Socrates, Modernity, and the Problem of a Genuine Postmodernism

by

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The term "postmodernism" is used in so many ways in such a variety of realms—philosophical, literary, artistic, and social—that it is difficult to know what the word is supposed to mean, except that it must refer to something not modern that comes after and presumably makes an advance upon modernism. This, however, is a start, and it suggests a challenging problem: to understand what "modernism" is (or was) in such a way as to see how one might go beyond it without lapsing from it, i.e., without falling back from it into what it was itself in some ways an advance upon. Phrased in this way, this seems a challenge that cannot help but call to mind Kierkegaard's description of the challenge that faced him in the Philosophical Fragments: to make an advance upon Socrates and yet say essentially the same things as he, only not nearly so well.

Before proceeding directly to the bearing of Socrates' and Plato's thought on a possible critique and transcendence of modernism, however, I would like to cite as two seminal texts for this discussion a statement by one of the major figures of modernism, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and another not by but about another major modern figure who is also frequently invoked as at least an incipient postmodern, Martin Heidegger.

Friedrich Waismann reports that in response to Moritz Schlick's suggestion that the idea that good is grounded in God's nature is more profound than the idea that it proceeds from divine command, Wittgenstein argued that this would imply the fallacy that value could be rationally analyzed; to end the discussion he said finally, "Gut ist was Gott befiehlt" (Good is whatever God commands). Wittgenstein remained faithful throughout his career, and despite the radical changes his thought underwent in the shift from the Tractatus to the Philosophical Investigations, to the belief that fact and value

constitute two different realms, the latter of which lies beyond the analytic capabilities of reason and language.

The statement about Heidegger is by Jean-François Lyotard, himself one of the leading voices of "postmodernism," in his recent book, Heidegger et "les juifs". Lyotard uses the term "the Jews" to stand not for just any people of Jewish descent but specifically for those who are committed to the Jewish sense of a divine calling to take seriously questions of right and wrong. He says that whereas Heidegger spoke of a "forgetfulness of being" in the Western philosophical tradition descending from the Greeks, there has also existed alongside it all the while the "other" tradition of the Jews, a non-Western people in the midst of the West, that has served to remind us of our forgetfulness not of Being but of "the Law." That, he says, is the really significant point of the question about Heidegger's association with the Nazis: "that Nazism tried to make us forget once and for all the idea of something owed, of the difference between good and evil" (p. 135).

The question of right and wrong, in the tradition of the Jews, can be fully meaningful only if it includes a consideration of one's relation to God and to one's neighbor—that is, if it takes seriously the question of "the other." This, however, raises a point Lyotard does not bring up but one that is essential to the question he does raise about Heidegger's relation to "the Jews" and one that penetrates, I think, to the heart of the problematic character of Heidegger's thought: the ambiguous status in it of the "other" as such. Heidegger talks at length of the "call" of conscience, but what that is a call to is strictly a relation to oneself, that is, to authentic consciousness of one's "ownmost" possibility, which is primarily the possibility of choosing to face with open eyes one's own mortality. Not only is there no real place in Heidegger's thought for the alterity of a genuinely "other" person, but when he does speak of others it is either as potential sources of temptation to inauthenticity ("the 'they'") or else as models to be used as instruments in one's own quest for authenticity. Even when he speaks explicitly

of "otherness," it has nothing to do with the possibility of a relation to a personal other, a "thou"; it is only that which he says one can discover when "an experience of Being as sometimes 'other' than everything that 'is' comes to us in dread," i.e., the otherness of death, and his discussion of a possible "authentic being with others" is only a fellowship in the confrontation with death. Heidegger's is a philosophy with an "I" and an "it" but no real "thou," either human or divine, and no place for a theory of obligation involving a relation to a personal other. It is also a call to heroism without a theory of value that could explain what is good about heroism as such or why one hero might serve as a better model than another.

