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HISTORY AS A SYSTEM

I

HUMAN life is a strange reality concerning which the first thing to be said is that it is the basic reality, in the sense that to it we must refer all others, since all others, effective or presumptive, must in one way or another appear within it.

The most trivial and at the same time the most important note in human life is that man has no choice but to be always doing something to keep himself in existence. Life is given to us; we do not give it to ourselves, rather we find ourselves in it, suddenly and without knowing how. But the life which is given us is not given us ready-made; we must make it for ourselves, each one his own. Life is a task. And the weightiest aspect of these tasks in which life consists is not the necessity of performing them but, in a sense, the opposite: I mean that we find ourselves always under compulsion to do some-

thing but never, strictly speaking, under compulsion to do something in particular, that there is not imposed on us this or that task as there is imposed on the star its course or on the stone its gravitation. Each individual before doing anything must decide for himself and at his own risk what he is going to do. But this decision is impossible unless one possesses certain convictions concerning the nature of things around one, the nature of other men, of oneself. Only in the light of such convictions can one prefer one act to another, can one, in short, live.

It follows that man must ever be grounded on some belief, and that the structure of his life will depend primordially on the beliefs on which he is grounded; and further that the most decisive changes in humanity are changes of belief, the intensifying or weakening of beliefs. The diagnosis of any human existence, whether of an individual, a people, or an age, must begin by establishing the repertory of its convictions. For always in living one sets out from certain convictions. They are the ground beneath our feet, and it is for this reason we say that man is grounded on them. It is man's beliefs that truly constitute his state. I have spoken of them as a repertory to indicate that the plurality of beliefs on which an individual, a people, or an age is grounded never possesses a completely logical articulation, that is to say, does not form a system of ideas such as, for ex-

ample, a philosophy constitutes or aims at constituting. The beliefs that coexist in any human life, sustaining, impelling, and directing it, are on occasion incongruous, contradictory, at the least confused. Be it noted that all these qualifications attach to beliefs in so far as they partake of ideas. But it is erroneous to define belief as an idea. Once an idea has been thought it has exhausted its role and its consistency. The individual, moreover, may think whatever the whim suggests to him, and even many things against his whim. Thoughts arise in the mind spontaneously, without will or deliberation on our part and without producing any effect whatever on our behavior. A belief is not merely an idea that is thought, it is an idea in which one also believes. And believing is not an operation of the intellectual mechanism, but a function of the living being as such, the function of guiding his conduct, his performance of his task.

This observation once made, I can now withdraw my previous expression and say that beliefs, a mere incoherent repertory in so far as they are merely ideas, always constitute a system in so far as they are effective beliefs; in other words, that while lacking articulation from the logical or strictly intellectual point of view, they do nonetheless possess a vital articulation, they *function* as beliefs resting one on another, combining with one another to form a whole: in short, that they

always present themselves as members of an organism, of a structure. This causes them among other things always to possess their own architecture and to function as a hierarchy. In every human life there are beliefs that are basic, fundamental, radical, and there are others derived from these, upheld by them, and secondary to them. If this observation is supremely trivial, the fault is not mine that with all its triviality it remains of the greatest importance. For should the beliefs by which one lives lack structure, since their number in each individual life is legion there must result a mere pullulation hostile to all idea of order and incomprehensible in consequence.

The fact that we should see them, on the contrary, as endowed with a structure and a hierarchy allows us to penetrate their hidden order and consequently to understand our own life and the life of others, that of today and that of other days.

Thus we may now say that the diagnosing of any human existence, whether of an individual, a people, or an age, must begin by an ordered inventory of its system of convictions, and to this end it must establish before all else which belief is fundamental, decisive, sustaining and breathing life into all the others.

Now in order to determine the state of one's beliefs at a given moment the only method we possess is that of comparing this moment with one or more other moments.

The more numerous the terms of comparison the more exact will be the result—another banal observation whose far-reaching consequences will emerge suddenly at the end of this meditation.

II

A comparison of the state of beliefs in which the European finds himself today with that obtaining a mere thirty years ago makes it clear that this has changed profoundly, because the fundamental conviction has changed.

The generation that flourished about the year 1900 was the last of a very long cycle, a cycle which began towards the end of the sixteenth century and was characterized by the fact that men lived on their faith in reason. In what does this faith consist?

If we open the *Discours de la Méthode*, the classical program of the new age, we find that it culminates in the following sentences:

Those long chains of simple and easy conclusions used by the geometers for obtaining their most difficult proofs made me think that everything within the ken of man is interlaced in this same manner and that, if only we refrain from accepting as true what may be not true and from upsetting the order required for deducing one thing from the other, there can be nothing so remote that it will not finally be reached nor so hidden that it will not be discovered.¹

¹ *Oeuvres*, ed. Adam et Tannery, vol. 6, p. 19.

These words are the cockcrow of rationalism, the moving reveille that ushers in a whole new age, our so-called modern age, that modern age whose death agony, whose swan song, as it seems to many, we are today witnessing.

There is at least no denying that between the Cartesian attitude of mind and our own no slight difference exists. What joy, what a tone of vigorous challenge to the universe, what an early-morning presumptuousness these magnificent words of Descartes reveal! The reader has observed: apart from the divine mysteries which his courtesy bids him leave on one side, to this man there is no problem that cannot be solved. He assures us that in the universe there are no arcana, no unconquerable secrets before which humanity must halt in defenseless terror. The world that surrounds man all about, existence within which constitutes his life, is to become transparent, even to its farthest recesses, to the human mind. At last man is to know the truth about everything. It suffices that he should not lose heart at the complexity of the problems, and that he should allow no passion to cloud his mind. If with serene self-mastery he uses the apparatus of his intellect, if in particular he uses it in orderly fashion, he will find that his faculty of thought is *ratio*, reason, and that in reason he possesses the almost magic power of reducing everything to clarity, of turning what is most opaque to crystal, penetrating it by analysis until

it is become self-evident. According to this, the world of reality and the world of thought are each a cosmos corresponding one to the other, each compact and continuous, wherein nothing is abrupt, isolated, or inaccessible, but rather such that from any point in it we may without intermission and without leaping pass to all other points and contemplate the whole. Man with his reason may thus plunge tranquilly into the abysmal depths of the universe, certain of extracting from the remotest problem, from the closest enigma, the essence of its truth, even as the Coromandel diver plunges into the deeps of ocean to reappear straightway bearing between his teeth the pearl of great price.

In the closing years of the sixteenth century and these early years of the seventeenth in which Descartes is meditating Western man believes, then, that the world possesses a rational structure, that is to say, that reality possesses an organization coincident with the organization of the human intellect, taking this, of course, in its purest form, that of mathematical reason. Here accordingly is a marvelous key giving man a power over things around him that is theoretically illimitable. Such a discovery was a pretty stroke of fortune. For suppose that Europe had not then come by this belief. In the fifteenth century it had lost its faith in God, in revelation, either because man had completely lost that faith or because it

had ceased to be in him a living faith. Theologians make a very shrewd distinction, one capable of throwing light on not a few things of today, between a live and a sluggish faith. Generalizing this, I should formulate it thus: we believe in something with a live faith when that belief is sufficient for us to live by, and we believe in something with a dead, a sluggish faith when, without having abandoned it, being still grounded on it, it no longer acts efficaciously on our lives. It is become a drag, a dead weight; still part of us, yet useless as lumber in the attic of the soul. We no longer rest our existence on that something believed in; the stimuli, the pointers we live by no longer spring spontaneously from that faith. The proof is that we are constantly forgetting we still believe in it, whereas a living faith is the constant and most active presence of the entity we believe in. (Hence the perfectly natural phenomenon that the mystic calls "the presence of God." For a living love is likewise distinguished from a lifeless, dragging love in this, that the object loved is present to us without need of trance or fear of eclipse. We do not need to go in search of it with our attention; on the contrary, we have difficulty in removing it from before our inner eye. And this is not to say that we are always nor even frequently *thinking* about it, but simply that we constantly "count on it.")

