been important to my work in philosophy? But what do art and architecture have to contribute to philosophy?

At first blush the answer to the latter question would seem to have to be: very little, at least given common ideas of what philosophy is. To be sure, philosophers have liked to invoke architectural metaphors, have liked to speak of laying foundations, of raising conceptual edifices, of the architectonics of some philosophical system. But how much work do such metaphors really do? It would seem that someone who insists on an intimate relationship between philosophy and architecture or art would have to have a rather strange understanding of the task of philosophy, strange in the way in which

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<sup>3</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, 610.

Heidegger's thinking renders itself strange when he places it in an essential relationship to the poetry of Hölderlin.<sup>4</sup> Can a philosopher claim this and remain a philosopher?

How then do I understand the connection between art and philosophy? To give even a sketchy answer to my second question I shall have to say something about how I understand the task of philosophy. But before returning to this question, let me say a bit about how my interest in art and architecture has been important to my work in philosophy. I said already that my love of art and architecture is older than my interest in philosophy and goes back to my childhood. My book *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism*<sup>5</sup>, which appeared in 1983 and has now appeared also in a considerably revised German version<sup>6</sup>, was born of that love. The very fact that I wrote such a book suggests a certain impatience with academic philosophy, although I personally do not see a profound break between this book and my more obviously philosophical work. That book touches on many, perhaps all the themes that matter to me as a philosopher and to which I first gave expression in my dissertation, which was on nihilism. I shall turn to it a bit later.

Let me mention here just a few of the themes addressed in the book on the Bavarian rococo church that have continued to matter to me.

1. That book is part of an extended reflection on the historical threshold that separates Baroque and Rococo from the Enlightenment, an age of faith from an age of reason. But that threshold also is the threshold to our modern world. There is thus a sense in which this book is also a reflection on our own spiritual culture, on both the legitimacy and the limits of that objectifying reason that presides over it. Kant, especially his *Critique of Judgment*, has remained important to me because he still occupies that same threshold and offers us a key to understanding its significance.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger and National Socialism: Questions and Answers, ed. Gunther Neske and Emil Kettering (New York: Paragon Press, 1990), p. 62.

<sup>5</sup> Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church: Between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>6</sup> Karsten Harries, *Die Bayerische Rokokokirche. Das Irrationale und das Sakrale* (Dorfen: Hawel Verlag, 2009).

2. A reviewer called this book a preamble after the fact to my first book, *The Meaning of Modern Art*<sup>7</sup> of 1968, which was a greatly expanded version of just one brief chapter in my dissertation. In a sense he was right. That earlier book called for a step beyond modern art, and not just modern art, but beyond the nihilistic understanding of reality that I claimed much modern art presupposed, an understanding that renders nature mute, to be used and abused by human beings as they see fit. Since writing that book I have come to see much more clearly what the step for which I called presupposes: an overcoming of what Nietzsche calls "the spirit of revenge," of that "ill will against time and its 'it was'" that has supported metaphysics ever since Plato and at the same time prevents us from fully affirming all that binds us to time, prevents us from affirming ourselves as the mortals we are: finite and embodied. Much of my philosophical work has continued to circle around the possibility of such an overcoming, as it did already in my dissertation.

3. Closely linked is the need to challenge that aesthetic approach to art and architecture, which, at least since Baumgarten's establishment of aesthetics as a philosophical discipline in the orbit of Cartesian rationalism, has presided both over the production and the theory of art. That approach leads with some necessity to an understanding of works of architecture as decorated sheds, as functional buildings to which an aesthetic component has been added. And similarly it leads to an understanding of art as an aesthetic addendum to an often all too prosaic life. As its title suggests, in *The Ethical Function of Architecture*<sup>8</sup> I argued that whatever distinguishes architecture from mere building needs to be understood differently. That the book spoke to issues that mattered to architects is shown not only by the fact that it was honored by the American Institute of Architects, also by my being asked to write the lead essay for a large volume celebrating the AIA's 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary, which was celebrated in 2007.

