

Roberto Mangabeira Unger

THE RELIGION OF THE FUTURE



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Harvard University Press

Cambridge, Massachusetts

London, England

2014

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Unger, Roberto Mangabeira.

The religion of the future / Roberto Mangabeira Unger.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-674-72907-0 (alk. paper)

1. Religion. 2. Forecasting. I. Title.

BL51.U645 2014

200—dc23

2013034082

For Tamara

“I can think of no greater happiness than to be with you all the time, endlessly . . . , and I dream of a grave, deep and narrow, where we could clasp each other in our arms as with clamps, and I would hide my face in you, and you would hide your face in me . . . ”

—Franz Kafka, *The Castle*

Contents

1. Beyond Wishful Thinking: Life without Illusion	1
<i>Death</i> 1	
<i>Groundlessness</i> 5	
<i>Insatiability</i> 17	
<i>Belittlement</i> 23	
<i>Religion and the flaws in human life</i> 35	
<i>The common element in past religious revolution</i> 40	
<i>What religion is, or has been</i> 49	
2. Overcoming the World	62
<i>Central idea, historical presence, and metaphysical vision</i> 62	
<i>Incitements to overcoming the world</i> 72	
<i>Serenity and benevolence</i> 74	
<i>Criticism: betrayal of the past</i> 77	
<i>Criticism: the school of experience</i> 80	
<i>Criticism: betrayal of the future</i> 84	
3. Humanizing the World	90
<i>Central idea, historical presence, and metaphysical vision</i> 90	
<i>Making meaning in a meaningless world</i> 96	
<i>Our situation and our task</i> 98	
<i>The ennoblement of our relations to one another</i> 103	
<i>Criticism: betrayal of the past</i> 106	
<i>Criticism: the school of experience</i> 113	
<i>Criticism: betrayal of the future</i> 117	

4. Struggling with the World	121
<i>Central idea, spoken in sacred and profane voice</i>	121
<i>Metaphysical vision</i>	125
<i>Conception of the self</i>	136
<i>Only one regime</i>	143
<i>Spirit and structure</i>	162
<i>Self and others</i>	170
<i>Twin orthodoxies suppressed</i>	180
<i>Criticism: strength and weakness of the struggle with the world</i>	182
<i>Criticism: estrangement from life in the present</i>	188
5. Religious Revolution Now: Its Occasions and Instruments	196
<i>Reasons for religious revolution</i>	196
<i>The unique position of the struggle with the world</i>	199
<i>Resolving the ambivalence of the higher religions to the transformation of the world</i>	204
<i>Radicalizing the significance of the struggle with the world for our ideas and institutions</i>	207
<i>Achieving a greater life, without Prometheanism</i>	213
<i>Recognizing the defects in human existence</i>	216
<i>Occasions and sources of religious revolution</i>	221
<i>In what sense a religious revolution</i>	236
<i>The practice of religious revolution</i>	239
<i>A tragic contradiction in the history of religion</i>	245
<i>Philosophy and religion</i>	250
<i>Direction and indirections of the religion of the future</i>	255
<i>Christianity as the religion of the future?</i>	257
6. Deep Freedom: The Politics of the Religion of the Future	290
<i>Political theology without God</i>	290
<i>Conception of a free society</i>	293
<i>Four principles</i>	300
<i>The principle of apostasy</i>	303
<i>The principle of plurality</i>	308

<i>The principle of deep freedom</i>	314
<i>The principle of higher cooperation</i>	324
7. Becoming More Human by Becoming More Godlike: The Conduct of Life in the Religion of the Future	341
<i>The enhancement of life</i>	341
<i>Method and vision</i>	344
<i>The overthrow: from self-subversion to self-transformation</i>	355
<i>Virtue as self-transformation</i>	366
<i>Virtues of connection</i>	370
<i>Virtues of purification</i>	378
<i>Virtues of divinization</i>	382
<i>The course of life: decentering</i>	387
<i>The course of life: downfall</i>	393
<i>The course of life: mutilation</i>	397
<i>The course of life: mummification</i>	405
<i>The reward</i>	438
<i>Countercurrents</i>	439
<i>Life itself</i>	443
A Note on the Three Orientations and the Idea of the Axial Age	445
Proper Name Index	457
Thematic Index	459

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1

Beyond Wishful Thinking

Life without Illusion

Death

Everything in our existence points beyond itself. We must nevertheless die. We cannot grasp the ground of being. Our desires are insatiable. Our lives fail adequately to express our natures; our circumstances regularly subject us to belittlement.