An illustration of this difference in the present situation of the European I shall shortly adduce.²

Throughout the Middle Ages the European had lived on revelation. Lacking it, limited to his own naked strength, he would have felt incapable of dealing with the mysterious surroundings that made up his world, with the misfortunes and trials of existence. But he believed with a living faith that an all-powerful, all-knowing being would unfold to him gratuitously all that was essential to his life. We may follow the vicissitudes of this faith and witness, almost generation by generation, its progressive decay. It is a melancholy story. Gradually the living faith ceases to take nutriment, loses its color, becomes paralyzed, until, from whatever motives —these lie outside my present inquiry—towards the middle of the fifteenth century that living faith is clearly seen to have changed to a tired, ineffective faith, if indeed the individual soul has not uprooted it entirely. The man of that age begins to perceive that revelation does not suffice to illumine his relations to the world; once more he is conscious of being lost in the trackless forest of the universe, face to face with which he lacks alike a guide and a mediator. The fifteenth and the six-

² In his book *On Liberty*, chap. 2, John Stuart Mill makes very opportune use of this same distinction, expressed in the same terms of "living faith" and "dead, inert faith."

teenth centuries are, therefore, two centuries of tremendous restlessness, of fierce disquiet, two centuries, as we should say today, of crisis. From this crisis Western man is saved by a new faith, a new belief: faith in reason, in the *nuove scienze*. Man, having again fallen, is born again. The Renaissance is the parturient disquiet of a new confidence based on physico-mathematical science, the new mediator between man and the world.

III

Beliefs constitute the basic stratum, that which lies deepest, in the architecture of our life. By them we live, and by the same token we rarely think of them. Whatever is still to us more or less in debate, that we think of. Hence we say that we *hold* such and such ideas, whereas rather than holding our beliefs we are them.

One may symbolize the individual life as a bank of issue. The bank lives on the credit of a gold reserve which is rarely seen, which lies at the bottom of metal coffers hidden in the vaults of the building. The most elementary caution will suggest that from time to time the effective condition of these guaranties—of these *cre-dences*, one might say, that are the basis of *credit*—be passed in review.

Today it is become urgent that we should do the same with the faith in reason by which the European, obedient

to tradition—a tradition of close on three centuries—has been living. It may be said that until twenty years ago the state of this belief had not suffered modification in its general outline, but that in the last few years it has changed most profoundly. So much is demonstrated by innumerable facts, facts that are only too well known and that it would be depressing to enunciate once more.

It will be superfluous to point out that in speaking of the traditional faith in reason and of its present-day modification I am not referring to what happens in this or that individual as such. Apart from what individuals as individuals, that is to say, each for himself and on his own account, may believe, there exists always a collective state of belief. This social faith may or may not coincide with that felt by such and such an individual. The decisive factor in the matter is that whatever may be the private belief of each one of us we are confronted with a state of faith collectively constituted and established, a faith, in short, that is socially operative.

The faith in science to which I refer was not merely and firstly an individual opinion. It was, on the contrary, a collective opinion, and when something is a collective or social opinion it is a reality independent of individuals, outside them as the stones on the ground, a reality with which individuals must reckon willy-nilly. Our personal opinion may run counter to social opinion, but this

will not invalidate one iota the reality of the latter. What constitutes and gives a specific character to collective opinion is the fact that its existence does not depend on its acceptance or rejection by any given individual. From the viewpoint of each individual life public belief has, as it were, the appearance of a physical object. The tangible reality, so to speak, of collective belief does not consist in its acceptance by you or by me; instead it is it which, whether we acquiesce or not, imposes on us its reality and forces us to reckon with it. To this characteristic of social faith I apply the term "operative." A law is said to be operative when, far from its effectiveness hinging on my recognition of it, it acts and functions independently of my adhesion. And in like manner collective belief has no need of my belief in it as a particular individual in order to exist and weigh upon me and even, perchance, crush me. If now it be agreed, for our better understanding, to apply the term "social dogma" to the content of a collective belief, we are in a position to continue our meditation.

When, equipped with these instrumental concepts, we compare the situation in which the European found himself about the year 1910 with that of today, the perception of the change, the mutation, that has occurred ought to cause in us a salutary terror. A mere twenty years, that is to say only a portion of a man's life, in itself so

short, have sufficed to invert the order of things to the point that, whereas then one might in any part of Europe have invoked faith in science and the rights of science as the maximum human value, and this urge functioned automatically, the social body accepting in all docility its imperative and reacting thereto with efficacy, energy, and promptitude, today there are already nations where such an invocation would provoke only smiles—nations that some years ago were considered precisely as being in the van of science—and I do not believe there is any, at the time of writing, in which it would call forth even a throb from the social body.

IV

Science is in danger. In saying this I do not think I exaggerate. For this is not to say that Europe collectively has made a radical end of its belief in science, but only that its faith, once living, is in our day become sluggish. This is sufficient to cause science to be in danger and to make it impossible for the scientist to go on living as he has lived till now, sleepwalking at his work, believing that the society around him still supports, sustains, and venerates him. What has happened to bring about such a situation? Science today knows with incredible precision much of what is happening on remote stars and galaxies. Science is rightly proud of the fact, and be-

cause of it, although with less right, it spreads its peacock feathers at academic gatherings. But meanwhile it has come about that this same science, once a living social faith, is now almost looked down upon by society in general. And although this has not happened on Sirius but only on our own planet, it is not, I conceive, bereft of importance. Science cannot be merely science about Sirius; it claims also to be science about man. What then has science, reason, got to say today, with reasonable precision, concerning this so urgent fact that so intimately concerns it? Just nothing. Science has no clear knowledge on the matter. One perceives the enormity of the position, the shame of it. The upshot is that, where great human changes are concerned, science, strictly so called, has got nothing exact to say. The thing is so enormous that it straightway reveals to us the reason. For it causes us to note that the science, the reason, in which modern man placed his social faith is, speaking strictly, merely physico-mathematical science together with biological science, the latter based directly on the former and benefiting, in its weakness, from the other's prestige—in short, summing both up together, what is called natural science or reason.

The present position of physical science or reason is in consequence somewhat paradoxical. If there is anything in the repertory of human activities and pursuits

that has not proved a failure, it is precisely this science, when one considers it circumscribed within its genuine territory, nature. Within this order and ambit, far from having failed, it has transcended all our hopes. For the first time in history the powers of realization, of achievement, have outstripped those of mere fantasy. Science has achieved things that irresponsible imaginings had never so much as dreamed of. This is so unquestionable that one has difficulty in understanding straightway why man is not today on his knees before science as before some magic power. The fact remains that he is not on his knees; on the contrary, he is beginning to turn his back. He does not deny, he is not unaware of, its marvelous power, its triumph over nature, but he realizes at the same time that nature is only one dimension of human life and that a resounding success with regard to nature does not preclude failure with regard to the totality of our existence. Life at any instant is an inexorable balance, in which "physical reason" (*la razón física*) for all its partial splendor does not rule out the possibility of a heavy deficit. Even more, the lack of equilibrium between the perfection of its partial efficiency and its failure from the comprehensive point of view, which is final, is such in my opinion that it has contributed to the aggravation of our universal disquiet.

Man thus finds himself, when confronted with physi-

cal reason, in a state of mind comparable to that of Christina of Sweden, as described by Leibnitz, when, after her abdication, she caused a coin to be struck bearing the effigy of a crown and had these words inscribed in the exergue: *Non mi bisogna e non mi basta.*

In the upshot the paradox resolves itself into a supremely simple observation. What has not collapsed in physics is physics. What has collapsed in it is the rhetoric, the trimmings of childish presumption, of irrational and arbitrary additions it gave rise to, what, many years ago, I styled "the terrorism of the laboratory." This is why ever since I began to write I have combated what I called scientific *Utopianism*. Open, for example, *El tema de nuestro tiempo* at the chapter entitled "The historic sense of Einstein's theory," written about 1921. There the following passage will be found:

It is incomprehensible that science, whose only pleasure lies in attaining to a true image of things, should nourish itself on illusions. I recall a detail whose influence on my thought was decisive. Many years ago I was reading a lecture of the physiologist Loeb on tropism. The tropism is a concept which has been invoked to describe and throw light on the law governing the elemental movements of the infusoria. The concept serves, indifferently well and with corrections and additions, to help us understand some of these phenomena. But at the close of this lecture Loeb adds: "The day will come when what we now call moral acts in man will be explained simply as tropisms." Such temerity perturbed me exceedingly, for it opened my eyes to many other judgments of modern science that are guilty, if less

ostentatiously, of the same error. So then, I thought, a concept like the tropism, which is scarce capable of plumbing the secret of phenomena so simple as the antics of the infusoria, may at some vague future date suffice to explain phenomena as mysterious and complex as man's ethical acts! What sense is there here? Science has to solve its problems in the present, not transport us to the Greek kalends. If its present methods are insufficient to master now the enigmas of the universe, discretion would suggest that they be replaced by other and more effective ones. But the science *à la mode* is full of problems which are left intact because they are incompatible with its methods. As if it was the former that were under obligation to subordinate themselves to the latter, and not the other way round! Science is full of achronisms, of Greek kalends.

