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Introduction

“Bourgeois Philosophy” and the Problem of the Subject

I

Nowadays the term “bourgeois philosophy” no doubt sounds an immediate ironic note. It invokes a still polemical, if also a stale and overused characterization of a distinct historical condition, our historical condition, the “modern West.” The phrase suggests that there is a sort of philosophy appropriate to a historical epoch and a kind of society, that pursuing some questions makes sense only under certain historical conditions: a certain level of cultural development or prosperity, a certain sort of economic organization, a certain distribution of social power, a certain relation to religion, and so forth. “Bourgeois” is an adjective that is supposed to help direct us to the specific conditions among the possibilities most relevant for understanding why our philosophy looks the way it does, so different from past versions of our own, and perhaps from anyone else’s. Since the term has become a kind of epithet, it also suggests a high-minded defense of a commitment to a value, when that commitment is actually motivated by low-minded interests.

If we were to characterize epochs and societies by reference to “highest values,” then the heart of such a bourgeois philosophy would have to be a philosophy of freedom. This would be a philosophy that explains how it is possible (whether it is possible) that individual subjects could uniquely, qua individuals, direct the course of their own lives, why it has become so important that we seek to achieve this state maximally, consistent with a like liberty for all, what that means, why it is just to call on the coercive force of law to ensure such a possibility (the protection of liberty, the “one natural right”), and so forth. The basic philosophical claim underwriting

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such an enterprise is the notion of the independent, rational, reflective individual, one who can act in the light of such reflective results. This is the ontological and the value claim that underwrites rights protection, claims of entitlement, and just deserts, and that begins to make pressing new sorts of philosophical problems: the distinct nature of self-knowledge, the problem of personal identity, skepticism about the external world and other minds, and so forth.

In the European philosophical tradition, “the question of the subject” became quite a speculative one. The most important issue derived from the famous Kantian and post-Kantian denial of any immediate presence to the mind of, or possible direct reliance on, the world (even “the world” of one’s own impulses and inclinations), the denial of the “myth” of the given. A human subject is, rather, a meaning-making subject (minimally always “making up her mind” in experiencing and so likewise responsible for what she claims to know), a self-conscious subject, in this active, self-determining relation to itself in all experience as well as in all action.¹ This “inseparability of mind and world” claim raised the issue of how rightly to acknowledge the “subjective” character of such experience and the many unique, elusive characteristics of self-knowledge. So the “bourgeois” claim is that there are such entities and that they in fact actually *do* these things in acting and thinking.

The “problem” suggested in my title is that a great many very persuasive writers think that such an ontological claim, in both its socio-political and more speculative formulations, and such a normative ideal, freedom, understood in “the bourgeois sense,” are not only fantasies but destructive, dangerous, and self-deceived fantasies. Insofar as one can agree with such a vaguely summarized objection, I agree with this charge but not with the implications most often drawn from it, and I want to explain that agreement and that demurral in the work that follows. (The demurral defines the nature and the limit of the agreement: The basic “bourgeois” picture is not false, a mistake, or “ideological”; in Hegel’s terms, it is simply “incomplete.” Such an ideal of freedom should be not rejected but properly “realized.”)²

¹ All this under the assumption that any such “self-determination” must be rule bound to really be a determination, that it cannot be an arbitrary positing, either in judging or in acting.

² In historical terms, no Western philosopher better represents bourgeois philosophy in this sense than Kant, and the story of an astonishing amount of post-Kantian European philosophy can be understood as a reaction against, a great qualification of, such a conception of a moral and social ideal, such a conception of philosophy’s task.

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II

By now that bourgeois label suggests a variety of cultural sins: conformism, consumerist materialism, pompous self-satisfaction, self-deceit, and hypocrisy as a whole way of life. This cultural characterization – self-deceived satisfaction – is often explained as the only effective strategy for dealing with the deep, permanent conflict in bourgeois culture between the inheritance of a largely Christian, altruistic humanism, on the one hand, and a ruthless, remorseless secular capitalism, on the other hand; all ending up in what Nietzsche famously called a “wretched contentment.” (There are plenty of other stories about the presumed “cultural contradictions of capitalism” – such as the view that liberal-democratic capitalism requires a kind of morality of prudence and responsibility that it also must undermine by promoting ever more creatively self-indulgence and hedonism, all in order to create the conditions of the expanding consumption on which capitalism depends.) In lieu of any full treatment of the theme, let us say then that in general the epithet is meant to convey the charge of a self-deceived or hypocritical, disguised egoism and selfishness (often parading as entitlement claims), a complacent satisfaction with low-minded, uninspiring, vulgar ends or goals, or, usually, both. In historical actuality, the great ideal of “a free life” is just well-organized selfishness, producing a lowest-common-denominator level of cultural crudity.