Of central importance in *The Ethical Function of Architecture* is the concept of re-presentation. I there distinguish, somewhat artificially I admit, ornament from mere

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<sup>7</sup> Karsten Harries, *The Meaning of Modern Art: A Philosophical Interpretation*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968).

<sup>8</sup> Karsten Harries, *The Ethical Function of Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1997).

decoration as follows: ornament is decoration that has a re-presentational function. Or: decoration is ornament that has shed its re-presentational function. And what is here said of decoration can be generalized and said also of beauty as understood by the aesthetic approach. From a self-sufficient formal beauty, we have to distinguish a beauty that has a re-presentational function.

As this critique of what I have called the aesthetic approach suggests, I am impatient with all philosophy that remains content to address problems posed by previous philosophizing without questioning the presupposed frameworks and maps. Works of art and architecture especially invite such questioning.

## 4

Let me return now to my second and more important question: what do art and architecture have to contribute to philosophy? I suggested already that an answer to this question forces us to ask: what is philosophy? The fact that so many philosophers continue to struggle with just this question suggest that there is no simple answer.<sup>9</sup>

But let me at least approach this question with a quote from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein claims there that philosophical problems have the form, "I do not know my way about," a quote that recalls Aristotle who would have philosophy begin in wonder. Of course, not all problems having this form are therefore already philosophical: To lose one's way in a strange city is not sufficient to make one a philosopher; nor is failure to understand a new piece of equipment. Say my computer misbehaves and I don't know what to do; I don't know my way about. But why does such loss of way not present us with a philosophical problem? I would suggest that it fails to do so because in such cases our disorientation is only superficial. Thus in the first case I might study a map; in the second I might ask an expert for help. The problem poses itself against a background of established and accepted ways of doing things to which we can turn to help us decide what is to be done. Genuinely philosophical problems, I would like to suggest, have no such background. They emerge wherever

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<sup>9</sup> See Karsten Harries, "Philosophy in Search of Itself," *What is Philosophy?*, ed. C. P. Ragland and Sarah Heidt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 47-73.



human beings have begun to question the place assigned them by nature, society, and history, and searching for firmer ground demand that this place be more securely established. Again and again works of art have occasioned such questioning.

So understood philosophy comes to an end, either when it despairs of responsibly addressing the questions that haunt it, or when it steps on what it takes to be firm ground and establishes what is now accepted as a secure foundation. When the latter happens philosophy gives birth to a science. There is thus a sense in which science and skepticism may be said to bound philosophy. Science may be said to have presented philosophy with a challenge resembling that which photography presented to representational painting.

But science itself presents itself today to us as anything but unquestionable. There is a sense in which everyone of us, I suspect, stands in an ambiguous relationship to science and its offspring, technology. On one hand we have to affirm science and recognize its purchase on reality. Given the many problems we face, it would be irresponsible not to do so. On the other hand, science cannot know anything of persons as persons. Nor can it know anything of values. To give an account of both the legitimacy and limits of scientific understanding and that means also of technological thinking seems to me one of the main tasks facing philosophy today.

But such an account must be guided by some understanding of where we should be going. In this broad sense all philosophy is at bottom "ethical reflection," reflection concerning the ethos, concerning how we should take our place in this fragile world and how we arrived at where we are now.

But is philosophy able to determine our proper place? Traditionally such determinations were given not by philosophers, but by prophets, poets, and statesmen. Plato's *Republic* gives expression to the claim that the philosopher should take over from the poet the task of telling the Greeks what their place should be. The ethical function that religion, art, and politics once had now comes to be claimed by reason. The French Revolution thus placed the goddess of reason on the high altar of Notre Dame. She did not stay there for very long.