Religion has been both an attempt to interpret the meaning of these irreparable flaws in the human condition and a way of dealing with them. It has told us that everything is ultimately all right.

However, everything is not all right. A turn in the religious consciousness of humanity would begin in an approach to these defects that abandoned the impulse to deny them. Religion would cease to console us for these frightening facts. Our hope might survive, changed.

Life is the greatest good. With life come surfeit, spontaneity, and surprise: the capacity to see more, make more, and do more than all the social and conceptual regimes in which we move can countenance. In the face of all constraint, the experience of life is an experience of a fecundity and a fullness without foreordained limits.

We exceed immeasurably the social and cultural worlds that we build and inhabit. There is always more in us, in each of us individually as well as in all of us collectively, than there is or ever can be in them. There is always more that we have reason to value and power to produce than any of these orders of life, or all of them together, can contain.

The principle that applies to the organization of society and culture applies as well to thought and discourse. No method, no system of procedures of inference and modes of argument, no apparatus of reasoning in any one discipline, or in all disciplines combined, can do justice to our capacities for insight. We can always discover more than our established practices of inquiry can prospectively allow. Vision exceeds method. Method adjusts retrospectively to suit vision.

We are unlimited, or infinite, with respect to the practical and discursive settings of our activity. They are limited, or finite, with regard to us. Our excess over them is what, in a traditional theological vocabulary, we call spirit.

Everyone dies anyway. The response of nature to our experience of fecundity, of amplitude, of reach over circumstance and context is to decree our death. The finality of this annihilation, in contrast to the vibrant presence that preceded it, is the first and fundamental reason why death is terrible. The good that is the highest, preceding all others and making all others possible, is the good that will be most definitively destroyed.

Our fall toward death is surrounded on every side by tokens of the wasting of life. At any given moment on our planet, as Schopenhauer reminded us, countless living creatures tear one another apart the better to live a while longer. We are unable to distinguish our situation from theirs as much as we would like. Science teaches that death forms part of the continuance of life. However, what is necessary for the species is fatal to the individual.

The hour of death comes sometimes with agitation and suffering, and sometimes with resignation or even in sleep. Some people report, from near death experiences, that they see a great light. However, there is no great light, other than in the minds of some of the dying. According to certain conjectures, they perceive such a light because the brain is starved of oxygen, or because there is stimulation, as life wanes, of the temporal lobe, as if the body, on the very verge, were to play a final trick on us.

Regardless of whether death is resisted or accepted, its aftermath follows a regular course. The body is now a corpse. It becomes first rigid, then bloated. It soon rots, stinks, and begins to be devoured by vermin and bacteria, unless it is promptly burned. From having been revered, it turns into an object of revulsion.

So life ends in a strange sacrifice. Each of us is brought to the altar. This time, no angel stays Abraham's hand. What is the point of the sacrifice, and what faith does it serve? It is an incident in a cult the secrets and purpose of which remain forever closed to us.

It is all the more terrifying to know that those whom we love most will be brought to the same altar, and offered in the same sacrifice, sometimes under our eyes. In their death we see what we can only imagine for ourselves: the annihilation to which we are all doomed confirmed, as love proves powerless to sustain the life that love may have given.

The terribleness of death becomes clear as well from another vantage point: the perspective of consciousness and of its relation to the world. The experience of life is an experience of consciousness. The mark of consciousness is to present a complete world: not just how I see, feel, and think about myself, but a whole world centered on me, extending outward from my body. For consciousness, everything that exists, or that has existed, or that will exist exists only because it plays a part in this mental theater of mine. Beyond the perimeter of its stage, there is no world, and there is no being.

Continuity of consciousness, embodied in an individual human organism, is what we mean by a self. The experience of selfhood is the experience of consciousness associated with the fate of the body and persistent over time, until the body fails and dissolves. There are no human beings for whom the world fails to be manifest in this way as extending outward, and backward and forward in time, from the conscious and embodied self.

We come to learn that this view of the world is an illusion. We correct the illusion, or compensate for it, but only theoretically; that is to say, by telling ourselves that the world is not in fact the way in which we will continue to experience it.

