

The Modern Philosophical Revolution

The Luminosity of Existence

The Modern Philosophical Revolution breaks new ground by demonstrating the continuity of European philosophy from Kant to Derrida. Much of the literature on European philosophy has emphasized the breaks that have occurred in the course of two centuries of thinking. But as David Walsh argues, such a reading overlooks the extent to which Kant, Hegel, and Schelling were already engaged in the turn toward existence as the only viable mode of philosophizing. While many similar studies summarize individual thinkers, this book provides a framework for understanding the relationships between them. Walsh thus dispels much of the confusion that assails readers when they are only exposed to the bewildering range of positions taken by the philosophers he examines. His book serves as an indispensable guide to a philosophical tradition that continues to resonate in the postmodern world.

David Walsh is professor of politics at The Catholic University of America. The editor of three volumes of *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin*, he has published numerous articles in political science and philosophy journals, as well as essays in anthologies. This is the third volume in a trilogy concerning the modern world that includes *After Ideology: Recovering the Spiritual Foundations of Freedom* and *The Growth of the Liberal Soul*.

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The Luminosity of Existence

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The Catholic University of America



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David Walsh

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*To Brendan, Emma, David, and Talia,
as well as Austyn and Tyler*

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Preface

Contemporary literary theory has induced enough skepticism about the notion of a preface that one is inclined to abandon the attempt to write one. Yet the urge to communicate prevails over inevitable reservations. If anything has been learned, it is perhaps that all books are in the manner of a preface, an insight that Kierkegaard alone carried through in a book composed wholly of prefaces. One remains always in the mode of a pre-face, wanting to say what must be said before one faces the reader but never actually managing to say it. Indeed, the entire book is an ample demonstration of that failure, for if communication were as simple as saying what is on our minds, there would hardly arise the need to elaborate our thought in books. In that sense the operative assumption of all book writing is that the task can never reach its end. The book goes on, and all that is produced is merely a preface to what remains to come. Books, too, partake of the “between” character of existence, and although we impose a limit on them, they immediately overflow the boundaries in every direction. We are back in the end at the acknowledgment that we have not reached the end. We have only a preface, which must be offered in the knowledge that we have fortunately not been able to say what we sought to say. The saying can go on.

But it can also go backward, and that is the main justification for beginning with a preface. This is especially the case with a volume that is offered as the third in a series hitherto unannounced. A retrospective identification of the unity of a work has at least the merit of permitting inspection of its claim without delay. Readers can, with the author, judge the extent to which unity has or has not been achieved. No attempt has been made to prejudge the outcome by imposing even the constancy of volume numbering in advance. Yet there has been a consciousness of the unity of subject matter from the start. *The Modern Philosophical*

Revolution is the final volume of a trilogy that includes *After Ideology* and *The Growth of the Liberal Soul*. The goal of the latter two books was to deal comprehensively with the character of the modern world in which we find ourselves. The problem of “modernity,” of that world that remains a question to itself, was the guiding thread. But in contrast to the intention of much of the literature that addresses the “crisis of modernity,” the purpose was to avoid being captivated by the most captivating elements. The idea was to understand our world as profoundly as possible, recognizing that it is capable of erupting into orgiastic homicide just as it is capable of maintaining civilized societies of impressive durability. We live in a complicated historical epoch. There is no way to do justice to the modern world by selectively focusing on particular features of it. Only an approach that enables us to dwell with the contradictions, to wait for their inner vitality to reveal itself, holds any promise of enlarging the understanding of who we are. It is that aspiration to undertake a fair and capacious reading of the world in which we live that is the main attribute, if not the achievement, of the volumes here presented by their culminating member. They have been guided by an approach to modernity that has aimed at weighing truly and truly weighing its bewildering range of manifestations.