When we emerge from a science so devoutly simple, bowing in idolatrous worship before pre-established methods, and approach the thought of Einstein there comes upon us as it were a fresh morning breeze. Einstein's attitude is radically different from that of tradition. With the dash of a young athlete we see him make straight for his problems and take them by the horns, using the method that lies nearest to his hand. Out of the apparent defects and limitations of science he draws virtue and tactical efficiency.

From this idea of the Greek kalends all my philosophic thought has emanated. There in germ is my whole conception of life as the basic reality and of knowledge as an internal—and not an independent or Utopian—function of life. Just as Einstein was then telling us that in physics it is necessary to elaborate concepts such as will make absolute motion impossible (absolute motion is immeasurable and before what cannot be measured physics is impotent), I considered it essential to

elaborate a philosophy that should take its point of departure, its formal principle, from the exclusion of the Greek kalends. Because life is the opposite of these kalends. Life is haste and has urgent need to know what it is up against, and it is out of this urgency that truth must derive its method. The idea of progress, placing truth in a vague tomorrow, has proved a dulling opiate to humanity. Truth is what is true now and not what remains to be discovered in an undetermined future. Mr. Loeb—and his whole generation is with him—gives up his claim to a present truth of morality on the strength of the future attaining to a physics of morality: a curious way of existing at the expense of posterity while leaving one's own life shorn of foundations, of roots, of any profound implications in the scheme of things. The viciousness of this attitude is so radical that it appears already in the "provisional morality" of Descartes. And so it happens that the first blow directed against the superficial framework of our civilization, our economics, our morals, our politics, finds man possessed of no truths of his own, of no clear, firm position on anything of importance.

The only thing he believed in was physical science, and when this received the urgent call to propound its truth on the most human problems, it did not know what to say. And suddenly Western man has received the im-

pression of losing his footing, of finding himself without support, and has known a panic terror and believed himself to be sinking, making shipwreck in the void.

And yet, a measure of serenity is all that is needed for our feet once more to experience the delicious sensation of touching hard, solid mother earth, an element capable of sustaining man. As always, it is essential—and sufficient—instead of giving way to panic and losing one's head, to convert into a source of support the very factor that had engendered the impression of an abyss. Physical science can throw no clear light on the human element. Very well. This means simply that we must shake ourselves free, radically free, from the physical, the natural, approach to the human element. Let us instead accept this in all its spontaneity, just as we see it and come upon it. In other words, the collapse of physical reason leaves the way clear for vital, historical reason.³

V

Nature is a thing, a great thing, that is composed of many lesser things. Now, whatever be the differences between things, they all have one basic feature in common, which consists simply in the fact that things *are*, they

³ The form I first gave to this thought, in my youth, may be found in *El tema de nuestro tiempo*, 1923 (English translation by James Cleugh, 1932).

have their being. And this signifies not only that they exist, that there they are, in front of us, but also that they possess a given, fixed structure or consistency. Given a stone, there exists forthwith, for all to see, what a stone is. Its every change and mutation, world without end, will be in specific combinations of its fundamental consistency. The stone can never be something new and different. This consistency, given and fixed once and for all, is what we customarily understand when we speak of the being of a thing. An alternative expression is the word "nature." And the task of natural science is to penetrate beneath changing appearances to that permanent nature or texture.

When naturalist reason studies man it seeks, in consistence with itself, to reveal his nature. It observes that man has a body, which is a thing, and hastens to submit it to physics; and since this body is also an organism, it hands it over to biology. It observes further that in man as in animals there functions a certain mechanism incorporeally, confusedly attached to the body, the psychic mechanism, which is also a thing, and entrusts its study to psychology, a natural science. But the fact is that this has been going on for three hundred years and that all the naturalist studies on man's body and soul put together have not been of the slightest use in throwing light on any of our most strictly human feelings, on what

each individual calls his own life, that life which, intermingling with others, forms societies, that in their turn, persisting, make up human destiny. The prodigious achievement of natural science in the direction of the knowledge of things contrasts brutally with the collapse of this same natural science when faced with the strictly human element. The human element escapes physico-mathematical reason as water runs from a sieve.

And here we have the explanation why our faith in reason has entered upon a phase of lamentable decadence. Man cannot wait any longer. He demands that science illumine for him the problems of humanity. At bottom he is somewhat tired by now of stars and nervous reactions and atoms. The earliest generations of rationalists believed that with their physical science they could throw light on human destiny. Descartes himself wrote a treatise *De homine*. Today we know that all the marvels of the natural sciences, inexhaustible though they be in principle, must always come to a full stop before the strange reality of human life. Why? If all things have given up a large part of their secret to physical science, why does this alone hold out so stoutly? The explanation must go deep, down to the roots. Perchance it is no less than this: that man is not a thing, that it is false to talk of human nature, that man has no nature. I conceive that a physicist, on hearing this, may well feel his hair stand

on end, since it signifies, in other words, an assertion that physics is radically incompetent to speak of man. But it is useless to shelter behind illusions: whether our consciousness of this be clear or not so clear, whether we suspect or not the existence of another mode of knowledge, another reason capable of speaking of man, the conviction of this incompetence is today a fact of the first magnitude on the European horizon. Physicists in the presence of it may feel irritated or pained—although both attitudes may here seem somewhat puerile—but this conviction is the historical precipitate of three centuries of failure.

Human life, it would appear then, is not a thing, has not a nature, and in consequence we must make up our minds to think of it in terms of categories and concepts that will be *radically* different from such as shed light on the phenomena of matter. The enterprise is no easy one, since for the last three centuries “physicism” has accustomed us to leaving behind us, as an entity having neither importance nor reality, precisely this strange reality of human life. And so, while the naturalists devoted themselves with pious absorption to their professional tasks, the whim has taken this strange reality to veer to another point of the compass, and on enthusiasm for science there have followed lukewarmness and aversion. Tomorrow, who knows, it may be frank hostility.

VI

It will be said that the more patent became the resistance of the human phenomenon to physical science, the more prominent became another form of science opposed to this: against the natural sciences, in effect, there arose and developed the so-called sciences of the spirit, the moral or cultural sciences. To this I reply, to begin with, that these sciences of the spirit, *Geisteswissenschaften*, have not so far been successful in moving the European to belief in the way that the natural sciences were.

And this is easily understood. The representatives of the spiritual sciences were combating the avowed intent of the others to investigate the human element by means of naturalistic ideas; but it happens that the spiritual sciences have in fact represented so far no more than a disguised attempt to do the same. Let me explain.

Geist? Wer ist der Bursche? asked Schopenhauer, with an ill-humored insolence that was not lacking in common sense. This great Utopian concept of the spirit sought to oppose itself to nature. One felt intuitively that nature was not the only reality and, above all, that it was not the primary or fundamental one. The more one got to grips with it, the more it appeared to depend on the human element. German idealism, like the positivism

of Comte, signifies the attempt to place man before nature. It was the former that gave man, in so far as he is not nature, the name *Geist*, spirit.

But it happened that in the effort to comprehend the human element as a spiritual reality things did not go any better: human phenomena showed the same resistance, the same stubborn reluctance to let themselves be hemmed in by concepts. Further, it was a privilege reserved to the thought of that age to indulge in the most scandalous and irresponsible Utopias. One readily appreciates Schopenhauer's ill-humor and insolence. Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and Comte's "law of the three estates" are, beyond a doubt, two works of genius. In affixing to them this qualification of genius, however, all we are clearly doing is to applaud a man's magnificent dexterity as such, to applaud him for his agility, for what he has of the juggler or the athlete. If we study these works, chiefly Hegel's, from the decisive point of view, that of intellectual responsibility, and consider them as symptomatic of a moral climate, we soon perceive that they would have been impossible, *ceteris paribus*, in any normal epoch of thought, in any age of restraint, proportion, and sensitive respect for the function of the intellect.