The call to face resolutely one's death sounds bracing, and one can understand the appeal it has had. There are, however, some things one cannot help but wonder about when one hears it. One is whether there might not be more to existential fullness than just resoluteness in the face of death, whether there might not be some more positive plenitude intrinsically worth seeking. Another is whether Heidegger's notion of heroism is not also rather limited. Both issues have to do ultimately with matters of value, a topic that—despite what seem value-charged connotations to such terms as "authentic" and "inauthentic," "resoluteness" and "hero"—Heidegger explicitly sets aside in favor of what he intends as a purely descriptive, non-evaluative phenomenology of Dasein. One may well ask, however, whether there is not some deep evasiveness, perhaps even "inauthenticity," involved in the attempt to formulate a conception of existential heroism without addressing the question of the good. In fact one cannot help but wonder in this connection, whether Plato's idea of the Agathon might not be worth thinking about more carefully if the alternative to it is something as restricted as Heidegger's "authenticity," and also ultimately as arbitrary—just as the "good" commanded by Wittgenstein's God may be said to have been arbitrary.

These two texts, then, point, I think, to a central problem of modernism that a genuine postmodernism, if such a thing should ever come into being, will have to deal

with. As Lyotard's comment, as well as what might be speculated about in the as yet unwritten, perhaps even unthought of, critique, "Paul de Man et 'les juifs,'" might suggest, this is a problem that currently haunts like a guilty conscience both modernism and what usually passes for "postmodernism."

In his commitment to the phenomenological bracketing of the question of the good, Heidegger seems a characteristically modern thinker, but he is also frequently cited as one of the originators of the postmodern movement. This dual status of Heidegger's thought is also indicated by the ambiguity of his relation to Socrates. Like Nietzsche, and probably following his lead, Heidegger made Socrates something of a whipping boy for the ills of modern thought. Nietzsche seems to have blamed Socrates both for the imprisonment of western philosophical thought in metaphysics and for his own guilty Christian conscience, which he hoped his Overman would break free from for the sake of the Will to Power. Heidegger blamed Socrates and Plato and all their heritage for imposing on western thought the shackles of the metaphysics of being, and he made his own project the *Destruktion* of the western philosophical tradition, which he hoped to accomplish by a return to pre-Socratic thinking. In attempting to do this, he was, of course, acting in a quintessentially modern manner, declaring an epochal break in history and exalting an earlier, supposedly purer tradition in order to extirpate from his mind the traces of his own despised ancestors. To accomplish this, however, he had to try to perform with regard to the thinking he opposed the kind of dialectical critique of which Plato's Socrates was the West's premier teacher. In doing so, he imitated willy-nilly the historical Socrates as one who had tried to sort out what could be known concretely from what was merely abstract verbiage. In this effort too Heidegger was following, perhaps unwittingly, a longstanding modern tradition that at one time had looked to Socrates for its inspiration as it tried to make an epochal break with its predecessors.

Socrates was, in fact, something of a patron saint of modernity in its first stirrings. He was invoked by the humanists of the renaissance as a model of rationality and one

who might help them to deliver themselves from the superstitions of what they were beginning to call the "middle age" in contrast to Socrates's "ancient" and their own "modern" ages. Modernity as they conceived it had to involve first of all a recovery of the wisdom of the ancients in order that standing on their shoulders they might see further than they had. Perhaps Socrates may also eventually serve to point the way toward a genuine postmodernity.

One of the the most basic ways of understanding modernity was, of course, that just mentioned: as the point of an epochal break with the past, the idea that the modern is what is radically different from and better than what came before it. That claim has been made by so many, however, and in such a variety of ways that it is not always clear what exactly the newness of modernism is supposed to have been.

One analyst of modernism has asserted "an equivalence between 'modernity' and the kind of consciousness called in philosophy 'critical,'" by which he explicitly said he meant Kantianism. There is a point to this, as we will see in a moment. A good case can be made, however, for tracing modernism back considerably further, especially since Kant himself can be said to have been rooted in the previous modernisms of figures like Hume, who Kant said awoke him from his dogmatic slumbers, and Descartes, who first formulated as an explicit program the rejection of all earlier thought and its replacement by such truths as could be known with mathematical certainty using his own up to date methods of radical doubt and reasoning of the sort exemplified preeminently by his own new science of analytic geometry. Or one could follow Hans Blumenberg in tracing the roots of modernism back still further, well before Descartes, to the nominalism of William of Ockham in the fourteenth century, which came to be known even in the late Middle Ages as the *via moderna*, in contrast to the *via antiqua* of the main medieval tradition of thought.