Even the formulation of the project as a study of modernity is only now reticently broached because it suggests that an entry into the modern world can be found outside of it. The guiding intuition of *After Ideology*, a book that was initially named “Ascent from the Depths,” was that the truth of the modern world could be pronounced only from within it. Only those individuals who had confronted its most harrowing manifestations and found at that point the meaning of existence could speak with the requisite moral authority. That is why *After Ideology* is a study of the catharsis evoked by the totalitarian crisis. It is not a study of totalitarianism, a genre of writing whose objectivity of tone often masks the very abyss of subjectivity that made totalitarianism possible. As a spiritual deformation, there can be no account of totalitarianism that absents itself from the struggle against it. Perfunctory condemnation is not adequate to the task of contemplating the possibility of evil that lay within the heart of modern civilization. Nothing less was required than a confrontation with the manner in which the very meaning of philosophy and Christianity could yield such distortion. But the struggle for understanding was worth it. The result was an understanding not only of the possibility of evil, but also of the force of goodness capable of overcoming it. If the ideological madness of the twentieth century was the fruit of the misapplication of

philosophy and Christianity, only their true application could assuage the longing that had been so sadly misdirected. *After Ideology* was therefore a study of the innermost truth of the modern world that emerges only in the moment of its calamitous contemplation of the abyss. Far from being merely “values” or “ideas,” good and evil were discovered as the imprescriptible boundaries of our existence.

That insight into the priority of existence over all formulations of it became the thread for exploring the impressive achievement of political order that also characterizes our world. Totalitarianism did not simply disappear, nor was it demolished by the heroic witness of individuals opposing it. Totalitarianism was defeated militarily and politically. That meant that there were resources of spiritual strength that were sufficient to the task of resisting evil, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Indeed, it has remained a puzzle even to the liberal democratic societies themselves as to how they mounted such formidable efforts. The whole thrust of liberal democracy had long seemed to privilege the realm of private satisfactions over any demand of civic virtue. It was in order to address this mystery of inexplicable success that *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* examined both the historical sources and the contemporary articulations of the liberal political tradition. It found that nothing in the arguments adduced could adequately account for the durability evinced by liberal polities. Nor were the achievements simply attributable to the spiritual capital accumulated throughout Western history. That explanation merely begged the question of how such capital functioned in the present. What needed to be explained was how the seemingly fragmentary invocations of liberal principles, of natural and human rights, sustained an enduring consensus in the absence of any sustaining whole. The answer lay in liberal political practice, which recurrently called forth an actualization of the virtues indispensable to sustaining it. By relying on a maximum of individual freedom, a way had been found to promote a freedom that was more than individual. This is why, despite all appearances, liberal polities have proved to be the most formidable powers on the world scene. To a remarkable degree they rely far less than any other regime on the necessity of coercion. The abbreviated language of rights, it turns out, contained within it the possibility of the growth of the soul by which responsibilities are eventually served. A surface incoherence conceals an inward coherence that is nowhere revealed except through existence itself.

Now *The Modern Philosophical Revolution* examines the philosophical logic of the prioritizing of existence that has been the implicitly unfolding

direction of the modern world. The subtitle, *The Luminosity of Existence*, is intended to suggest the distinctive character of the shift. Philosophy is the way in which we become self-conscious. It is the language by which an age can, if at all, articulate what it is to itself. The growth of science and technology and of the global moral and political language of rights are two manifestations of the modern spirit. But it is arguable that the philosophical revolution that prioritizes existence is a third achievement that may eventually be seen to be as momentous as the other two. While the philosophical shift may be the last to come into focus, it is the one that enables us to understand the viability of both science and rights. How is it possible for science to resist the dehumanizing implications of reductionism and instrumentalization? How is a universal language of rights to avoid a collapse into incoherence in the absence of any overarching intellectual framework? In each case the crucial insight is that the thinker and practitioner always escape the products of thought and action. We no more live in a world of instrumentalized rationality than we live in a world of individualized chaos. Our lives are spent within the eschatological openness that is the indefinable mystery of the personal. What makes it possible for us to build cooperatively the world that is sustained by just such efforts is that we are not simply entities within that world. Over and above all that is done in history is the singular person that transcends it all. That insight is not by any means new, for it is present at the very inception of philosophy and Christianity. But its formulation within a language of appropriate transparency has been the achievement of the modern philosophical revolution.