I am bold to say this solely as an extrinsic indication of the fact that the interpretation of man as a spiritual

reality could not but be violent, arbitrary, and a failure. Because in this context it is not permissible to continue using the word "spirit" vaguely; it must needs be referred to the cycle of exact meanings it has borne in the philosophy of the past two centuries.

If now we ask why the concept of spirit has shown itself insufficient to explain the human element we are led to the following fundamental consideration.

When the knights-errant of the spirit sallied forth to wage war on naturalism, determined to give a scrupulous representation of human phenomena in their genuine essence and putting far from them the concepts and categories that nature imposes on our thinking, they did not take heed that, as they set out, they had already left the enemy behind. In nature they saw only certain peculiar attributes, spatiality, force, their sensorial manifestation, and the like, and they believed it sufficient to replace these by other antagonistic attributes, *cogitatio*, consciousness, apperception, and the like, in order to place themselves outside nature. In short, they were guilty of the same mistake Descartes made when he held it enough, in order to define the self, to oppose it as a *res cogitans* to the *res extensa*. But can the fundamental difference between that strange reality, man, the *ego*, and that other reality, things, consist in the fact that the *ego* thinks while things have extent? What difficulty

would there be in the *res* that thinks having extent and the *res* that has extent thinking? Descartes is wont to add, astutely, that the *res* that thinks has no extent and the *res* that has extent does not think. But this denial, coming as an afterthought, is wholly arbitrary, and Spinoza, who was not easily imposed upon, calmly draws the inference that one and the same *res*—*Natura sive Deus*—thinks and has extent. To compose the issue it would be necessary to do what Descartes did not do, to wit, to ask oneself what is this *res* business, what is its structure, before proceeding to classify it as thinking or as having extent. For if the attributes of *cogitatio* and *extensio* are in such wise antagonistic that they cannot coexist in the same *res*, the suspicion arises that each of them must react on the very structure of the *res* as *res*. Or, which comes to the same thing, that the term *res* is equivocal in both expressions.

Now, the concept *res* had already been established by traditional ontology. The error made by Descartes and by the knights-errant of the spirit lay in not carrying down to bedrock their reform of philosophy, in applying unthinkingly to the new reality they aspired to establish—*pensée, Geist*—the old doctrine of being. Can an entity that consists in thinking have *being* in the same sense as one that consists in having extent has *being*? Apart from the difference implied in the fact that one thinks while

the other has extent, are they not differentiated also in their very being, as entities *sensu stricto*?

In traditional ontology the term *res* is always linked with the term *natura*, whether as a synonym or in the sense that *natura* is the real *res*, the beginning of *res*. The concept of nature we know to be of pure Greek descent: it is first stabilized in Aristotle, then, modified by the Stoics, it comes into the Renaissance, and through that mighty portal inundates the modern age. In Robert Boyle it finds the expression that still holds: “*natura* is the rule or system of rules according to which phenomena behave—in short, their law.”⁴

To go back over the history of the concept of nature is not possible here, and any summary of it must be futile. For the sake of brevity I shall content myself with a single allusion: is it not surprising that the term “nature” should have come, with unbroken continuity, from meaning what it meant to Aristotle to mean the law of phenomena? Is not the distance between the two meanings enormous? That distance, be it noted, implies nothing less than the whole change in our way of thinking of the universe from ancient to modern man. What then, down this long evolution, has remained constant in the concept of nature?

⁴ Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*, vol. 2, p. 433.

There are few themes in which one may see so clearly as here the extent to which European man is heir to the Greek. Inheritance, however, is not only treasure; it is, at the same time, a charge and a bond. Concealed in the concept of nature we have received the bonds that make us the slaves of Hellenic destiny.

Greek thought is formulated in Parmenides. Parmenides represents beyond question the pure essence of Hellenism, for it is a fact that Eleaticism has always held sway in Hellenic minds. What was not Eleaticism, simple or compound, was merely opposition. This Greek destiny continues to weigh on us, and in spite of some notable rebellions we are still prisoners within the magic circle described by Eleatic ontology.

Ever since Parmenides, the orthodox thinker in search of an object's being holds that he is searching for a fixed, static consistency,⁵ hence something that the entity *already* is, which already composes or constitutes it. The prototype of this mode of being, possessed of the characteristics of fixity, stability, and actuality (a being *already* what it is), was the being of mathematical concepts and objects, an invariable being, a being-always-the-same. Since observation showed that the things in the world around were changeable, were "movement," he

⁵ Alongside the term *existence* I use that of *consistency*. The entity that exists has a consistency, that is to say, it *consists of* something or other.

begins by denying their reality. Aristotle, more prudent, renounces such absolutism and adopts a solution of the *juste milieu*. In the changeable object he seeks that which in the midst of change does not vary, that which in its movement remains motionless. This accordingly is what he called the "nature" of things, that which in the real object *appears* to shrink from having a being similar to the being of mathematical concepts and objects. The *φύσις* was the invariable principle of variations. In this way it became possible to retain the fundamental Eleaticism of being and yet to conceive as realities those objects which in the eyes of absolute Eleaticism lacked authentic reality, *οὐσία*. The idea of time, interposing itself between the invariable *οὐσία* and the diverse states of the object, served as a bridge between the latent unity of being and its apparent multiplicity. The *res* was thus conceived of as something possessing at heart—in its *ἀρχή*—the same ontological condition as the concept and the triangle: identity, radical invariability, stability—the profound tranquillity that the term *being* signified to the Greek.

The process that causes the *natura* of Aristotelianism to evolve into Boyle's stable rule or law of unstable phenomena, far from being a degeneration, is a purification of the original concept and as it were a sincere confession of it. Thus in Comte and Stuart Mill everything hangs as from a nail on "the invariability of the laws of nature."

The nature of positivism is already pure and declared "invariability," a being fixed, static . . . Eleatic.⁶

Now, in laying down as a condition of reality, before admitting it as such, that it should consist in an element of identity, Parmenides and the orthodox Greeks in general revealed their colossal arbitrariness. Into the origin of what I call sublime "arbitrariness" I do not propose here to inquire, although the theme is one of infinite attractiveness. The word is an express concept, and the concept is a reality that is peculiar among realities in consisting of identity, one might say in being made of identity. When we speak of reality—*onto-logy*—we are under obligation to be faithful at once to the conditions of the reality of which we are thinking and to the conditions of the thought with which we "manipulate" the reality.

One can readily understand that philosophy, in its first phase, should have lacked the agility necessary to distinguish, in thinking of reality, between that element in the resulting thought that belonged to the intellect and that which belonged properly to the object. Until Kant, strictly speaking, no one had even begun to see clearly that thought is not a copy and mirror of reality but a transitive operation performed on it, a surgical intervention.

⁶ I do not enter here into the question whether this is compatible with the relativism of Comte. This is a theme which I hope to develop in a forthcoming study on *The Unknown Comte*.

Hence philosophy since Kant has embarked on what Plato would call its δεύτερος πλοῦς, its second voyage, its second apprenticeship. This rests on the observation that if there be possible a knowledge of authentic reality, αὐτὸν τὸ ὄν (and only philosophic knowledge claims to be such), it must consist in a duplicate thinking, a going and coming—that is to say, in a thinking that, having once thought something concerning reality, turns back on the thought and strips it of what is mere intellectual form, leaving only the intuition of reality in all its nakedness. This is fearsome, and paradoxical, but there is no other way out. In the formidable crusade for the liberation of man that constitutes the mission of the intellect there has come a moment when man needs to deliver himself from his most intimate slavery, to wit, from himself. It follows from this that, precisely because Kant has taught us that thought has its own forms and projects these on to the real, the end of the process initiated by him consists in uprooting from reality all those forms that are at once inevitable and foreign to it, and in learning to think with a mind ever on the alert, in an unceasing *modus ponendo tollens*. In short, we must learn to disintellectualize the real if we are to be faithful to it.