Unfortunately, reason has proved unequal to the assumed task. As Nietzsche saw, we live today in the ruins of the inherited value system. To support this claim I

would have to show that, notwithstanding the efforts of philosophers from Plato to Kant and indeed right down to the present, reason alone is unable to help us meet the challenges we face effectively. Let me give an example: That we all need to make sure that those natural resources on which we depend for our survival will continue to be available, not just to us, but to future generations has become almost a cliché. Given a still rising life expectancy, a still growing population, and demands for an ever higher standard of living, the conclusion seems inevitable: the road on which the world has been traveling has to lead to disaster, or rather disasters — not only to the expected disasters, such as mass starvation, wars for land, a deteriorating environment that will make clean water, air, and soil, not to speak of relatively unspoiled nature, let alone wilderness, increasingly scarce resources, but also to moral disaster.

But if we all at bottom know this, why do our responses remain so half-hearted? Needed is more than reason. The individual who says after me the deluge, who cares neither for his neighbor nor for coming generations, is not unreasonable. His is a different problem: he has a heart of stone. Needed is a change of heart. But how do we change hearts? Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* remain relevant: to change the way we relate to the environment and to others, including those who will still be around when we are no longer, we need more than just cold reason. We need to experience and cherish this earth as our home, the only home that we humans shall ever have.

In this connection I have called in quite a number of essays and lectures for a post-Copernican geocentrism, most recently in a lecture to our architecture school two months ago. I have argued that full self-affirmation requires an affirmation of the never quite resolved tension between our need for freedom, for open space, and our need for place, between dreams of journeying into the unknown and dreams of homecoming. To briefly consider the former. Why did we travel to the moon? Is it too simple to answer, just because it is there and we finally had the technology to get us there? We are curious creatures, and curiosity calls us again and again beyond the familiar places and the associated points of view and perspectives, calls us away from what we once called home. The loss of paradise will be repeated over and over by human curiosity. Relentlessly curiosity bids us embark on ever new voyages of discovery, lets us repeat

the Copernican revolution over and over again. To quote Nietzsche, "Since Copernicus, man seems to have got himself on an inclined plane — now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into — what? into nothingness? into a *penetrating* sense of his own nothingness?"<sup>10</sup> As science has opened our life-world to the universe, this earth has become ever less homelike, more and more like a ship lost in an endless ocean, embarked on a journey with no clear goal. This earth, which once, because of its central position in a finite cosmos, was thought to provide human beings with a privileged place near the center, has come to be understood as just another among countless stars. But just as we have come to see the insignificance of human life here on earth, when measured by the space and time of the cosmos, we also have come to an increased awareness that for all practical purposes we are alone in the cosmos, that this earth is the only home we will ever have. That space exploration and the environmental movement should have developed in the very same years is no accident. There is a sense in which the exploration of space, including the vain search for extraterrestrial intelligence, have led to an ever clearer sense that we have no other home than this fragile, beautiful earth, which we should leave to those who come after us in state that will allow them to flourish. Despite our freedom, we remain earth-bound mortals. Our bodies and this earth to which it belongs remain the ground of all meaning.<sup>11</sup> In this sense we can speak of the need for a post-Copernican geocentrism.

## 5

I realize that concern with what should be our place may well make a philosopher look foolish, since it requires a willingness to distance oneself from the prevailing common sense, so from what is currently taken to be politically correct. I think the philosophers the age most profoundly needs should be somewhat like the fools or jesters

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<sup>10</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III, 25, *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Munich, Berlin, and New York: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag and de Gruyter, 1980), 5: 404. Trans. Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale, *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo* (New York: Vintage, 1989), p. 155.

<sup>11</sup> Hans Blumenberg, *Die Vollzähligkeit der Sterne*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 383. See also Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 331.

of long ago. A healthy society needs places where it tests its boundaries and explores radically new possibilities. There has to be an openness to the future. Art can be such a place. So can philosophy. I recognize the danger of such testing and experimentation. I thus also have a contrary sympathy: I think those who insist on the preservation of the inherited are also needed in a healthy society. There is inevitable tension between voices pointing in different directions, one forward — testing, experimenting, the other backward — wanting to preserve. I would want neither to be so immediately associated with power that it can translate its views into political reality. They should be like yeast in a larger conversation. But both voices should be granted a bit of the fool's freedom. The fool at court said things that perhaps needed saying, but which also were easily dismissed and needed to be appropriated by others to become effective. I'm not at all denigrating this fool's freedom. And I'm not meaning to denigrate philosophers, when I say that they, too, should be a bit like the fool, the jester — Leszek Kolakowski, who joined this department for an all too brief time when I was chairman, called himself that and I admired him for it. Well aware of the need for both art and philosophy, also of the need to preserve their freedom, he provides an example that continues to challenge us.