This recognition of the uniqueness of modern philosophy became a major discovery as I worked on the present volume. Any project that extends over twenty years marks a learning curve for the author who begins with vague intuitions of the material into which his investigation must plunge. So just as *The Growth of the Liberal Soul* entailed a revision of the presentment of liberalism that had tangentially surfaced in *After Ideology*, the guiding assumption concerning the modern philosophical context throughout both volumes had also to undergo significant modification. When sustained attention is directed toward a body of thought, it turns out to be different from its peripheral apprehension. Liberal political thought on closer examination emerged as far more than an unstable compromise tilted toward a totalitarian collapse. Not only had liberal polities historically demonstrated their staying power, but their theoretical inconclusiveness evidenced the same irrepressible vitality. Now it is the larger philosophical tradition defining the modern world that turns out

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to bear a very different aspect than at first supposed, for while there had always been a willingness to concede significant advances in highlighting the importance of subjectivity, the modern philosophical achievement had been viewed in largely negative terms. At best philosophy had failed to find the means of countering the ideological madness; at worst it had been complicit in the very decline into irrationality it was powerless to overcome. The crisis of nihilism so traumatically announced by Nietzsche seemed to coincide with the fate of philosophy itself. Looking back, it seemed as though the course had already been set in the Kantian removal of the possibility of metaphysics, a vacuum that could only unfold into the endlessly proliferating incoherence synonymous with the very term “postmodern.” It was no wonder that many looked for a fresh beginning before the fatal modern misstep had taken place, or simply retreated into the self-imposed boundaries within which the search for analytic coherence might be pursued.

The Modern Philosophical Revolution proposes a distinctly different narrative. Based on a conscientious rereading of eight major figures, from Kant to Derrida, it argues that there is a remarkably consistent unfolding within this philosophical development. Studies of individual figures or periods within this time frame have often gone a considerable distance in dispelling the fog of conventional misjudgments. But the achievements as a whole have not come into focus; indeed, the era of philosophy from Kant to the present has hardly been conceived of as a whole, because we have lacked an overarching interpretative hypothesis. That is what the present volume seeks to provide. It suggests that philosophy, beginning with Kant, has explicitly shifted from an account of entities and concepts to an existential meditation on the horizon within which it finds itself. So while metaphysics in the propositional sense may have become defunct, it is not by any means the case that our orientation within metaphysical openness has disappeared. The death of metaphysics in thought has meant the return of metaphysics in life. God, immortality, and freedom, as well as the unsurpassable exigency of goodness in its unending struggle with evil, not only remain real but have acquired an existential force that is all the more powerful for our inability to contain them within discursive limits. No surprise is prompted by the return of religion or the echoes of Greek philosophy in contemporary thought. But if we are to make sense of these strange reverberations in a context that has understood itself apart from all theological and metaphysical reference, we must be prepared to understand why the transcendent can surface only within this profoundly mysterious mode. It is not that we in the modern

world have lost faith, but that philosophy has come to understand the meaning of faith in a very different way.

Now whether that way of faith is continuous with the tradition of faith that has descended to us is for the reader to judge. All that the present study can offer is a way of reading the development of modern philosophy as an opening to the possibility of faith. Of course, it is more than the opening of sheer possibility that Kant announced. It is more like the practice of faith that his own philosophical odyssey evidenced, even while he sought to assimilate his project to the authority of science. A revolutionary shift is, in other words, not always fully visible even to those who carry it out. So it is by no means surprising that it should remain invisible to those in whose midst it occurs. Only in looking backward do the contours begin to emerge, and then we realize that a revolution has occurred when, as the term suggests, everything has changed and yet nothing has changed. We are back where we started. If that realization occurs, the quest of modern philosophy will have been vindicated, for not only will its convergence with rational and revelatory tradition have been demonstrated, but the necessity for its departure from the traditional modes of such discourse will also have been recognized. A guiding intuition can be confirmed only through the intuition toward which it guides. But there may be no harm in stating it forthrightly at the beginning. It is that the modern philosophical revolution has done no more than bring to light what has all along been the source of the very tradition against which it sought to distinguish itself. The practice of faith has ever and always been the only available source of faith. Now philosophy has found the means of conceding what had hitherto only been said silently. The achievement seems slight, but it is the slightness that clarifies more than we thought.

The debt of gratitude an author incurs can never be fully discharged, and certainly not in the customary acknowledgment of it. But this is all the more reason for undertaking the attempt. In the order of material assistance, I am deeply grateful for the support provided by a number of grants from the Earhart Foundation, as well as a sabbatical leave from Catholic University of America. For friendship and conversation over the years on the themes of this volume, I thank Brendan Purcell, Joe McCarroll, Cyril O'Regan, Steve Schneck, and Claes Ryn. It has been a pleasure to work with Beatrice Rehl of Cambridge University Press, and I am grateful for her supportive encouragement at every phase of the project. The external readers selected by the Press were all that one

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