Eleaticism was the radical intellectualization of being. It is this that constitutes the magic circle already referred to, that we so urgently need to rise above. In naturalism

what prevents our conceiving of human phenomena, what veils them to our minds, is not the secondary attributes of things, *res*, but the very idea of *res* founded on identical being and, since identical, fixed, static, predetermined. Wherever this subtle attribute persists, there naturalism, invariable being, is still to be found. Naturalism is, at bottom, intellectualism, i. e., the projection on to the real of the mode of being peculiar to concepts. Let us renounce valiantly, joyously, this convenient presumption that the real is logical and recognize that thought alone is logical.⁷ Even the mathematical object presents chasms of illogicality as tremendous as the "labyrinth of the difficulties of continuity" and all the problems that inspired Brouwer's attempt to overthrow the *principium tertii exclusi*. Today physics, too, has sprung a dramatic surprise on us with its states of indeterminateness of the atomic elements.

This article, I need not point out, is not a treatise, quite the contrary; it is a series of theses that are submitted without defense to the meditative fair play of the reader. I believe nonetheless that some meaning will now attach to my previous enigmatic assertion according to which the concept of spirit is a disguised naturalism and in con-

⁷ Vide "La Filosofía de la Historia" de Hegel y la historiología," *Revista de Occidente*, February, 1928.

sequence inoperative when faced with naturalistic conceptions, its presumed enemies.

Spirit, if it is anything in this world, is identity, and hence *res*, a thing—though as subtle and ethereal as you please. Spirit possesses a static consistency: it is already, to begin with, what it is going to be. The revolt of the human element against any conception of it as static was so obvious that soon, with Leibnitz, there came the attempt to rise above the static by making spirit consist in dynamic activity.⁸ A vain attempt, for that activity, like all activity, is always one and the same, fixed, prescribed, ontologically motionless! Hegel's movement of the spirit is a pure fiction, since it is a movement within the spirit, whose consistency lies in its fixed, static, pre-established truth. Now the entity whose being consists in identical being evidently possesses already, to begin with, all it needs in order to be. For this reason identical being is substantive being, substance, a being that suffices to itself, sufficient being. This is the *thing*. Spirit is no other than a thing. It appears indeed that other things are things in virtue of their materiality, their spatiality, their force. But all this would serve them in no stead if they were not

⁸ Only Fichte constitutes a case apart. One is aware that he touches the true being of life, but his intellectualism does not allow him to see what it is he is touching, and he is compelled forcibly to think Eleatically. Whence the pathetic resemblance to a blind traveler we see in Fichte as he journeys across the mountain ranges of metaphysics.

also and previously identical, *that is to say, concepts*. The *proto-thing*, the *Urding*, is the intellect. It identifies, thing-ifies—*ver-dinglicht*—all the rest.

The knights-errant of the spirit have no right to the revulsion, that amusing Plotinian revulsion, they feel where nature is concerned. Because the profound error of naturalism is the reverse of what is supposed: it does not consist in our treating ideas as though they were corporeal realities, but on the contrary in our treating realities—corporeal or no—as if they were ideas, concepts, in short, identities.

When Heine, assuredly after reading Hegel, asked his coachman, "What are ideas?" the answer he got was: "Ideas? . . . Ideas are the things they put into your head." But the fact is that we can say, more formally, that things are the ideas that come out of our heads and are taken by us as realities.

The need to rise above, to transcend the idea of nature comes precisely from this, that this idea can have no validity as an authentic reality: it is something relative to the human intellect, which in its turn has no detached, independent reality—herein lies the error of all idealism or "spiritualism"—but is only real when functioning in a human life, by whose constitutive urgencies it is moved. Nature is a transitory interpretation that man has given to what he finds around him in life. To this then, as to a

radical reality, including and preforming all others, we are referred.

Faced with this, what we are indeed now conscious of is a liberation from naturalism, because we have learnt to immunize ourselves from intellectualism and its Greek kalends. Here is the "fact" previous to all facts, that which holds all others in solution and from which all flow: human life as it is lived by each one of us. *Hic Rhodus, hic salta*. Our need is to think on it with urgency, just as we behold it in all its primary nakedness, by the aid of concepts bent only on describing it and which admit no imperative whatever from traditional ontology.

That undertaking, needless to say, is not one that can be pursued within the bounds of the present article. My purpose here is limited to the suggestion of so much as is indispensable if my title—"History as a System"—is to have an exact meaning.

VII

Physico-mathematical reason, whether in its crude form of naturalism or in its beatific form of spiritualism, was in no state to confront human problems. By its very constitution it could do no other than search for man's nature. And, naturally, it did not find it. For man has no nature. Man is not his body, which is a thing, nor his soul, psyche, conscience, or spirit, which is also a thing. Man

is no thing, but a drama—his life, a pure and universal happening which happens to each one of us and in which each one in his turn is nothing but happening. All things, be they what they may, are now mere interpretations which he exercises himself in giving to whatever he comes upon. Things he does not come upon: he poses or supposes them. What he comes upon are pure difficulties and pure facilities for existing. Existence itself is not presented to him ready-made, as it is to the stone; rather, shall we say, looping the loop begun in the opening words of this article, on coming up against the fact of his existence, on existence happening to him, all he comes up against, all that happens to him is the realization that he has no choice but to do something in order not to cease existing. This shows that the mode of being of life, even as simple existing, is not a *being already*, since the only thing that is given us and that *is* when there is human life is the having to make it, each one for himself.⁹ Life is a gerundive, not a participle: a *faciendum*, not a *factum*. Life is a task. Life, in fact, sets us plenty of tasks. When

⁹ Bergson, the least Eleatic of thinkers, whom we must allow today to have been right on so many points, constantly uses the expression *l'être en se faisant*. But a comparison of his sense with that which I here give to the same words shows a radical difference. In Bergson the term *se faisant* is merely a synonym of *devenir*. In my text *making oneself* is not merely *becoming* but in addition the way in which human reality *becomes*, which is the effective and literal *making oneself*, a *fabricating oneself*, we might say.

the doctor, surprised at Fontenelle's having reached the age of a hundred in full health, asked him what he felt, the centenarian replied: *Rien, rien du tout . . . seulement une certaine difficulté d'être*. We ought to generalize and say that life always, and not only at a hundred, consists in *difficulté d'être*. Its mode of being is formally a being difficult, a being which consists in problematic toil. Compared with the sufficient being of the substance or thing, life is an indigent being, an entity which possesses, properly speaking, only needs, *Bedürfnisse*. The star, on the other hand, continues ever on the line of its orbit, asleep like a child in the cradle.

At every moment of my life there open before me divers possibilities: I can do this or that. If I do this, I shall be A the moment after; if I do that, I shall be B. At the present moment the reader may stop reading me or may go on. And, however slight the importance of this article, according as he does the one or the other the reader will be A or will be B, will have made of himself an A or a B. Man is the entity that makes itself, an entity which traditional ontology only stumbled upon precisely as its course was drawing to a close, and which it in consequence gave up the attempt to understand: the *causa sui*. With this difference, that the *causa sui* had only to "exert itself" in being the *cause* of itself and not in determining

what *self* it was going to cause. It had, to begin with, a *self* previously determined and invariable, consistent, for example, to infinity.

But man must not only make himself: the weightiest thing he has to do is to determine *what* he is going to be. He is *causa sui* to the second power. By a coincidence that is not casual, the doctrine of the living being, when it seeks in tradition for concepts that are still more or less valid, finds only those which the doctrine of the divine being tried to formulate. If the reader has resolved now to go on reading into the next moment, it will be, in the last instance, because doing this is what is most in accordance with the general program he has mapped out for his life, and hence with the man of determination he has resolved to be. This vital program is the *ego* of each individual, his choice out of divers possibilities of being which at every instant open before him.¹⁰

Concerning these possibilities of being the following remarks fall to be made:

1. That they likewise are not presented to me. I must find them for myself, either on my own or through the medium of those of my fellows with whom my life brings me in contact. I invent projects of being and of doing in the light of circumstance. This alone I come upon, this

¹⁰ *Vide my Goethe desde dentro*, 1932.

alone is given me: circumstance.¹¹ It is too often forgotten that man is impossible without imagination, without the capacity to invent for himself a conception of life, to "ideate" the character he is going to be. Whether he be original or a plagiarist, man is the novelist of himself.¹²

2. That among these possibilities I must choose. Hence, I am free. But, be it well understood, I am free *by compulsion*, whether I wish to be or not. Freedom is not an activity pursued by an entity that, apart from and previous to such pursuit, is already possessed of a fixed being. To be free means to be lacking in constitutive identity, not to have subscribed to a determined being, to be able to be other than what one was, to be unable to install oneself once and for all in any given being. The only attribute of the fixed, stable being in the free being is this constitutive instability.