## 6

Let me return to my student days. As the preceding should have shown, I have always been a boundary-crosser. As an undergraduate I thus ended up not really majoring in any one subject. Yale's unfortunately now defunct Scholar of the House program freed me in my senior year from the normal course requirements. It required instead a dissertation-length essay. Mine had the title *Change and Permanence. A Study of Structure, Symbol, and Idea in Eight Major Prose Works by Hermann Hesse*. It was indeed quite a bit longer than my dissertation was going to be. That essay already attempted to address that nihilism which inescapably shadows the progress of reason. My dissertation, *Stranger In a Strange Land. An Exploration of Nihilism* (1961), confronted that shadow more directly. And that shadow haunts just about everything that I have written since. I confronted it once more quite directly in my most recent book:

*Wahrheit: Die Architektur der Welt*<sup>12</sup> (2012), originally ten lectures I gave at the Leuphana University in Lüneburg.

I began work on the dissertation in Munich in the fall of 1960; but much of my time there was taken up with courses at the university — a lecture course by the art historian Hans Sedlmayr proved especially memorable — and even more, with looking at Rococo churches, often in the company of the Williams College art historian Lane Faison.

The dissertation itself was written mostly in the course of one cold February in Florence in 1961. I thought it only a draft, respectable enough to show my department that I had not frittered away my year abroad visiting churches and climbing mountains. But Yale had offered me an instructorship, we were expecting a child, and my advisor George Schrader thought the draft sufficient. So I submitted the dissertation in the fall of 1961, when I began teaching. The defense was quite an event. The whole department was present.

Looking back at that all too quickly written dissertation I am struck by how many of the themes and thinkers that have continued to occupy me are addressed or at least touched on already in those 170 pages. In a nutshell it already included what was to become my first book, *The Meaning of Modern Art*; and for hints of an answer I looked already then to Nicolaus Cusanus, who was to become the central figure in my book *Infinity and Perspective*<sup>13</sup>, which recently was translated into Chinese and now is found in more libraries all over the world than any other of my publications.

What holds the different themes, addressed already in the dissertation, together is a concern with what I now call the antinomy of Being. Not that I called it that in the dissertation. Then it was not yet Heidegger's *Being and Time* or Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* that informed my discussion. Of Heidegger's works I had read at the time only the essays collected in *Holzwege* and the essay *Zur Seinsfrage*. The texts that most significantly informed my reflections by provoking my critical response included Descartes' *Meditations*, which I had studied with Charles Hendel and Russell's *Logical*

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<sup>12</sup> Karsten Harries, *Wahrheit: Die Architektur der Welt* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2012)

<sup>13</sup> Karsten Harries, *Infinity and Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001).

*Atomism* and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, which I had studied with Wilfrid Sellars. What interested me was the way the principle of bivalence seemed to entail nihilism. These works provided me with a needed foil.

In a different sense that can also be said of the first volume of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or*, which provided me with a key to the aesthetic approach to art and life that I wanted to criticize. And I found essentially the same key in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. Drawing on both, I located the origin of nihilism in the inability of freedom to bind itself. Nothing in experience, Sartre insists, provides a transcendent guarantee of values, other than the subject itself. "Human nature, cannot receive its ends ... either from the outside or from a so-called 'inner' nature. It chooses them and by this very choice confers upon them a transcendent existence as the external limit of its projects. From this point of view ... human reality in and through its very upsurge decides to define its own being by its ends. It is therefore the positing of my ultimate ends which characterizes my being which is identical with the sudden thrust of freedom which is mine."<sup>14</sup> But, as Sartre knew all too well, life becomes precarious when values are determined by the choice with which the individual determines him- or herself. If I am truly free, what lets me fix value to this rather than to that? So understood freedom has to lead to an understanding of the world as it is in itself as a mute, meaningless desert that is transformed into a meaningful world only by the upsurge of freedom. But just that upsurge, that embodiment of freedom or descent into an inevitably particular situation remains unintelligible.