To identify the defining feature of modernist thought seems at first a bit simpler than pinning down its origin, since all the thinkers just mentioned share one major

assumption: that whereas people of the past tended to be deficient in their grasp of the powers of rationality, the "moderns" know how to think rationally and are determined to do so, giving credence to no other truth-claims than those they can establish themselves by their own reasoning processes. This, however, is only one aspect of modernism, and perhaps not the one that is most important.

Anthony J. Cascardi has argued recently that the truly central feature of modernism is not its conception of itself as "the age in which reason definitively prevailed," but rather its belief in "the mutual exclusion of reason and activities with value-dependent goals," the idea commonly known as the fact-value dichotomy: "...the model of reason as mathematical representation," says Cascardi, "is only one side of a coin which also projects a vision of desires and of the will as beyond all rational control."

To speak of desire and will brings us to a central point of Socratic thought that contrasts sharply with modernism: the idea that will and desire are distinguished by the fact that will is rational and desire is not, that the purpose of the philosophical calling is not speculative knowledge but the care of the soul and the cultivation of genuine will through the control of desire and its subordination to reason.

The question of the relation between desire and will is also a point at which we can see the relevance of Wittgenstein's comment regarding the idea that the good is whatever God commands. In his discussion with Schlick, which echoed a controversy of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Wittgenstein was taking the position of Ockham and the *via moderna* against Schlick's, uncharacteristic and perhaps unwitting, advocacy of that of the *via antiqua* as represented by such figures as Dante, Aquinas, and Bonaventure, with roots going back to Socrates' claim that virtue is knowledge of the good and that no person willingly does evil.

Aquinas, to cite the most systematic of the thinkers in the *via antiqua,* had argued in essence that God necessarily wills the good because he wills his own being and because being and good are identical. The Socratic roots of these positions can be seen

from the arguments Aquinas gives for them. Regarding the latter point he said, for example:

> Good and being are really the same.... The essence of good consists in this, that it is in some way desirable. Hence the Philosopher [i.e., Aristotle] says "The good is what all desire." Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is in act. Therefore it is clear that a thing is good so far as it is being; for it is being [that] is the actuality of all things....

Regarding the corollary idea that God wills the good necessarily, Aquinas said: "For the divine will has a necessary relation to the divine goodness [i.e., His own perfection of being], since that is its proper object. Hence God wills His own goodness necessarily, even as we will our own happiness."

Although it was Aristotle Aquinas cited as a philosophical source, it was from Plato and Socrates before him that Aristotle had learned to think of the good as that which all desire when they properly understand their desires, and it was also from them that he learned to think of happiness as the ultimate goal of all human action, whether or not that goal is clearly understood.

What Ockham argued, on the other hand, was that any necessity governing God's will would be a restriction of His freedom and a diminution of his sovereign majesty. Consequently he held that the good was not identical with being but was whatever God arbitrarily declared it to be by an act of his absolute power.

To return to more recent thinking and to someone set aside temporarily a few moments ago, another figure that probably lay behind Wittgenstein's position, as he lies behind almost everything else in modern continental thought, is Immanuel Kant. Kant took over the fact-value dichotomy from David Hume and worked out his own solution to it, but one that left the dichotomy itself intact. The good for Kant was what could be known through logical reasoning as a systematic, universal imperative. Interestingly, the

structure of Kant's thought here parallels that of Aquinas in a certain respect, in that his categorical imperative has as its ultimate justification that it makes for action that accords with the nature of a rational man, as Aquinas's God had willed the good because it was in accord with his nature to do so. The important difference, however, is that with Kant the good is conceived, somewhat in Ockham's manner, as the object of an imperative rather than of appetite. Aquinas had said that both God and His rational creatures necessarily act in accord with their nature to pursue their happiness, insofar as they understand it. One of the basic features of Kant's thought, on the other hand, was that it separated the question of the good entirely from considerations of happiness. Even an objectively good act that might bring with it some intrinsic satisfaction could not be considered a moral act for Kant unless it was done for the sake of duty rather than enjoyment. And even apart from the question of the moral status of the act, knowledge of the good would not in itself lead to good action.

