

PART I

THE CLAIMS OF SPECULATIVE
REASON

CHAPTER I

Aims of a New Epoch

Hegel was born in 1770, at the moment that German culture was entering the decisive shift known as the *Sturm und Drang*, and when the generation which would revolutionize German thought and literature at the turn of the century was being born. Hegel belongs to this, the 'Romantic' generation, as it has been called, a bit loosely. In fact such party labels are misleading; there were certain pre-occupations which captured the thinkers and artists of this generation, whether they qualify as Romantics or not, pre-occupations which were shared even by sharp critics of the Romantics, as Hegel was. We cannot really understand what he was about until we see the basic problems and aspirations which gripped him, and these were those of the time.

It was a revolutionary time, of course. This has become to us a hackneyed phrase, because revolution in the world is become almost a constant of our experience. But in the 1790s Revolution had its full impact, as the shock waves from Paris spread across Europe; and its impact was all the stronger for being bi-valenced: enthusiasm followed by perplexed horror, among the young intelligentsia of Germany. Much in the writings of Hegel and his contemporaries can be explained by the need to come to terms with the painful, perturbing, conflict-ridden moral experience of the French Revolution. But we have also to understand something of the medium in which this epochal event reverberated, the climate of thought and feeling in which the rising generation of young educated Germans was formed and evolved.

Perhaps the most economical way of sketching this climate, or those aspects of it which will most help us in understanding Hegel, is to delineate a central problem, which insistently demanded solution of the thinkers of this time. It concerned the nature of human subjectivity and its relation to the world. It was a problem of uniting two seemingly indispensable images of man, which on one level had deep affinities with each other, and yet could not but appear utterly incompatible.

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Both these views arose as reactions to, and hence partly as developments of, the main stream of radical Enlightenment thought as this had developed through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England and France. By this I

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mean the line of thought which begins with the epistemological revolution which was part inspirer, part beneficiary of the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. It develops through such diverse thinkers as Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Locke; and authenticated by the science of Galileo and Newton, it entrenches its hold in the eighteenth century not only as a theory of knowledge, but as a theory of man and society as well. In the hands of its more radical protagonists it develops towards a thoroughgoing atomism and mechanism, sometimes going as far as materialism, in its account of man and society, and it becomes a radical utilitarianism in ethics. Helvétius, Holbach, Hume, Bentham can be thought of as representatives of different currents of this broad stream.

Now there are many ways of reading this movement of ideas; the most common is the one just mentioned: that we see it as primarily an epistemological revolution with anthropological consequences. But it will be more relevant to our purposes if we try to concentrate on the notion of the subject which underlay this revolution from the start.

As epistemological innovators, the moderns of the seventeenth century directed their scorn and polemics against Aristotelian science, and that view of the universe which had become intricately with it in Medieval and early Renaissance thought. Final causes and the related vision of the universe as a meaningful order of qualitatively differentiated levels give way first to a Platonic–Pythagorean vision of mathematical order (as in Bruno, Kepler, and partly too, in Galileo), and then finally to the ‘modern’ view of a world of ultimately contingent correlations, to be patiently mapped by empirical observation. From the modern point of view, these earlier visions betrayed a deplorable if understandable weakness of men, a self-indulgence wherein they projected on things the forms which they most desire to find, in which they feel fulfilled or at home. Scientific truth and discovery requires austerity, a courageous struggle against what Bacon called the ‘Idols of the human mind’.

We are all ‘moderns’ enough to have bought a good deal of this story. It is with a mixture of condescension and embarrassment that we read a passage like the following, an early seventeenth-century ‘refutation’ of Galileo’s discovery of the moons of Jupiter.

There are seven windows given to animals in the domicile of the head, through which the air is admitted to the tabernacle of the body, to enlighten, to warm and to nourish it. What are these parts of the *microcosmos*? Two nostrils, two eyes, two ears, and a mouth. So in the heavens, as in a *macrocosmos*, there are two favourable stars, two unpropitious, two luminaries, and Mercury undecided and indifferent. From this and from many other similarities in nature, such as the seven metals, etc., which it were tedious to enumerate, we gather that the number of planets is necessarily seven.¹

¹ Quoted from S. Warhaft (Ed.) *Francis Bacon: A selection of his works*, Toronto, 1965, p. 17.