In order to speak, then, of man's being we must first elaborate a non-Eleatic concept of being, as others have elaborated a non-Euclidean geometry. The time has come for the seed sown by Heraclitus to bring forth its mighty harvest.

Man is an infinitely plastic entity of which one may

¹¹ *Vide Meditaciones del Quijote*, 1914. In this early book of mine it is already suggested that I am no more than one ingredient in that radical reality "my life," whose other ingredient is circumstance.

¹² Be it recalled that the Stoics spoke of an "imagining of oneself," *φαντασία ἑαυτοῦ*.

make what one will, precisely because of itself it is nothing save only the mere potentiality to be "as you like." Let the reader pass in review for a moment all the things that man has been—that is to say, that he has made of himself—and has then ceased to be—that is to say, has cast off from himself—from the paleolithic "savage" to the young *surréaliste* of Paris. I do not say that at any moment he may make of himself anything whatever. At each moment there open before him limited possibilities—what these limits are we shall see straightway. But if instead of one moment we take all moments, it is impossible to see what frontiers can be set to human plasticity. From the paleolithic female there have issued Madame Pompadour and Lucile de Chateaubriand, from the indigene of Brazil, unable to count above five, have come Newton and Henri Poincaré. Lessening the distance in time, be it remembered that in 1873 the liberal Stuart Mill, in 1903 the most liberal Herbert Spencer, were still alive, and that already in 1921 Stalin and Mussolini were in power.

Meanwhile man's body and psyche, his *nature*, have experienced no change of importance to which these effective mutations may be clearly ascribed. What has taken place, on the contrary, is the "substantial" change in the reality "human life" implied by man's passing from the belief that he must exist in a world composed only of

arbitrary wills to the belief that he must exist in a world where there are "nature," invariable consistencies, identity, etc. Human life is thus not an entity that changes accidentally, rather the reverse: in it the "substance" is precisely change, which means that it cannot be thought of Eleatically as substance. Life being a "drama" that happens, and the "subject" to whom it happens being, not a thing apart from and previous to his drama, but a function of it, it follows that the "substance" of the drama would be its argument. And if this varies, it means that the variation is "substantial."

Since the being of whatever is alive is a being always distinct from itself—in the terms of the schools, a being that is metaphysically and not only physically mobile—it must be thought of in concepts that annul their own inevitable identity. This is not so terrifying as it may appear at first sight, though it is a question that I cannot even touch the fringe of here. I would only recall to the reader, that I may not leave his mind adrift on an uncharted sea, that thought has a much greater capacity for avoiding itself than is commonly supposed. Thought is constitutively generous, it is the great altruist. It is capable of thinking what lies at the opposite extreme to thought. One example will suffice. There are concepts called by some "occasional"; e. g., the concept "here," the concept "I," the concept "this." Such concepts or

significations have a formal identity that serves precisely to guarantee the constitutive nonidentity of the matter signified or thought of through them. All concepts that seek to think of the authentic reality, life, must be "occasional" in this sense. There is nothing strange in this, since life is pure occasion. It is for this reason Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa calls man a *Deus occasionatus*, for, according to him, man once he is free is a creator like God inasmuch as he is a being creating its own entity. Unlike God, however, his creation is not absolute but is limited by the occasion. Whence, literally, what I am bold to affirm: that man makes himself in the light of circumstance, that he is a God as occasion offers, a "secondhand God" (*un Dios de ocasión*).

Every concept, in Husserl's phrase, is a universal meaning (*allgemeine Bedeutung*). But whereas in other concepts the universality consists in the fact that when applying them to one singular case we must always think the *same* as when applying them to another singular case, in the occasional concept it functions precisely by inviting us never to think the *same* when we apply it. The supreme example is this very concept "life" in the sense of human life. Its signification *qua* signification is, of course, identical, but what it signifies is something not merely singular, but unique. Life is the life of each one of us.

And here, for the sake of brevity, I may be allowed to

interrupt these considerations and to refrain from dealing with the most obvious difficulties they give rise to.¹³

VIII

Yesterday I made the acquaintance of Hermione. She is a fascinating woman. Towards me she was deferential, insinuating. I think of making love to her, and of attempting to win her love in return. But can my authentic being, what I call *I*, consist in "being Hermione's lover"? Scarcely have I conjured up my love for Hermione in the mind's eye with a measure of precision when I emphatically turn down such a project of being. Why? I can find no objection to raise against Hermione, only the fact is . . . that I am fifty, and at fifty, although the body may have retained all the elasticity of thirty and the psychic impulses have lost none of their vigor, I cannot now "be Hermione's lover." But why? The point is this, that being a man of years I have already had time to be the lover of Cidalisa and the lover of Arsinoe and the lover of Glykeia, and I know now what "being a lover" is.

¹³ For example, whether two lives whose attributes were the same and, in consequence, indistinguishable, would not be the *same* life. The idea of life obliges us, in fact, to invert the Leibnitzian principle and to speak of "the discernibility of identities." Or again, how, if life is unique, it is at the same time multiple, since we can speak of the lives of others, etc., etc. All these difficulties are engendered in the old intellectualist habits. The most interesting and fruitful of them consists in asking how it is that we "define" life by means of general characteristics, saying that in all its possible cases it is this and this and this.

I know its excellences, I know also its limitations. In short, I have experienced to the full that form of life that is called "loving a woman," and, frankly, I have had enough. And so it happens that the "cause" of my not being a lover tomorrow is precisely the fact that I have been one. If I had not been a lover, if I had not already experienced love to the full, I should be Hermione's lover.

Here, then, is a new dimension in this strange reality of life. Before us lie the diverse possibilities of being, but behind us lies what we have been. And what we have been acts negatively on what we can be. When I was a child I was a Christian; now I am one no longer. Does this mean, strictly speaking, that I do not go on being a Christian? The Christian I was, is he dead, annihilated? Of course not; of course I am still a Christian, but in the form of having been a Christian. Had I not known the experience of being a Christian, did I not have it behind me and go on being a Christian in this form of having been one, it is possible that, faced with the difficulties of life today, I might now resolve to be a Christian. And what has happened to me in this matter is happening to many Europeans, who *were* Christians either on their own account or vicariously, from the recollection of their forefathers. Who knows, if one got to the bottom of things, whether it might not be said that it is happening to every-

body, including those who believe in all good faith that they still are Christians? That it is possible to be a Christian today, just like that, in the fullness of the term and without reservations, is not so very certain. And the same might be said about being "a democrat," being "a liberal," being "*ancien régime*," being "feudal."

If I do not make love to Hermione, if I do not turn Christian, accordingly, if the reality of my life at the moment is what it is, what it is going to be depends on what is commonly called "experience of life." This is a knowledge of what we have been that memory has preserved for us and that lies always to hand, accumulated in our today, in our actuality or reality. And it happens that this knowledge determines my life negatively in its "real" aspect, in its being. And from this it follows that constitutively my life is experience of life. My fifty years signify an absolute reality, not because the body may be growing weak or the psyche losing its grip, things that do not always happen, but because at that age one has accumulated a longer living past, one has been more things, and one "has more experience." The conclusion to be drawn from which is that man's being is irreversible, he is compelled ontologically always to advance on himself, and this not because a given instant of time cannot recur: on the contrary, time does not recur because man cannot go back to being what he has been.