Despite such unintelligibility, I did feel that Sartre offered me a key to the spiritual situation of modern man and more especially to an understanding of modern art. In my first book, *The Meaning of Modern Art*, I tried to apply this key. Sartre's understanding of the fundamental project, I thought, gave me a key to the riddle that is modern art. Here is what I wrote:

I agree with Sartre [in the preface to the Japanese translation of that book I was to take back that agreement] that this fundamental project is a project

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. and intro. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Philosophical Library, 1956), pp. 440-443. See Harries, *In a Strange Land*, pp. 16-17.

to become like God, i.e. “fundamentally man is the desire to be, and the existence of this desire is not to be established by an empirical induction; it is the result of an *a priori* description of the being of the For-itself, since desire is lack and since the For-itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being.”<sup>15</sup>

This description remains empty as long as we are not told *how* man seeks to be like God.

Different conceptions of God correspond to different interpretations of man’s fundamental project. Which interpretation is accepted depends, according to Sartre, on the free choice of the individual.

Even then that seemed to me to overburden freedom. And so I claimed that Sartre misinterprets the human situation when he recognizes “nothing before the original upsurge of human freedom.”<sup>16</sup> “Man’s interpretation of the fundamental project is conditioned by what he is, and what he is, is determined in part by his place in history.”<sup>17</sup> Here already there is an insistence that freedom be situated and bound in a way that Sartre’s opposition of In-itself and For-itself prevents him from doing.

My dissatisfaction with Sartre gained sharper focus in a chapter I called “The Demonization of Sensuousness.” That chapter began with the familiar distinction between “naked” and “nude.” I quoted Kenneth Clark: “To be naked is to be deprived of our clothes, and the word implies some of the embarrassment most of us feel in that condition. The word ‘nude,’ on the other hand, carries, in educated usage, no uncomfortable overtone.”<sup>18</sup> Given that distinction it is only to be expected that Christian art should have been suspicious of the nude, for to present human beings as nude is to present them as at ease with their bodies. But this, as St. Augustine reminds us, is denied to fallen humanity: “By the just retribution of the sovereign God whom we refused to be subject to and serve, our flesh, which was subjected to us, now torments us by

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<sup>15</sup> Sartre, p. 565.

<sup>16</sup> Sartre p. 569.

<sup>17</sup> *Meaning of Modern Art*, p. xiii, fn. 3.

<sup>18</sup> Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1959), pp. 23, 400-406.

insubordination.”<sup>19</sup> According to Augustine human beings discover their bodies to be shameful when they recognize that they shatter their dreams of freedom. Subject to sexual desire we recognize our distance from divine autonomy. In our shame we taste the failure of our project of pride. By positing the autonomy of the free spirit as the highest value, pride posits the body and its claims as something to be suppressed. Pride necessarily leads to an experience of my flesh as an independent demonic force, as, yes, myself, but not really me.

Sartre moves explicitly in this orbit:

Shame is the feeling of an original fall, not because of the fact that I may have committed this or that particular fault, but simply that I have ‘fallen’ into the world in the midst of things and that I need the mediation of the Other to be what I am.