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What seems to underlie this reasoning as an 'anthropomorphic' assumption is the vision of meaningful order. It can be called a meaningful order because the notion is that different elements in creation express or embody a certain order of ideas – this is why the apertures in the head, the planets, the metals, and other phenomena 'which it were tedious to enumerate' can all be put in relation with each other. They all embody the same idea reflected in different media, rather as 'it's hot' and 'il fait chaud' express the same statement in different languages. And because of this correspondence, we can conclude to the nature of one from the other just as I know from learning that someone said, in French, 'it's hot' that he said 'il fait chaud'. The idea of a meaningful order is inseparably bound up with that of final causes since it posits that the furniture of the universe is as it is and develops as it does in order to embody these Ideas; the order is the ultimate explanation.

Understanding the world in categories of meaning, as existing to embody or express an order of Ideas or archetypes, as manifesting the rhythm of divine life, or the foundational acts of the gods, or the will of God; seeing the world as a text, or the universe as a book (a notion which Galileo still makes use of) – this kind of *interpretive* vision of things which in one form or another played such an important role in many pre-modern societies may appear to us the paradigm of anthropomorphic projection onto the world, suitable to an age in which man was not fully adult. And if this is our only way of seeing this transition in our intellectual and cultural history, then we must interpret the revolts against mechanism of the late eighteenth century, the vision of Goethe, the Romantic imagination, the philosophies of Nature of a Schelling or a Hegel, simply as a failure of nerve, a nostalgic return to earlier, comfortable illusions.

This way of seeing things is not uncommon, but it very much misses the point of these reactions, as well as obscuring the way in which the issues raised then remain central today. Instead of seeing the issue between Galileo and the Paduan philosophers, between modern science and medieval metaphysics, as a struggle between two tendencies in the self, one deploying comforting illusions, the other facing stern realities, we might see it as a revolution in the basic categories in which we understand self. This is not to say that it was understood in this way at the time, but that this formulation is best suited to help us understand the movements of the late eighteenth century.

The moderns' reading of their predecessors and opponents as caught in a web of illusion which they themselves have spun, self-indulgently projecting meanings devised in the mind onto the facts, arose understandably out of the struggle of innovators to free themselves from a venerable orthodoxy. But it persists partly because the very completeness of the modern revolution militates against our understanding the view it replaced. The very modern notion of the self, which is the locus for this struggle between indulgence and

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austerity, really only comes to be in the seventeenth century, although the epicurean view foreshadows it to some extent.

The essential difference can perhaps be put in this way: the modern subject is self-defining, where on previous views the subject is defined in relation to a cosmic order.

Any account of the human subject has to cope with certain universal facets of experience: that at times we can be 'in touch' with ourselves, with our central concerns, we can be clear about who we are and what our purposes are; while at other times we are confused, unclear, or distraught, torn this way and that, or obsessed with the inessential, or just giddily forgetful. Many concepts and images can be used to describe these opposed conditions: harmony vs. conflict, depth vs. superficiality, self-possession vs. -loss, self-centring vs. dispersal. And of course none is neutral, in the sense that each proposes an interpretation of what is at stake which can be contested. For different notions of the subject suggest very different interpretations.

If we pick 'self-presence' as against 'distraction' or 'dispersal' as provisional terms to designate the oppositions here, then we can say that the view of the subject that came down from the dominant tradition of the ancients, was that man came most fully to himself when he was in touch with a cosmic order, and in touch with it in the way most suitable to it as an order of ideas, that is, by reason. This is plainly the heritage of Plato; order in the human soul is inseparable from rational vision of the order of being. For Aristotle contemplation of this order is the highest activity of man. The same basic notion is present in the neo-Platonist vision which through Augustine becomes foundational for much medieval thought.

On this view the notion of a subject coming to self-presence and clarity in the absence of any cosmic order, or in ignorance of and unrelated to the cosmic order, is utterly senseless: to rise out of dream, confusion, illusion *is just* to see the order of things. We might say that on this view, there is no notion of the self in the modern sense, that is, of an identity which I can define for myself without reference to what surrounds me and the world in which I am set. Rather, I am essentially vision of...either order or illusion.