There is an aristocratic flavor to this use of the term as an epithet, and that is important to note because it marks a kind of anxiety deeply connected with an important dimension of the problem of the bourgeois subject, and hence important for its ideal (perhaps its compensatory fantasy of) freedom. The bourgeois is originally held in contempt because he cannot act as the nobleman paradigmatically acts – *independently*, in majestic indifference to what unworthy others think of what he does.³

³ A brief history of the term: Its original meaning derives from feudalism. Certainly by the eleventh century and long thereafter the term simply designated an inhabitant of the *bourg*, a *lieu fortifié* surrounding a princely household. They were the people who lived inside the fortified walls, and while they were not noble (and so did not have the privilege of carrying arms in service to the king) they were entitled to privileges as *bourgeois du roi* and so, as tradesmen, artisans, and basically what we would call bureaucrats, were distinguished from the group who lived in open houses outside the walls, in the villa or country houses (a *villanus* or villain, a word with its own remarkable history), and certainly from the paysans, the serfs who lived farther out.

By the seventeenth century in France, though, much of the modern meaning of the term as an epithet, or insult, was well established. In French literary works by Corneille,

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(In principle, anyway; there is a lot of self-deceit and fantasy on the “aristocratic” side as well.) The world of the bourgeois – indeed for Rousseau the world of modern society itself – is a world of such complex, pervasive and fragile dependencies that for the bourgeois attempting such independence would be economic and social suicide. His range of independent action is limited not merely by his bad, craven character but by the form of society that requires and rewards such cautious, reputation-protecting conduct. This question of the right way to understand the relation between independence and dependence will emerge as one of the most significant complexities in the modern aspiration to a free life.

III

But these problems of dependence, conformism, inauthenticity, and so forth – the cultural dissatisfactions – are only a part of a still larger, quite paradoxical situation. At just the moment in the nineteenth century when Western European societies seemed to start paying off the Enlightenment’s promissory notes – reducing human misery by the application of its science and technology, increasing the authority of reason in public life, constraining the divisive public role of religion, extending the revolutionary claim of individual natural right to a wider class of subjects, accelerating the extension of natural scientific explanation – it also seemed that many of the best, most creative minds produced within and as products of such societies rose up in distaste, protest, even despair at

Boileau, Poisson, and most famously Molière, a bourgeois was already a person without dignity or merit, a social climber, vulgar and craven, a philistine, possessed of the means to enjoy the finer of things in life but with no clue how to do so (and terrified that such ignorance would be discovered, such as the man snoring through Wagner or asking how much that Vermeer would cost) and bizarrely obsessed with respectability and the appearances of conventional morality (only the appearances because the bourgeois was also false, a hypocrite, a poseur; the local anti-pornography bourgeois is the one sure to have a huge stash of the stuff in his basement). Now what is interesting about this history is that such expressions of distaste with the bourgeois and the whole way of life that emerges when they become the “ruling class” is that it is almost always tied to aristocratic nostalgia and a kind of aristocratic self-congratulation. To “épater” the bourgeoisie is to demonstrate that one is not a member, and if that cannot any longer place one in the nobility, it can help to inch one closer to the hierarchy of cultural rank established by romanticism and still so influential: the ranks of the creative, authentic, artistically sensitive appreciators of the finer things. This style of critique, in other words, is not political (unequal wealth and unfair advantage are not usually intended in the epithet) but cultural. I am much indebted here to Paul E. Corcoran’s informative 1977 article and to Zhiyuan Cui for this reference. For even more detail, see Pernoud 1960 and Pirenne 1939.