Modesty and in particular the fear of being surprised in a state of nakedness are only a symbolic specification of original shame; the body symbolizes here our defenseless state as objects. To put on clothes is to hide one’s object-state; it is to claim the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject. This is why the Biblical symbol of the fall after the original sin is the fact that Adam and Eve “know that they are naked.”<sup>20</sup>

How Christian the atheist Sartre here sounds, so Christian in fact that one has to wonder whether his ontology and anthropology are not unduly burdened by an all too uncritically assumed Christian inheritance? Like Augustine, Sartre makes pride the foundation of shame. Pride indeed gains an even greater significance, for while according to Augustine pride rules fallen humanity, Sartre makes pride constitutive of human being. There can be no redemption from its rule, if pride does indeed constitute our fundamental project. That is why for Sartre there can be no reconciliation of spirit and flesh, no full incarnation of spirit in flesh, no escape from shame. And this much I think we must grant Sartre: to the extent, and I want to underscore the conditional, to the extent that human

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<sup>19</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, XIV, 15. 17. trans. M. Dods (New York: 1950). Pp. 463, 465.

<sup>20</sup> *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 288-289.



beings remain subject to pride, they will be prevented from giving sensuousness its due. Pride has to lead to a disturbed, ambivalent relationship to all that threatens what Sartre calls “the right of seeing without being seen; that is, to be pure subject.” We may well ask how “right” here is to be understood? What is the ground of this supposed right? The answer can only be: a freedom that refuses to be bound. That this refusal has to lead to such a disturbed relationship is born out in embarrassing detail by Sartre’s writings.

In the dissertation I began my reflections in good phenomenological fashion with an experience: “Just a few minutes ago, my attention was suddenly caught by a piece of music. For a moment I forgot what I was doing and listened. Then I recognized the melody and almost at the same time noticed that I had stopped working. I became conscious of listening and soon went back to work, while the song receded into the background. The magical moment had passed.”<sup>21</sup> With my recognition of the song the experience changed. I still heard the music, but it no longer spoke to me. It had lost what Walter Benjamin would have called its aura. An observation Heidegger makes about the modern world came to mind: “man has risen into the selfhood of the *ego cogito*. With this revolt everything becomes object. Being becomes objective and as such is drowned in the immanence of subjectivity. The horizon no longer shines with its own light.”<sup>22</sup> I linked such auratic experience to an experience of transcendence. What I now call the antinomy of being opens a window to such transcendence.

## 7

When a philosopher uses the word antinomy, he is likely to think of Kant and his four antinomies, which were meant to prove that the being of things has to be understood in two senses: what presents itself first of all to us are phenomena, appearances, and as such their being is essentially a being for the human subject; but these appearances are also things in themselves, and as such they possess a transcendent being. And we must somehow be aware of this transcendent being, it must somehow affect or touch us, if the being of things is not to reduce to their being for us. That was already the central theme of my dissertation.

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<sup>21</sup> Dissertation, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1957), p. 241.

But when I am speaking of the antinomy of being I am thinking not only of Kant, but also of Heidegger. Not that Heidegger speaks of an antinomy of Being. But he had to confront this antinomy in his attempt to think what he calls the ontological difference, the difference between beings and the Being of these beings. We are tempted to say, without Being beings would not be. Being is constitutive of and in this sense transcends beings. But, as Berkeley knew, beings can present themselves only to a being that in some sense perceives them. *Esse est percipi*. There are no mind independent things. Heidegger would not disagree. But Heidegger cannot think mind except as our human mind, i.e. as dependent on human beings. Being, *Sein*, is thus made dependent on Dasein, i.e. on human being.

But this attempt to ground being in the constitution of Dasein has to call itself into question. How are we to understand Heidegger's assertion of the dependence of Being, but not of beings, of reality, but not of the real, on care, i.e., on the always understanding and caring being of human beings.<sup>23</sup> This implies a sense in which beings and the real can be said to transcend that Being (*Sein*) which is said to be relative to Dasein. To be sure, these beings could not "be" in the first sense without human beings. Only human consciousness provides the open space, the clearing that allows things to be perceived, understood, and cared for. That space is a presupposition of the accessibility of things, of their Being. But this is not to say that we in any sense create these beings. They are given to us. Our experience of the reality of the real is thus an experience of beings as transcending Being so understood. This invites a distinction between two senses of Being, the first transcendental sense relative to Dasein and in this sense inescapably historical, the second transcendent sense gesturing towards the ground or origin of Dasein's historical being and thus also of Being understood transcendently.