Now the shift that occurs in the seventeenth-century revolution is, inter alia, a shift to the modern notion of the self. It is this kind of notion which underlies Descartes' *cogito*, where the existence of the self is demonstrated while that of everything outside, even God, is in doubt. Similarly, it is this notion which underlies the emancipation from meaning. If man only comes to self-presence in a rational vision of cosmic order which is an order of ideas; and if science as the highest mode of consciousness presupposes self-presence, then science must be founded on a vision of meaningful order. Not deployed as an argument, but rather as an unspoken boundary to thought, this must have underlain the argument of Galileo's opponents. If there *had* to be a mean-

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ingful order, then the set of correspondences they deploy are pretty convincing, granted other current assumptions. But at base there had to be an order because this was a condition of the rational grasp of the world we call science, on the assumption that rationality = vision of this order. Of course, it would be anachronistic to place this as an *argument* in the mouths of contemporaries. For it is we post-Kantians who can cast it as a transcendental argument from the fact of science. But it is not incoherent or illegitimate to think of it as an inarticulate limit of thought.

But plainly the obverse relation holds as well, and to dispense with the notion of meaningful order was to re-define the self. The situation is now reversed: full self-possession requires that we free ourselves from the projections of meanings onto things, that we be able to draw back from the world, and concentrate purely on our own processes of observation and thought about things. The old model now looks like a dream of self-dispersal; self-presence is now to be aware of what we are and what we are doing in abstraction from the world we observe and judge. The self-defining subject of modern epistemology is thus naturally the atomic subjectivity of the psychology and politics which grow out of the same movement. The very notion of the subject takes on a new meaning in the modern context, as a number of contemporary writers have pointed out.¹

Of course, as mentioned above, this modern notion of the self was not without precedents. The Epicureans and Sceptics among the ancients presented a view of the self which was defined in abstraction from any order; and it is not surprising that this minority tradition among the ancients provided some of the fuel for the modern revolution, or that many figures of the Enlightenment felt great affinity for Epicurus and Lucretius. But the modern subject provided a significantly new twist.

The Epicureans and Sceptics achieved a notion of self-definition by withdrawal from the world; their weapon was scepticism about cosmic order, or a plea for the irrelevance of the Gods. By contrast the modern shift to a self-defining subject was bound up with a sense of control over the world – at first intellectual and then technological. That is, the modern certainty that the world was not to be seen as a text or an embodiment of meaning was not founded on a sense of its baffling impenetrability. On the contrary, it grew with the mapping of the regularities in things, by transparent mathematical reasoning, and with the consequent increase of manipulative control. That is what ultimately established the picture of the world as the locus of neutral, contingent correlations. Ancient sceptics while denying our ability to know the nature of things, had claimed that men had enough immediately relevant grasp on their situation to go about the business of life. While sometimes taking

¹ E.g. Heidegger: 'Die Zeit des Weltbildes' in *Holzwege*, Frankfurt a.M., 1950, 81–5.

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up the same formulae, the seventeenth century changed their content radically. The immediately relevant knowledge which was not to be compared with knowledge of final causes came to enjoy a higher and higher prestige. It came to be understood as the paradigm of knowledge.

This control over things which has grown with modern science and technology is often thought of as the principal motivation behind the scientific revolution and the development of the modern outlook. Bacon's oft-quoted slogan, 'knowledge is power' can easily give us this impression, and this 'technological' view of the seventeenth-century revolution is one of the reasons why Bacon has often been given a greater role in it than he deserves, alongside Galileo and Descartes. But even in Bacon's case, when he insists on the nullity of a philosophy from which there cannot be 'adduced a single experiment which tends to relieve and benefit the condition of man',¹ we can read his motivation in a different way. We rather see the control as valuable not so much in itself as in its confirmation of a certain view of things: a view of the world not as a locus of meanings, but rather of contingent, de facto correlations. Manipulability of the world confirms the new self-defining identity, as it were: the proper relation of man to a meaningful order is to put himself into tune with it; by contrast nothing sets the seal more clearly on the rejection of this vision than successfully treating the world as object of control. Manipulation both proves and as it were celebrates the vision of things as 'disenchanted' (entzaubert) to use Max Weber's famous phrase.