This is as about far as one can get from Socrates, for whom knowledge and virtue went hand in hand and for whom the whole purpose of philosophy was not the development of abstract notions of right and wrong but the development of the soul's capacity to love concretely its own good, which is to say, its possibility of fullness of life. It has become a truism of the tradition deriving from Kant to say that Socrates and Plato were simple-minded in thinking the way they did, since it is taken as obvious that wicked people know quite well that they are acting wickedly and do so anyway, but to say this is really to miss Plato's point. Werner Jaeger stated the issue well when he said that "[f]or Socrates, it is no contradiction of the statement 'virtue is knowledge' to say that in the experience of most men knowing good is not the same as doing it. That experience merely shows that real knowledge is rare."

Where, then, did the modern separation of fact from value and desire from the good come from? Although there is scarcely time here to do justice to the subject, I will suggest that it comes, at least in part, from a genuine advance in the differentiation of

consciousness of which the early modern thinkers became acutely aware—even if they may have exaggerated their own role as its originators.

The development of which I am speaking is the differentiation, both theoretical and experiential, of the full range of intentional operations by which it becomes possible to operate distinctly in attending first to the data of experience, then second to the act of interpreting those data by construing them in intelligible configurations, and third to critical reflection and judgment regarding the adequacy of such construings, then finally fourth to questions about how to act in the context of the reality that can be known through the careful performance of the first three levels of operation.

It is essential to a proper understanding of this analysis to bear in mind that all of these operations are driven by what might be described as an *eros* of consciousness, a fundamental dynamism of questioning that moves one to reach beyond mere experience to seek intelligible patterns in the data of experience (real or imaginative), and then further to reach beyond mere ideas to a grasp of reality through critical reflection on the adequacy of ideas to real experience and of courses of action to real situations. It was this dynamism Aristotle was referring to when he said at the beginning of his Metaphysics (980a), "All men desire to know," and then went on to speak of the delight we take in the exercise of our senses (i.e., the first level of intentional operation) and of how wonder about "the 'why'" of things moves us on toward the pursuit of wisdom through understanding and knowledge (the second and third levels of operation). In the Nicomachean Ethics he describes how the capacity for good decision (the fourth level of operation) is developed. Aristotle assumes that this presupposes a successful performance on the first three levels because, as he puts it, "each man judges well the things he knows, and of these he is a good judge" (1094b29).

Viewed in the light of this schema, it is easy to understand that fact and value are known by distinct but interrelated operations, the first three levels of operation in the case of fact, and in that of value, the fourth. That this need imply no problem of a dichotomy

is clear from the facts that (1) the *eros* that drives the operations on all four levels is a reaching toward the specific satisfactions (i.e., values) to be gained in and by their successful performance, and (2) all of the higher level operations are cumulative—that is, they are founded upon the successful performance of each of the lower levels of operation. Just as reality, the world of fact, is known by careful acts of attention, interpretation, and critical reflection and judgment, so value can only be known adequately by the cumulative performance of all four levels of operation. The true good differs from apparent good precisely in that apparent good is what appeals only to the data of experience on the first level, that is, pleasurable sensation, whereas, true value is the good not merely of sense but of the rational person living with genuine understanding in the full context of reality. This, of course, is precisely what Socrates was driving at when he talked about the difference between desire and will and said that "real will," to cite Jaeger's paraphrase, "exists only when based on true knowledge of the good at which it is directed" whereas "mere desire is an effort aimed towards apparent goods."

It was fascination with the powers that might come from a differentiated capacity for critical reflection and judgment that gave rise to the early modern hope of a complete cognitive and practical mastery of the material world, but it was also the incompleteness of that very process of cognitive and ethical self-appropriation that caused that hope to take the form of the characteristically modern effort of rationalistic system building. The entire tradition of philosophical idealism from Descartes through Leibniz to Hegel and beyond may be interpreted as an effort to elide the second and third levels and eclipse the fourth, that is, to know both reality and the good purely through the analysis of ideas—as is evidenced by the tendency of so many of the thinkers of that tradition to speak of geometry as the paradigmatic form of true knowledge in all domains.