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the form of life that also made all of this possible. In painting, literature, music, as well as in a kind of avant-garde philosophy in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and others, just being “modern,” as that was understood in bourgeois terms, became a source of some distinct anxiety, a distasteful fate. A large dimension of the problem had to do with issues not traditionally aesthetic, issues such as how to understand historical time at all, the temporality of one’s art, how to locate oneself in a moment that seemed unlocatable given the radicality of the rupture represented by modernity. One can “hear” this accelerating radicality and rupture most dramatically in music from Wagner to Schoenberg and Webern, but roughly the same trajectory (the thematization of art itself, the concentration on form, the assumption of the historical exhaustion of prior forms, a liberationist sensibility demanding “freedom,” a growing anxiety about art’s reception in a mass democratic culture) occurred in drama, painting, poetry, and novels.

More substantively, the best brief characterization of much of the tone of post-Hegelian European thought and culture is that it is comprised of a profound suspicion about that basic philosophical claim of “bourgeois” philosophy noted above, the notion central to the self-understanding and legitimation of the bourgeois form of life: the free, rational, independent, reflective, self-determining subject. Nowadays, one has to get in the back of a rather long queue of European complainants to register an objection about any faith in such a conception or ideal. Moreover, although much of European modernism was inspired by a revolutionary consciousness and a hope for a rapid acceleration of the modern trajectory itself, such aspirations were often overshadowed by something darker, not just a critical reaction to the aspirations of modern subjectivity but something like a growing high culture “bourgeois self-hatred.” Indeed, it has been suggested that the two most successful and catastrophic mass movements of the twentieth century, fascism and communism, seem largely well nourished by this, the former rejecting the ends of peace, security, and individual well-being for the sake of a return to blood and soil, collectivist, archaic primitivism, the latter for the sake of a recklessly rapid acceleration forward, beyond the basic oppositions of “individualist” bourgeois society for the sake of a classless future.⁴ This must have something to do with the appeal of such a backward-glancing, even occasionally fascist sensibility to so many modernist artists and philosophers (such as Eliot, Lawrence, Pound, and Heidegger) and the revolutionary leap forward

⁴ For example by Furet 1999.

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attempted by so many artists and intellectuals (especially after the international crisis of the capitalist system in 1929).⁵

IV

To return to the question raised by the phrase itself: Is any of this cultural and social history important for philosophy? Is even the original, sweeping notion of “modern philosophy” of more than bureaucratic use; is it a *philosophical* term of art? Can such a characterization be taken in a much more radical way than as the mere date that a standard, historically organized textbook would invoke, an embodiment of the view that there is simply a subset of the very many, perhaps perennial philosophical problems that as a matter of contingent historical fact happened to engage the imagination of philosophers in the West from roughly the seventeenth century to the present? These might be historically novel problems, it might be conceded, but all of them would be *in principle* accessible anywhere anytime. Is there instead some common, historically specific prereflective orientation by virtue of which individual problems came to make whatever sense they did in *and only in* just this sort of society in historical time, a society moving toward or having arrived at capitalist economies, romantic marriages, nation states, liberal-democratic institutions, and by and large an ever greater commitment to natural science as the highest cognitive authority? Indeed, could there even be such a thing as “modernist philosophy” in the sense in which there is modernist painting or architecture or poetry? Might a similar self-consciousness about such a locatability, and an anxiety about how to deal with it, be said to have produced such a modernist moment in philosophy, first of all in Hegel, but then more dramatically in the Kantian and Hegelian aftermath of the European tradition, in many of the figures dealt with in this book?

The premise of such a moment would be a controversial one, but by no means necessarily a reductionist one: that certain problems rise to salience because of social and historical characteristics would not make

⁵ A caveat here or a concession. A contemporary single mother working two jobs, trying to arrange day care for her children, and taking them to the doctor when they are sick is not going to be much bothered by how unhappy Franz Kafka was and would understandably be thrilled to become beset with the spiritual crises of the bourgeoisie. But we should not also concede too much to such a class-oriented or so-called materialist counter. That an ideal could be said to be failing need not mean much about the individual beliefs of particular agents and can be apparent in various social and individual pathologies, and such shared symptoms can also have a lot to do with the products of high culture. It all depends on one's diagnosis, the content of the claims.