Technological progress has so transformed our lives and produced so many things we could barely do without, that we easily think of the 'pay-off' of the seventeenth-century revolution in terms of these benefits (if such they unambiguously are). But in the seventeenth century itself, this pay-off was very slim. For Bacon and the other men of his time, control was more important for what it proved. In the very passage quoted above where he speaks of relieving and benefitting the condition of man, Bacon says: 'For fruits and works are as it were sponsors and sureties for the truth of philosophies.' And later he makes an explicit comparison of the relative importance of the two considerations: 'works themselves are of greater value as pledges of truth than as contributing to the comforts of life'.² We have no reason to think of this as false scientific piety.

Bacon later defines this goal which 'is in itself more worthy than all the fruits of inventions' as 'the very contemplation of things as they are, without superstition or imposture, error or confusion'.³ My suggestion is that one of the powerful attractions of this austere vision, long before it 'paid off' in technology, lies in the fact that a disenchanted world is correlative to a self-defining subject, and that the winning through to a self-defining identity

¹ *Novum Organum*, Book I, LXXIII.

² *Op. cit.* Book I, CXXIV.

³ Book I, CXXIX.

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was accompanied by a sense of exhilaration and power, that the subject need no longer define his perfection or vice, his equilibrium or disharmony, in relation to an external order. With the forging of this modern subjectivity there comes a new notion of freedom, and a newly central role attributed to freedom, which seems to have proved itself definitive and irreversible.

In the preceding pages we have been speaking of a transformation in philosophical outlook, which as such could only touch a minority in seventeenth-century Europe. But the modern notion of the subject has left no one untouched and unchanged in European society, or indeed the world. In part we can see this as the result of changes, political, economic, social which spread under the influence of minorities first over Western society as a whole, and then over alien societies. But in the European case there was another powerful influence at work which seems to have moved in the same direction. For the majority of non-philosophical men the sense of being defined in relation to a larger order is carried by their religious consciousness, and most powerfully for most men in most ages by their sense of the sacred, by which is meant here the heightened presence of the divine in certain privileged places, times and actions. Catholic Christianity retained the sacred in this sense, both in its own sacraments and in certain pagan festivals suitably 'baptized'. But protestantism and particularly Calvinism classed it with idolatry and waged unconditional war on it. It is probable that the unremitting struggle to desacralize the world in the name of an undivided devotion to God waged by Calvin and his followers helped to destroy the sense that the creation was a locus of meanings in relation to which man had to define himself. Of course the aim of this exercise was very far from forging the self-defining subject, but rather that the believer depend alone on God. But with the waning of Protestant piety, the desacralized world helped to foster its correlative human subjectivity, which now reaped a harvest sown originally for its creator.

In any case, under the impact of philosophical revolution and religious reformation, we can discern the development in these countries of a modern notion of the subject, which I have characterized as self-defining, and correlative to this a vision of things as devoid of intrinsic meaning, of the world as the locus of contingent correlations to be traced by observation, conforming to no a priori pattern. I have spoken above of this vision of the world as 'disenchanted' using Weber's term, or as 'desacralized' in speaking of the religious development. Perhaps I can introduce the term of art 'objectified' here to cover this denial to the world of inherent meaning, that is, the denial that it is to be seen as embodied meaning. The point of using this term is to mark the fact that for the modern view categories of meaning and purpose apply exclusively to the thought and actions of subjects, and cannot find a purchase in the world they think about and act on. To think of things in these terms is to project subjective categories, to set aside these categories is thus to

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'objectify'. This marks a new, modern notion of objectivity correlative to the new subjectivity.

The new notion of objectivity rejected the recourse to final causes, it was mechanistic in the sense of relying on efficient causation only. Connected with this it was atomistic, in that it accounted for change in complex things not by gestalt or holistic properties, but rather by efficient causal relations among constituents. It tended towards homogeneity in that seemingly qualitatively distinct things were to be explained as alternative constructions out of the same basic constituents or basic principles. One of the most spectacular results of the new physics was to collapse the Aristotelian distinction between the supra- and sub-lunar to account for moving planets and falling apples in the same formula. Thus this science was mechanistic, atomistic, homogenizing, and of course saw the shape of things as contingent.