In this, of course, they were following the lead of Plato himself, who seems also to have fallen under the enchantment of geometry and of the possibilities of certainty and completeness implicit in the theory of forms. To separate out the thought of Socrates

from that of the Plato through whom we mainly know him is a notorious crux of philosophical history, but one thing that seems to stand out about the Socrates described in all sources is that he was notoriously sensitive to the kind of critical question that makes system builders uncomfortable. Various commentators have suggested that the reason Plato had to replace Socrates with the Athenian Stranger in his last, fundamentally didactic (even if outwardly dialogical) writing, the Laws, is that the kind of direct exposition of Platonic doctrine there presented would so obviously have been out of character in the mouth of the ever probing, self-questioning Socrates. Alasdair MacIntyre even speaks of the Laws as turning Socrates from a hero into a potential victim, whose fidelity to the promptings of doubt would have marked him for elimination by the Nocturnal Council described in Book 12: "His prosecutors would have had an even easier task in Magnesia than they had in Athens." Socrates, our perennial "other," has had an ambiguous history in the mind of the West from the start. In his life and trial in Athens, in the dialogues of Plato, for the Renaissance humanists, for Nietzsche, and now perhaps also for ourselves again, he vacillates in our perceptions between ally and enemy, savior and outcast.

It seems that his time to be an ally is returning. When one speaks now of "postmodernism," one of the things it usually is taken to include is a radical critique and "deconstruction" of the "beautiful totalities" the system builders of modern philosophical idealism were trying to construct and of which the shade of Socrates continues to be the remorseless gadfly. Let us hope he can also escape his usual fate as a victim this time around. The postmodernism that may give him a new lease on life is itself a sufficiently new and ambiguous phenomenon that one cannot be sure where it will lead. In some respects it seems, despite the irrationalism that sometimes appears on its fringe, a further advance in the development of the critically reflective capacity in thought of which he has always been a symbol. And in its emphasis on the erotic dimension of experience it sometimes seems to be reaching beyond mere hedonism toward the possibility, at least, of

a renewed, more critically grounded eudaemonistic ethic. And yet something else one cannot help but notice in it also, despite its air of defiant cheerfulness, is a note of nostalgia and disappointment, perhaps even of bitterness—as if the failure to attain the System with a capital "S," as Kierkegaard liked to call it, had become a matter of such chagrin to the generation that realized its impossibility that irrationalism and hedonism seem tempting alternatives. In this respect the thinking that goes by the name of "postmodernism" often seems rather a despairing version of late modernism than a real breakthrough beyond it—even if, as Kierkegaard phrased it, this can take the form of a despair that "in a kind of innocence does not even know that it is despair."

Jean-François Lyotard, in fact, in his essay, "Answering the Question: What is Post-Modernism?" suggests it is really part and parcel of modernism itself—"Il fait assurément partie du moderne"— and that "a work cannot become modern except by being already postmodern" ("une oeuvre ne peut devenir moderne que si'elle est d'abord postmoderne"). With a characteristically modern epochalism, the postmodern, he goes on to say, places under suspicion everything received from the past, even if from only yesterday, but with an "astonishing acceleration" so that the generations hurtle one after another into the wastebin of history. At the end, however, in what seems an appeal for a more genuinely postmodern postmodernism, he urges us to renounce our "modern" nostalgia for the whole and the one, for a totality of imaginative vision and understanding, lest we lapse back into the "terrorism" of a modernism that has not yet accepted its own inevitable frustration.

Now this does seem to represent an advance of a sort, and one that Socrates himself might well have applauded. For modernism to renounce the terrorism by which, in its drive to possess once and for all a full and absolute system of truth, it has repeatedly excluded as virtually subhuman all of its predecessors except the few it considers harbingers of itself would at least make modernity more humane—both less bloody and more historically just. If we could give up our unfortunate habit of trying to

excommunicate everyone who thought before us every time we begin to think we have finally understood something, we might not only extricate ourselves from an implicitly patricidal and fratricidal relation to our forebears and any other people who do not share our special "modern" experience, including an entire world of peoples outside the modern West, but we would also, perhaps, through respect for the universal humanity our "others," have shared with us, place ourselves in a position to gain access to the perspectives of their experience that might deliver us from the incestuous prison of our peculiar, distinctly limited rationality—perspectives that might contain what could become for us, too, the seeds of a neglected wisdom.