Death not only brings the conscious self to an end; it also shows, in definitive and incontrovertible form, that the representation of the world as extending outward in space and time from the self was false from the outset. The dead person will not be there to see the demonstration of his error, but the survivors will register what has happened. Each of them will know what awaits him.

With the end of consciousness, it is not just the conscious self that disappears forever; it is the whole world that perishes, as it existed for consciousness. The events and protagonists that filled it all vanish suddenly, in the instant of death, unless their disappearance has been foreshadowed by the ruin of the mind.

The person may flatter himself that he has recorded his experience of the world in lasting words. We know, however, that such records bear only a distant relation to the flow and richness of conscious life; at best, they select from it, or use it, translating it into a language that hardly resembles the real thing. The world of the conscious self cannot escape to the page; it remains trapped in the dying body, which sucks it into the grave and into nothingness.

No afterlife, of the kind promised by the religions of salvation, can—or, if it can, it should not—console us for our mortality. An afterlife would not suffice to give us back our bodies; we would need to be given back the time of the historical world: the struggle and the connection with other people in a time that is irreversible and decisive. To be restored to our bodies and made forever young without being reinstated in the time of history would be to suffer the torture of an eternal boredom. For this reason, portrayals of a paradise of eternal life in the salvation religions remain unconvincing and even repellent. They offer us the shell of immortality without granting us what makes life irresistible.

The embodied self is the same person who woke to the world in a burst of visionary immediacy, who soon found that he was not the center of that world but on the contrary a dependent and even hapless creature, and who then discovered that he was doomed to die.

The frightfulness of death wears another face, alongside its annihilating relation to the good of life and to the experience of consciousness. This third face of the terrors and evils of death has to do with not with its destruction of consciousness and of life, when it occurs, but rather with its effect on conscious life as each of us lives it.

We can best understand this effect in the form of a dilemma. One horn of the dilemma is what happens when we face death. The other horn is what happens when we fail to face it.

To face death squarely and persistently, without help from the feel-good theologies and philosophies that abound in the history of religion

and of metaphysics, is to look straight at a sun that Pascal assured us, with reason, cannot be long observed without danger. It is to live in fear of the incomprehensible and awful end before us.

However, to contrive to forget that we will die—to turn wholly away from death or at least as far away from it as we can—is to risk losing the most powerful antidote to a life of routine, convention, conformity, and submission—to a somnambulant life, which is to say, to a life that is not fully possessed and that exhibits only in diminished form the attributes of life: surfeit, spontaneity, and surprise. It is the prospect of death that gives life its decisive, irreversible shape and makes time, our time, full of weight and consequence. Aroused by the awareness of death, so closely connected to the sentiment of life, we can conceive an existence of striving and resist the automatisms, the habits, the endless little surrenders that rob us, by installments, of the substance of life.

As we confront this dilemma, we have reason for hope. If we were able fully to awaken to life and to grasp its qualities and possibilities, we might be just as overtaken by a paralyzing sentiment as if we held death firmly in our line of vision. That each of us was snatched out of nothingness before being returned to it (or promoted, according to some of the historical religions, to the perpetual ordeal of an uneventful timelessness) is an enigma of the same order as the riddle of mortality. It is also a fortune so great that it may be as hard to consider steadily as our fall toward death. Life, too, seen for what it is, or can become, would be a sun blinding us through an exultation that might paradoxically inhibit our ability to seize its benefits.

So we must run back and forth between these two suns in our firmament—the presentiment of death and the awareness of life—and avoid being transfixed by either of them. If we are lucky, in this uncertain middle distance, we may form attachments and projects that enhance the sentiment of life. However, even as we try our luck, death comes to us, and brings our experiment to an end.

Groundlessness

We are unable to grasp the ground of being, the ultimate basis for our existence in the world as well as for the existence of the world. We cannot look into the beginning and end of time. In our reasoning, one

presupposition leads to another and one cause into another. We never reach the bottom; the bottom is bottomless.

The root experience of groundlessness is astonishment that we exist, that the world exists, and that the world and our situation in it are the way they are rather than another way. The way they are seems to bear no relation, other than a relation of indifference, to our concerns. Indeed, on the concern that overrides all others—attachment to life—nature is not simply indifferent; it is unforgiving. It has condemned each of us to destruction.