But this notion of objectivity could not be confined to external nature. Man is also an object in nature, as well as the subject of knowledge. Hence the new science breeds a type of understanding of man, mechanistic, atomistic, homogenizing and based on contingency. Hume gives us a prime example of this kind of view of man, in its first mode where the medium of observation was introspective; but the same notions underlie later 'behaviouristic' attempts at a science of man. The attempts at such a science of the radical Enlightenment, of a Helvétius, a Holbach, a Condorcet, a Bentham were founded on this notion of objectivity, and the age of Enlightenment was evolving an anthropology which was an amalgam, not entirely consistent, of two things: the notion of self-defining subjectivity correlative to the new objectivity; and the view of man as part of nature, hence fully under the jurisdiction of this objectivity. These two aspects did not always sit well together. They reinforced each other in support of atomism, an atomistic science of nature matching a political theory whose starting point was the individual in a state of nature. But they seemed to conflict on an issue like that of determinism, for example, where the freedom of man as subject seemed compromised by the strict causal necessity under which he lay as part of nature. And this was reflected in diverging notions of the relevance of nature to practical reason. For Kant, for instance, the promptings of nature stood in contrast to the demands of freedom. While for the mainstream of the Enlightenment, nature as the whole interlocking system of objective reality, in which all beings, including man, had a natural mode of existence which dovetailed with that of all others, provided rather the basic model to man as a natural, desiring being, the blueprint of reason for happiness and hence good.

But in spite of tensions the amalgam held, and these two perspectives, partly converging partly conflicting, combined in different ways to generate a wide gamut of views, from the mildest deism which stressed the spiritual nature and destiny of man to the most radical materialism; from the deepest pessimism

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about the common man's capacity for enlightenment to the wildest Utopian hopes of a world rebuilt by science. These were the views of the era we know of as the Enlightenment.

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This anthropology was the point of attack, or perhaps recoil would be a better term, of two major tendencies in German thought whose reconciliation was the key problem of Hegel's generation. But this is not to say that the radical, mechanistic, materialist Enlightenment was strong in Germany. Quite the contrary. If we think of the French materialists as the fully developed form, then the Enlightenment unfolds in Germany in a mitigated version.

In so far as the radical Enlightenment presupposed a tremendous confidence in human subjectivity and human powers, we can perhaps understand the German variant as a result of German backwardness, the legacy of the Thirty Years War: internal division into a crazy-quilt of often absurdly minuscule states, the slow development of a middle class which could stand on its own, the economic backwardness relative to West Europe, the late cultural development in the vernacular. And obviously some good part of the explanation for the form the Enlightenment took in Germany lies in its religious background. The Lutheran churches never got to the point of head-on opposition, of a knock-down, drag-out fight with the Enlightenment, that French Catholicism so quickly reached. In this respect Germany resembled rather Protestant England. But beyond this, both the Enlightenment in Germany and the reaction to it was shaped in part by an important movement of religious revival, generally referred to as Pietism.

Pietism – which had some affinities to Methodism in the English-speaking world – was a movement of renewal in spiritual life. Starting in the seventeenth century it reached its culmination in the eighteenth. It reacted against the formalism of official Lutheranism, its stress on right beliefs and its concern for the established structures. All this was made secondary to the main point; the inward, heartfelt relation to Christ. Pietism was in this sense another outgrowth of the old German spiritual tradition, going back to the medieval mystics Eckhart and Tauler, and passing through Boehme – a tradition on which Luther himself had drawn – which made central the inner encounter of the soul and God.

It turned to a religion of the heart, one of enthusiastic devotion, of a renewal (*Wiedergeburt*) in which men are filled with the fire of the Spirit. The result was that it found itself allied with the Enlightenment on certain important points, for all the profound difference in spiritual basis between them. Thus Pietism too tended to denigrate the concern with dogma and confessional differences. It too ended up defending the individual, his sincere