But experience of life is not made up solely of my past, of the experiences that I personally have had. It is built up also of the past of my forebears, handed down to me by the society I live in. Society consists primarily in a repertory of usages, intellectual, moral, political, technical, of play and pleasure. Now, in order that a form of life—an opinion, a line of conduct—may become a usage, a thing of social validity, it is necessary, first, that time should elapse, and second, that the form in question should cease to be a spontaneous form of personal life. Usage is tardy in taking shape. Every usage is old. Expressed differently, society is, primarily, the past and, relatively to man, tardigrade. For the rest, the establishing of a new usage—a new “public opinion” or “collective belief,” a new morality, a new form of government,—the determination of *what* at each moment society *is going to be*, depends on what it has been, just as in the individual life. Western societies are finding in the present political crisis that they cannot, without more ado, be “liberal,” “democratic,” “monarchical,” “feudal” or . . . “Pharaonic,” precisely because they have already been these things, either in themselves or from experience of how others have been them. In the “political public opinion” of today, in the usage at present in force, an enormous amount of the past continues active; that opin-

ion, that usage, is accordingly this past in the form of having been it.¹⁴

Let the reader simply take note of what happens to him when, faced with the great political problems of the day, he desires to take up an attitude. First there arises in his mind a certain form of government, let us say, authoritarianism. In it he sees, rightly, a means of surmounting some of the difficulties of the public situation. But if this solution is the first or one of the first to occur to him it is not by chance. It thrusts itself upon him precisely because it already lay there to his hand, because he did not need to invent it for himself. And it lay to his hand not merely as a project, but as an experiment already made. The reader knows, from personal experience or from reference, that there have been absolute monarchies, Caesarianisms, unipersonal or collective dictatorships. And he knows further that all these forms of authoritarianism, if they solve some difficulties, leave others unsolved and in

¹⁴ I have already shown excessive temerity, and incurred excessive risk, in thus attacking at the gallop, like the Median warriors of old, the most fearsome themes of general ontology. Now that I have come to a point where, if I were to be moderately clear, it would be necessary to establish carefully the difference between so-called “collective or social life” and personal life, I would ask permission to renounce emphatically any intention of so doing. Should the reader be moved to curiosity concerning my ideas on the matter or, in general, concerning the development of all that has preceded, he will find both set forth, as adequately as may be, in two books. In the first, under the title *El hombre y la gente*, I have tried faithfully to expound a sociology which does not, as in the past, avoid the truly basic problems. The second, *Sobre la razón viviente*, is an attempt at a *prima philosophia*.

fact bring new ones of their own. The reader is thus led to reject this solution and to essay another in his mind which will avoid the drawbacks of authoritarianism. But here the same thing happens over again, and so it goes on until he has exhausted all the obvious forms of government, those that lay already to his hand, those he knew about because they had already been tried. At the end of this intellectual journey through forms of government he finds that, if he is to be sincere and act with full conviction, there is only one he could accept: to wit, a new one, one different from any that has been before, one invented by himself. He must either invent a new being of the state himself—even though it be only a *new* authoritarianism or a *new* liberalism—or search around for someone who has invented such or who is capable of inventing it. Here, then, may be seen how in our present political attitude, in our political being, there persists all the past of mankind that is known to us. That past is past not because it happened to others but because it forms part of our present, of what we are in the form of having been, because, in short, it is *our* past. Life as a reality is absolute presence: we cannot say that *there is* anything unless it be present, of this moment. If, then, *there is* a past, it must be as something present, something active in us *now*. And, in effect, if we analyze what we are now, if we take the consistency of our present and

hold it up against the light in order to reduce it to its component elements as the chemist or the physicist may an object, we find to our surprise that this life of ours that is always this, the life of this present, actual moment, is composed of what, personally or collectively, we have been. And if we speak of *being* in the traditional sense as a *being already* what one is, as a fixed, static, invariable, and given being, we shall have to say that the only element of being, of "nature," in man is what he has been. The past is man's moment of identity, his only element of the thing: nothing besides is inexorable and fatal. But, for the same reason, if man's only Eleatic being is what he has been, this means that his authentic being, what in effect he is—and not merely "has been"—is distinct from the past, and consists precisely and formally in "being what one has not been," in non-Eleatic being. And since we cannot hope ever to rid the term "being" of its traditional static signification, we should be well advised to dispense with it. Man *is* not, he "goes on being" this and that. The concept "to go on being" is, however, absurd: under promise of something logical it turns out in the end to be completely irrational. The term we can apply, without absurdity, to "going on being" is "living." Let us say, then, not that man *is*, but that he *lives*.

On the other hand, it is advisable to take due note of the strange mode of knowledge, of comprehension, repre-

sented by this analysis of what, concretely, our life, that of the present, is. In order to understand my conduct with regard to Hermione and to Christianity, or the reader's with regard to public problems, in order to discover the reason of our being or, what comes to the same thing, *why* we are as we are, what have we done? What was it that made us understand, *conceive*, our being? Simply the telling, the narrating that *formerly* I was the lover of this and that woman, that *formerly* I was a Christian, that the reader in himself or through others he has heard of was an absolutist, a Caesarist, a democrat, etc. In short, the reasoning, the *reason*, that throws light here consists in a narration. Alongside pure physico-mathematical reason there is, then, a narrative reason. To comprehend anything human, be it personal or collective, one must tell its history. This man, this nation does such a thing and is in such a manner, *because* formerly he or it did that other thing and was in such another manner. Life only takes on a measure of transparency in the light of *historical reason*.

The most disparate forms of being *happen* to man. To the despair of the intellectualist, *being* is in man mere *happening, happening to him*: it "happens to him to be" a Stoic, a Christian, a rationalist, a vitalist. It happens to him to be the paleolithic female and the Marquise de Pompadour, Jenghiz Khan and Stefan George, Pericles and Charles Chaplin. Man does not actively subscribe to

any of these forms: he passes through them—he lives them—like Zeno's arrow, moving, in spite of Zeno, during the whole of its flight.

Man invents for himself a program of life, a static form of being, that gives a satisfactory answer to the difficulties posed for him by circumstance. He essays this form of life, attempts to realize this imaginary character he has resolved to be. He embarks on the essay full of illusions and prosecutes the experiment with thoroughness. This means that he comes to *believe* deeply that this character is his real being. But meanwhile the experience has made apparent the shortcomings and limitations of the said program of life. It does not solve all the difficulties, and it creates new ones of its own. When first seen it was full face, with the light shining upon it: hence the illusions, the enthusiasm, the delights believed in store. With the back view its inadequacy is straightway revealed. Man thinks out another program of life. But this second program is drawn up in the light, not only of circumstance, but also of the first. One aims at avoiding in the new project the drawbacks of the old. In the second, therefore, the first is still active; it is preserved in order to be avoided. Inexorably man shrinks from being what he was. On the second project of being, the second thorough experiment, there follows a third, forged in the light of the second and the first, and so on. Man "goes on

being" and "unbeing"—living. He goes on accumulating being—the past; he goes on making for himself a being through his dialectical series of experiments. This is a dialectic not of logical but precisely of historical reason—the *Realdialektik* dreamt of somewhere in his papers by Dilthey, the writer to whom we owe more than to anyone else concerning the idea of life, and who is, to my mind, the most important thinker of the second half of the nineteenth century.

In what does this dialectic that will not tolerate the facile anticipations of logical dialectic consist? This is what we have to find out on the basis of facts. We must know what is this series, what are its stages, and of what nature is the link between one and the next. Such a discovery is what would be called history were history to make this its objective, were it, that is to say, to convert itself into historical reason.

Here, then, awaiting our study, lies man's authentic "being"—stretching the whole length of his past. Man is what has happened to him, what he has done. Other things might have happened to him or have been done by him, but what did in fact happen to him and was done by him, this constitutes a relentless trajectory of experiences that he carries on his back as the vagabond his bundle of all he possesses. Man is a substantial emigrant on a pilgrimage of being, and it is accordingly meaningless to set limits

to what he is capable of being. In this initial illimitableness of possibilities that characterizes one who has no nature there stands out only one fixed, pre-established, and given line by which he may chart his course, only one limit: the past. The experiments already made with life narrow man's future. If we do not know what he is going to be, we know what he is not going to be. Man lives in view of the past.

Man, in a word, has no nature; what he has is . . . history. Expressed differently: what nature is to things, history, *res gestae*, is to man. Once again we become aware of the possible application of theological concepts to human reality. *Deus, cui hoc est natura quod fecerit . . . ,* says St. Augustine.¹⁵ Man, likewise, finds that he has no nature other than what he has himself done.