What concerns me here is not just Kant's or Heidegger's thought. Their thought helps me to show that our thinking inevitably leads us into some form of this antinomy whenever it attempts to grasp reality without loss. All such attempts will fall short of their goal. And that they do so, I claim, is not something to be grudgingly accepted, but a necessary condition of living a meaningful life. To live such a life we have to open

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (San Francisco: Harper&Row, 1962), p. 255.

windows or doors in the edifice objectifying reason has built us. The experience of a person as deserving our respect — in the dissertation I invoked Buber’s Thou — opens such a window. So can the experience of nature or the experience of a work of art.

## 8

To make clearer what is at stake, let me translate my antinomy into a rather different language and refer to a conversation over lunch which I had a few years ago with a colleague, Professor Drew McDermott of Yale’s computer science department. What we then talked about has continued to occupy me. Professor McDermott told of how he had recently returned to the thought of Martin Heidegger, which he had encountered in college quite some time ago, but to which for many years he had given little thought. But now he had come to see that what Heidegger had to say did do justice to our first person awareness of being in the world. In that sense much of what he had to say could be called true. From the third person perspective of the scientist, however, it had to be judged false.

The comment made me think of Kierkegaard’s distinction between subjective and objective truth.<sup>24</sup> Kierkegaard knew very well that first of all “the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself.” Why then should we oppose to it a subjective truth and how are we to understand such a truth? Kierkegaard defines it as “An objective uncertainty, held fast through appropriation with the most passionate inwardness” — Kierkegaard was thinking of love and faith. This subjective truth he calls “the highest truth there is for an *existing* person.” In such attainment the individual is said to perfect him- or herself. We may well wonder whether we should speak in such cases of knowledge at all. But what is at issue is clear enough: the value of objective truth: “The way of objective reflection makes the subject accidental, and thereby transforms existence into something indifferent, something vanishing. Away from the subject the objective way of reflection leads to the objective truth, and while the subject and his subjectivity become indifferent, the truth

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<sup>24</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. David F. Swenson and Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 182, 178.

also becomes indifferent, and this indifference is precisely its objective validity; for all interest, like all decisiveness, is rooted in subjectivity.”

Kierkegaard speaks of an objective uncertainty, not of an objective falsehood. That avoids the paradoxical claim advanced by McDermott that what we are convinced is absolutely true, e.g. for him the claim that there are absolute values, must yet be judged, without overturning such conviction, objectively false.

McDermott followed this conversation up by sending me the draft of a paper on which he was still working with the thought-provoking title: “How Moral Absolutism Can Be True and False at the Same Time; Or: Non-Phenomenological Existentialism.” Here the paper’s abstract:

We examine ethics from the point of view of cognitive science. Science commits one to a view in which ethics is just an arbitrary aspect of culture, and the study of cultures is value-free, so that relativism seems axiomatically true. But intelligent agents cannot take the view of pure science, because certain built-in beliefs contradict it. These inescapable framework illusions (IFI’s) include a belief in free will, the persistence of the self through time, and, among humans, the universalizability of moral statements.

Mc Dermott takes us moderns to be confronted with something like an antinomy: as intelligent agents we are compelled to believe certain things, most importantly that our will is free, that we are selves that persist through time, that there are moral truths that can be universalized, beliefs which as individuals committed to science we yet know to be false. A somewhat weaker version of this claim, closer to what Kierkegaard thought, is familiar from the work of philosophers such as Kant and Fichte,<sup>25</sup> who insist that as free, responsible actors we have to take as true what theoretical reason is unable to establish, indeed cannot even make sense of. But they would have refused to assert that what practical reason forces us to accept as true is from an objective, third person point of view false. Thus they would not have wanted to say that “moral absolutism can be true and false at the same time.”

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<sup>25</sup> See especially Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, ed. and intro. Roderick M., Chisholm, (New York, Liberal Arts Press, 1956).