There is nothing in what we can understand about the workings of nature, when we do not allow ourselves to be deceived by cowardice, self-deception, wishful thinking, and power worship, that encourages us in the pursuit of our loves and devotions, or even provides a basis on which to understand their place and value in the history and structure of the universe. Thus, astonishment is accompanied, in the core experience of groundlessness, by awareness of the incomprehensibility, and of the sheer alienness, of the world in which we find ourselves.

Consider two distinct aspects of this experience: speculative groundlessness and existential groundlessness. It is the latter that counts as an ineradicable flaw in the human condition. Its significance, however, becomes clear only when it is seen against the background of the former.

Speculative groundlessness goes to the limits of what we can hope to discover about the universe and about our place in its history. Existential groundlessness has to do with the limits to our ability to overcome the disorienting implications of an inescapable fact: we play a part—a tiny, marginal part—in a story that we did not, and would not, write. We can edit that story marginally, but we cannot rewrite it. In fact, we can barely understand it; we survey it only in fragments. Consequently, our decisions about what to do with our brief lives can have no basis outside ourselves. We are, in this sense, ungrounded.

The most salient feature of the world is that it is what it is rather than something else. The most ambitious projects of understanding of the world are those that seek to explain why it must be the way it is and could be no other way and even why something exists rather than nothing. If these endeavors had any merit or prospect of success, our specu-

lative insight into the world might provide a response to our existential groundlessness. They do not.

Suppose, for example, that we seek to list certain features that would make one world more probable than another, enlisting in this effort the semblance of a calculus of probability. We might, for example, imagine that a full universe, with a great richness of manifestations, is more probable than a meager one. It is an idle speculation.

The observed universe is, so far as we know or could ever know, the only universe, although it may have predecessors. The idea of a multitude of other universes is not evoked by any observation, nor could it be, for these other universes would have no causal communion with ours. It is merely designed to fill a hole in certain scientific theories (such as in string theory in contemporary particle physics) that make many universes possible and therefore find it convenient to imagine all of them actual. With only one actual universe, and with no basis other than the limitations and predilections of the human mind to distinguish possible and impossible universes, we lack the conditions for a well-formed estimation of probabilities.

We come to recognize speculative groundlessness by facing the interminable and contestable character of the presuppositions on which all knowledge and belief rest. Every claim about the world relies on assumptions, and each layer of assumptions on further layers of assumptions. We cannot justifiably bring this layering of presuppositions to a halt by an appeal to self-evidence, for example, to the self-evident status of the axioms of Euclidean geometry. Our sense of self-evidence remains parasitic on our perceptual apparatus, which evolved in our embodied organisms to serve limited, practical goals.

Our more comprehensive claims about the world have an irreducible pragmatic residue. If we cannot bring the chain of our presuppositions to an end by an appeal to self-evidence, we can nevertheless justify the conditional forms of understanding with which we are left by invoking the predictions and initiatives that they inform, motivated by particular interests. The hard core of speculative groundlessness is the existence of intractable limits to our natural knowledge of the natural world. Science, equipped with technology, extends these limits, but it does not abolish them. With its help, we continue to view the world from the vantage point of our embodied minds.

The failure of the ontological argument for the existence of God in the history of Western philosophy and theology is a particular expression of a wider problem.* Nothing in the character and content of what we have discovered about nature alters the brute facticity of the world: the world just happens to be one way rather than another. If there is only one universe at a time, its most important attribute is that it is—that it just happens to be—what it is rather than something else.

When we put aside the fictions of a metaphysical imagination determined to overstep the bounds of understanding, usually in the service of an effort to reassure us and to reconcile us to our lot, we encounter the dominant undertaking of modern science from Galileo and Newton to today: to discern the immutable laws governing nature, expected to be written in the language of mathematics. The unified understanding of these laws would then fix the outer limit to our comprehension of nature. There are, however, two grave limitations to this approach to the most general features of reality.

The first limitation is that its methods are suited to the exploration of parts of nature rather than of the universe as a whole. What one might call the Newtonian paradigm of scientific inquiry studies parts of reality, regions of the universe. In each of these regions, it distinguishes stipulated initial conditions marking out a configuration space within which phenomena change according to laws that can be expressed as mathematical equations. What is an initial condition at one moment may become an explained phenomenon at another. The scientist-observer stands outside the configuration space in the timeless position of God.