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much sense without some pre-philosophical commonality in underlying, largely practical, and prereflective commitments and in a historically specific way of experiencing the world, the way one had come to experience claims to authority, religious practices, the organization of labor, and so forth.⁶ If there is such a prereflective commonality to the topics of bourgeois philosophy, one could perhaps see connections between typically modern problems in philosophy and the various but still quite distinct styles and subjects that characterize the art, literature, and music produced in and for such societies, especially as they became more and more sensitive to their own historicity.⁷ Or one could ask: Why should there be such a connection, if there is; and does it mean anything philosophically that there is? For one thing, perhaps there is simply philosophical progress, and the bourgeois world, with its disenchanting nature, atomistic self-understanding, and skepticism, suggests to philosophers a distinct set of problems because those are the (finally) genuine problems, appropriate to this latest, most advanced stage in human progress. Perhaps that is all the modernist, historical consciousness we need.

Even though the question of what sort of ideal this is and why it has become so historically important to us are obviously pretty sweeping topics, it already does not look like a strictly philosophical answer will get us very far, at least it doesn't seem likely to me. It is after all only relatively recently in Western history that we began to think of human beings as something like individual, pretty much self-contained and self-determining centers of a causal agency, only relatively recently that one's entitlement to such a self-determining life seemed not just valuable but absolutely valuable, for the most part more important even than any consideration of security, well-being, and peace that would make the attainment of such an ideal more difficult, that it was even worth the risk of life in its defense. It seems unlikely in the extreme that the so-called bourgeois notion of freedom and that most important implication – the idea of a human or natural right, the capacity just by being a human being (just by “showing up” as

⁶ Obviously, the question here of what it is for some phenomenon or practice to “make sense” or to fail to is a very large topic (cf. chapter 3). I mean here only to refer to the way a practice might be said to have come to “get a grip” within some form of life, to fit in and thereby have a salient profile, has come to matter; that it has come to seem that something important would be neglected if such a question or practice or possibility were neglected.

⁷ I mean here something more than the obvious point that such texts and practices can be said to “express” the “*Weltanschauung* of an age.” The idea is that there are dimensions to the problem of this historical self-consciousness that need to be explored and worked out, in various ways that cannot be understood as merely illustrative of philosophy.

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it is sometimes put) to place all others under an obligation to act in no way inconsistent with like availability of action for all – should have been waiting around in history unnoticed, waiting for Locke and Rousseau to discover it. That would be as unlikely as an attempt to explain (and to account for the authority of) what may be the greatest social transformation in human history – one we are actually living through – the greater and greater unacceptability of gender-based division of labor and unequal social statuses for men and women – by appeal to some philosophical discovery or new insight.

We can try to quarantine, as it were, the philosophical issues – arguing that the way in which such an ideal got on our agenda is of no importance to philosophy, and we just investigate its rational credentials once history hands it to us. But, on the one hand, that seems quite disingenuous since the notion has a kind of historical and social authority and priority in normative discussions and a dense, complex “lived” meaning to those committed to it that philosophy also needs to understand if it is to understand what the ideal entails and what actual authority is merited. (For example, how could one possibly begin to discuss something like what sort of importance ought to be attributed to modernist art, and why, without being everywhere oriented from an appreciation of what sort of status it has come to have in bourgeois societies and just those, even if one ultimately wants to say that status is too various and disunified for any answer, even if one wants to say that we have lost our way somewhere?)

On the other hand, if it is plausible to consider the origin and even the authority of such normative commitments as unintelligible apart from the place of such commitments in a changing, historical social organization, it is also highly plausible that any particular mode of “investigating the rational credentials” of such commitments is itself necessarily attached to the same historical story. Argument forms determining what counts as a legitimating case also come attached to complex and developing histories and need the same sort of proper location in order to be understood. For example, the idea of appealing to which form of authority “pre-social rational individuals would choose to submit to” is not something that would have made such sense, say, to Aristotle, just as refraining from appealing to the proper natural role of men and women, to natural law, would have greatly puzzled Aquinas.