The title of McDermott's paper brought to mind that theory of double truth condemned by the theologians at the university of Paris in 1277. Should I understand McDermott in the image of Siger of Brabant, the Aristotelian philosopher of nature, who was perhaps the leading target of that condemnation? Aristotelian science also left no room for certain key beliefs and especially for the kind of freedom demanded by Christianity. Given Aristotle's understanding of nature, such claims had to be judged false. How then could a good Christian be a follower of Aristotle? Could Aristotelian science and Christian theology, while they contradicted each other, both lay claim to truth? Must such a theory of double truth not be rejected by every right thinking person? — and there is indeed reason to wonder whether Siger ever really endorsed it. And similarly we must ask today, how can moral absolutism be true and false at the same time, except by relativizing the truth in question? Does the very essence of truth not rule out the theory of double truth? — But what is truth?

There is quite a bit that I agree with here. First of all, I agree with the claim that science as we know it is ideally value-free. McDermott invokes what he calls Hume's principle: "No statement about the way things ought to be can be derived from any set of statements about the way things are." I would not want to generalize that principle without asking: how should we understand: "the way things are"? Does science hold the key?

Accepting Hume's principle, McDermott concludes: "Because science is entirely about the way things are, nothing in science bears on whether one moral system is superior to another, or whether there is some supersystem that encompasses all the little ones... Science is crushingly indifferent to our affairs." "From the purely scientific point of view, the self doesn't exist at all; all that is observable are agents that believe they are selves."

As I suggested, I agree with McDermott that science knows nothing of values, persons, or freedom. So understood science is essentially nihilistic. But if I pretty much agree with McDermott about what he calls Hume's Principle, at least if restricted to the scientific understanding of nature, I have, questions about his second fundamental principle, McDermott calls it Neurath's Principle — the reference is to Otto Neurath's *Foundations of the Unity of Science: Toward an International Encyclopedia of Unified*

*Science* (1971): “The world discovered (and yet to be discovered) by science is the world.” Science here means fundamentally physics. To quote McDermott once more:

The world revealed by physics is bizarre and alien to us. But it’s the only world there is. All the other sciences are reducible to it, in what is by now a well-known sense. Nothing happens in chemistry that can’t be explained in terms of physics; nothing happens in biology that can’t be explained in terms of physics and chemistry; and so forth.

This would mean that we really need only one concept of nature. And physics provides the key to that concept. The work of the physicist Walter Elsasser has made me wonder.

Is the equation of nature with the nature discovered or to be discovered by science justified? It does indeed seem to be supported by our everyday understanding of truth as a correspondence of our thoughts or propositions with the things — but, we must add, with the things as they really are, not as they appear to an observer limited by his particular perspective or intellectual make-up. This entails a privileging of the aperspectival and objective. But isn’t the world discovered by science the only world we human knowers can hope to really understand? That was already Descartes’ position. But what does it mean, to really understand something? Is our human reason in principle able to fathom reality? At issue is the commensurability of reason and reality, a presupposition of Neurath’s principle.

McDermott’s confidence that our human reason is in principle able to fathom reality suffers shipwreck, I want to suggest, on what I called the antinomy of Being. That antinomy demands a distinction between two senses of Being, the first transcendental sense relative to human being, the second transcendent sense, which grounds our being and thus also Being understood transcendently. But any attempt to conceptually lay hold of that ground must fail. It is, as Kant said of the aesthetic idea, inexponible. Here our thinking bumps against the limits of language. And yet this ground is present to us whenever we experience the reality of the real, that something is, as opposed to what it is. To be open to the givenness of things, to the gift of their being, is to open a window in the house built us by our reason, in which phenomena have to take their place if they are to be for us at all, a window in the world of phenomena to the things in themselves, i.e. to the transcendent ground of phenomena. Every time we experience a person as a person

we open such a window. And the same can be said of our experience of a genuine work of art; or of the beauty of a daffodil. The Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* might have said: a window to what is higher. As Kant and Fichte came to realize, ethics remains incomplete without an account of the experience of the other as demanding our respect, an account to be given by an expanded aesthetics.

Karsten Harries