It is comic in the extreme that "historicism" should be condemned because it produces or corroborates in us the consciousness that the human factor is changeable in its every direction, that in it there is nothing concrete that is stable. As if the stable being—the stone, for instance—were preferable to the unstable! "Substantial" mutation is the condition on which an entity as such can be progressive, the condition on which its being may consist in progress. Now concerning man it must be said, not only that his being is variable, but also that his being grows

¹⁵ *De Genesi ad litteram*, vi, 13. 24 (*Patrologia Latina*, vol. 34).

and, in this sense, that it progresses. The error of the old doctrine of progress lay in affirming *a priori* that man progresses towards the better. That is something that can only be determined *a posteriori* by concrete historical reason: it is precisely the great discovery we await from this, since to it we look for the clarifying of human reality and, along with this, for light on the nature of the good, the bad, the better, and the worse. But that our life does possess a simply progressive character, this we can affirm *a priori* with full evidence and with a surety very different from that which has led to the supposition of the improgressivity of nature, that is to say, the "invariability of its laws."¹⁶ The same knowledge that discovers to us man's variation makes patent his progressive consistency. The European of today is not only different from what he was fifty years ago; his being now includes that of fifty years ago. The European of today finds himself without a living faith in science precisely because fifty years ago he did believe wholeheartedly in it. That faith that held sway half a century ago may now be defined with reasonable precision; were this done it would be seen that it was such *because* about 1800 the same faith in science wore a different profile, and so successively until we come to the year 1700 or thereabouts, at which date faith in reason is constituted as a "collective belief," as

¹⁶ I refer the reader to the last words of note 13 on p. 207.

something socially operative. (Earlier than 1700 faith in reason is an individual belief or the belief of particular small groups that live submerged in societies where faith in God, if already more or less inert, yet continues operative.) In our present "crisis," in our present doubt concerning reason, we find then included the whole of that earlier life. We are, that is to say, all those forms of faith in reason, and we are in addition the doubt engendered by that faith. We are other than the man of 1700, and we are more.

There is no cause, therefore, for weeping overmuch concerning the mutability of everything human. This is precisely our ontological privilege. Progress is only possible to one who is not linked today to what he was yesterday, who is not caught for ever in that being which is already, but can migrate from it into another. But this is not enough: it is not sufficient that man should be able to free himself from what he is already and take on a new form, as the serpent sloughs its skin and is left with another. Progress demands that this new form should rise above the old and to this end should preserve it and turn it to account, that it should take off from the old, climbing on its shoulders as a high temperature mounts on lower ones. To progress is to accumulate being, to store up reality. This increase of being, it is true, when referred only to the individual, might be interpreted naturalisti-

cally as the mere development or *enodatio* of an initial disposition. With the evolutionary thesis still unproved, whatever its probability, it can be said that the tiger of today is neither more nor less a tiger than was that of a thousand years ago: it is being a tiger for the first time, it is always a first tiger. But the human individual is not putting on humanity for the first time. To begin with, he finds around him, in his "circumstance," other men and the society they give rise to. Hence his humanity, that which begins to develop in him, takes its point of departure from another, already developed, that has reached its culmination: in short, to his humanity he adds other humanities. He finds at birth a form of humanity, a mode of being a man, already forged, that he need not invent but may simply take over and set out from for his individual development. This does not begin for him—as for the tiger, which must always start again—at zero but at a positive quantity to which he adds his own growth. Man is not a first man, an eternal Adam: he is formally a second man, a third man, etc.

Mutable condition has thus its ontological virtue and grace, and invites one to recall Galileo's words: *I detrattori della corruttibilità meriterebber d'esser cangiati in statue.*

Let the reader reflect closely on his life, studying it

against the light as one looks at a glass of water to study its infusoria. If he asks himself why his life is thus and not otherwise, it will appear to him that not a few details had their origin in inscrutable chance. But he will find the broad lines of its reality perfectly comprehensible once he sees that he is thus because, in the last resort, the society—"collective man"—in which he lives is thus. And in its turn the mode of being of society will stand revealed, once there is discovered within it what that society was—what it believed, felt, preferred—at an earlier stage. That is to say that in his individual and fleeting today man will see, foreshortened, the whole of man's past still active and alive. For we can only throw light on yesterday by invoking the day before yesterday; and so with all yesterdays. History is a system, the system of human experiences linked in a single, inexorable chain. Hence nothing can be truly clear in history until everything is clear. We cannot properly understand what this "rationalist" European is unless we know exactly what it was to be a Christian, nor what it was to be a Christian unless we know what it was to be a Stoic: and so the process goes on. And this systematism of *res gestae* becomes reoperative and potent in history as *cognitio rerum gestarum*. Every historic term whatsoever, to have exactness, must be determined as a function of all history,

neither more nor less than each concept in Hegel's *Logic* has value only in respect of the niche left for it by the others.¹⁷

¹⁷ A simple example will make clearer what I have sought, with extreme concision, to convey in these last few lines. In an excellent book recently published by Paul Hazard, *La Crise de la conscience européenne, 1680-1715*, the third chapter begins thus: "L'Europe semblait être achevée. Chacun de ses peuples avait des caractères si bien connus, et si décidément marqués, qu'il suffisait de prononcer son nom pour que surgît une série d'adjectifs qui lui appartenaient en propre, comme on dit que la neige est blanche et le soleil brûlant."

This means that about the year 1700 one of the active ingredients of human life here in the West was the conviction felt by European peoples that they knew one another. Let us admit the facts, referred to by the author, whose collective enunciation forms this proposition. Is this enough to make the proposition true? For it happens that exactly the same proposition might be valid for the life of Europe today. Who can doubt, nonetheless, that the knowledge of one another that European peoples believe they possess today is something very different from that of two centuries ago? And different, be it clearly understood, not solely nor chiefly by its content, but in the certainty, the fullness, the daily presence, and general sense it has for us. This means, however, that as an active factor in our lives its reality is in consequence very different from the reality of two centuries ago. Hence Hazard's proposition and the concept its terms express are inadequate, since they are equivocal. If they are valid for today, they are invalid for 1700. And if they are valid for both, they will be equally valid for 1500, for it is beyond question that then, too, the nations of Europe believed they knew one another. Now, in the measure in which a concept has validity for different epochs of humanity, it is an abstraction. Yet the conception that Hazard is trying to express is of an essentially concrete order, and it escapes through the abstract meshes of his proposition. Had this been thought in terms of the reality of 1500 and of that of 1900, for example, it is evident that it would have thrown much more light on what was in fact happening in 1700. In history there come in—and once it has resolutely constituted itself historical reason, there must come in still more—abstract concepts that are valid for whole ages and even for the whole of man's past. But this is a question of concepts whose object is also an abstract moment of reality, of the same degree of abstraction as themselves. In the measure of their abstractness they are clearly formal: they do not, in themselves, think anything real but demand to be made concrete. When therefore we say that they are valid for different ages, their validity is to be understood as one of forms requiring a content, as an instrumental validity; they do not describe "historic forces." An approximate analogy may be seen in geometrical concepts, which are valid for, but do not explain, physical phenomena, because they do not represent forces.

The need to think systematically in history has many corollaries, one of which is this, that it will have to increase substantially the number of its

History is the systematic science of that radical reality, my life. It is therefore a science of the present in the most rigorous and actual sense of the word. Were it not a science of the present, where should we find that past that is commonly assigned to it as theme? The opposite—and customary—interpretation is equivalent to making of the past an abstract, unreal something lying lifeless just where it happened in time, whereas the past is in truth the live, active force that sustains our today. There is no *actio in distans*. The past is not yonder, at the date when it happened, but here, in me. The past is I—by which I mean my life.

IX

Man stands in need of a new revelation. And whenever man feels himself in contact with a reality distinct from himself, there is always revelation. It does not matter what the reality be, provided it appear to us absolute reality and not a mere idea, presumption, or imagination of our own concerning a reality.

Physical reason was, in its day, a revelation. Astronomy previous to Kepler and Galileo was a mere play of ideas, and when one *believed* in any of the various systems then current or in such and such a modification of

terms and concepts. Naturalists will not take this amiss if they reflect that they possess today some millions of concepts and terms to describe the vegetable and animal species.