Now such historicizing tendencies always provoke spirited counterintuitions. For one thing, if all of this is plausible, it also means that the original core notions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century bourgeois

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liberalism – right, individual, property, contract, fairness – are also not frozen in some kind of time capsule, to be opened whenever philosophers need something from their tool kit. It is quite likely that our collective experience over time of the hold such notions have on us has changed a great deal, changed us and our sense of the ideal, and this would mean that any such notion must be taken up with a great deal of informed historical sensitivity if we are serious about any contemporary project of normative self-assessment. To be sure, one often hears people insist that, say, the ownership of human beings as chattel is evil, has always been evil, and that it must have always been possible for anyone anywhere to know directly and unhistorically that it was evil. This kind of issue would obviously require several more discussions even to begin properly, but as throughout I am only trying to suggest here that such a rigoristic, essentially moral condemnation is not only implausible (it too quickly lumps together all slaveholders of all times, with no appreciation of the great differences between the ancient Greek understanding of slavery and that of the American South and no way to appreciate the quality of mind of Jefferson, for example, or Lincoln's compromises in the prewar and early war years). It is also *itself* a particular sort of judgment of absolute ahistorical responsibility typical of a historically particular (sometimes called "peculiar") normative institution, morality, a kind of stance toward the world that requires *its own* historical genealogy in all the senses noted above.

To say everything at once: I think that there is (has to be) such a thing as philosophical modernism in the sense suggested above, that the historical location of philosophical activity has become a – perhaps the – central question for philosophy (and where it hasn't, it ought to be), that there is no easy progressivist narrative to explain the contemporary shape of philosophy, and that such issues cannot be properly understood unless the intimate reflection of such concerns in modernist literature and art is acknowledged (or said another way, unless the divisions between philosophy and literature and the arts are treated as the highly problematic, poorly understood, and crudely administered divisions that they are). My suggestion in the following chapters is that this is particularly important in any attempt to understand the fate of the ideal noted above, the free and rational individual subject, the heart of bourgeois philosophy, the philosophy of our time.

The underlying claim that I want to make in these essays about this situation is a difficult one to express economically. It is to try to suggest that the reflection of this tension and complexity in the main documents and work of modern European high culture can sometimes just as much

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be read as elements of panic, pathological melancholy, and a distorted, hasty appreciation of its own ideals, or as exploratory and unresolved, as it can be read as some sort of accurate record of “what we have become,” as a demonstration that fundamental sense-making practices have broken down. Or we should be suspicious about phrases such as “breakdown” and might view the modernist response to some sort of putative collapse of authoritative norms and ideals in bourgeois culture as only partial, hesitant, and, in such partiality, often partly distorted. This could all also be true about suspicions of bourgeois individuality and freedom. It is possible that that suspicion can go too deep or, to say it metaphorically, that reactions to the limitations of such subjectivity can move forward and away, can recoil, too quickly, too hastily.

I have discussed similar issues in several earlier books, especially *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* and *Idealism as Modernism: Hegelian Variations*. Those books were concerned with the general theoretical position at stake in a Kantian version of the project of German Idealism and of Hegel in particular, and the legacy of that tradition in later figures who took it up and in others who explicitly rejected it, and those books dealt with those writers who proposed alternative “modernity theories.” And in the latter book, there were also two essays on Hegel’s political philosophy itself, framing the collection, offering an alternative view. Here I am concerned with a more focused topic, and besides setting out its dimensions in this chapter, I am also eager to point out the limitations that such a narrower focus brings with it. I have called that problem the persistence of the problem of subjectivity, but in modern philosophy that topic has ranged from questions of self-knowledge, epistemological incorrigibility, first-person authority, and action theory to the nature of autonomy, the scope and basis of rights claims to phenomenological issues (what it is “like” to be the subject of one’s experiences and deeds, if it is anything at all). But I am concentrating in what follows on what could be considered a crucial subset of those issues; in more obvious terms it could simply be described as the conditions under which one could be said “to actually *lead* a life,” wherein one’s deeds and practices are and are experienced as one’s own, due to one, not fated, determined by exogenous requirements, under the sway of the will of others, of *das Man*, subject to “the administered life,” the imperatives of the work world, and so on, or where such a subjectivity would not be closed off to one because of the grip of some distorting picture, scientism, “reflective” philosophy, the forgetting of “the ordinary,” and so forth.