This approach fails when it is applied to the universe as a whole. Yet it is precisely knowledge about the universe as a whole (rather than about patches of space-time) that we require to defeat or to circumscribe speculative groundlessness. When the subject matter is cosmological rather than local, the distinction between initial conditions and explained phenomena within a configuration space cannot be maintained. The observer can no longer imagine himself as standing outside the

*The ontological argument for the existence of God claims to show that God must exist because his existence inheres in the idea of him. He is the perfect or absolute being. Existence is, according to some versions of this argument, an attribute of perfection.

boundaries of the configuration; there is nowhere outside the universe to stand. He cannot observe or prepare copies of the states of affairs that he investigates; there is only one universe, or at least one observable universe, at a time.

The second limitation of the dominant practice of natural science as a model of cosmological inquiry is that it assumes a historically provincial view of how nature works. It pictures the relatively settled and cooled-down universe. In this universe, the constituents of nature, as described by the standard model of particle physics, are unchanging and, for all practical purposes, eternal. States of affairs can be clearly distinguished from the laws governing them. We can think of the laws of nature as the indispensable warrants of all our causal explanations, and of causal connections as particular instances of the workings of these unchanging laws. The range of the adjacent possible is tightly drawn: the ways in which, and the extent to which, some things can turn into others.

What science has already discovered, however, suggests that nature did not, and does not, always appear in this form. It has another, fiery and unsettled variant, in which it presented itself in the very early history of the universe and may present itself again. In this variant, what we now think of as the elementary and eternal constituents of nature did not yet exist, or were not organized distinctly, as they now are, as a differentiated structure. The laws of nature may not have been distinguishable from the states of affairs that they governed. Indeed, causal connections or successions may not have assumed a law-like form at all. The susceptibility of the phenomena to transformation may have been much greater than it subsequently became in the relatively settled and cooled-down universe that the science founded by Galileo and Newton takes for granted.

When we cast aside feel-good metaphysics, with its disposition to claim more than we can pretend to know, recognize the incompleteness of that scientific tradition as a basis for thinking about the universe, and nevertheless attend to the revolutionary empirical discoveries of twentieth-century science, we reach a view reaffirming our speculative groundlessness rather than overcoming it. According to this view, everything changes sooner or later: the types of things that exist as well as the regularities connecting them. Change changes.

Causal succession, rather than being simply a construction of the mind, is a primitive feature of nature. It sometimes exhibits law-like regularity (in the relatively settled, cooled-down variations of nature), and sometimes fails to exhibit it.

What there is then at the limit of our understanding is not a universe that could not be other than it is, or a framework of timeless laws. What there is is impermanence, which we also call time, and which Anaximander described some 2,500 years ago at the beginning of both Western science and Western philosophy: “All things originate from one another, and vanish into one another, according to necessity . . . under the dominion of time.” Nothing in this view explains away our speculative groundlessness. On the contrary, everything converges to make its meaning both more precise and more acute.

The world has a history, extending backward and forward in time, even beyond the present universe. No final system of laws could tell us what this history was, or will be, or must be; the regularities of the nature are the products of this history even more than they are its source.

When we come to understand this history much better than we now do, we shall still be confined to play a tiny part in it. It remains foreign to our concerns. Its message continues to be that nothing is for keeps, and that everything turns into everything else.

What about us? That is the question lying at the heart of the problem of existential groundlessness. A response to our existential groundlessness would make sense of our situation in the world in ways that provide guidance for the conduct of life and for the organization of society. We may first seek outside ourselves a basis for an orientation to existence in our general understanding of the world and of our place in it. If such an understanding yields no clues, we are driven back on ourselves: on our biographical and historical experience and on our self-understanding. The question then becomes whether the very lack of a grounding outside ourselves can be turned into an incitement and a justification for our self-grounding.

Only if all these attempts fail are we then left face to face with our existential groundlessness. In every instance, a response to the threat of existential groundlessness must take account of the most frightening aspect of our situation: that we will die. If such a response cannot show

us how we are to achieve eternal life, it must suggest at least the beginnings of an approach to how we are to live, given our mortality, our manifest human nature or the human nature that we can bring about, our fundamental needs and desires, and the intractable limits to what we can hope to discover about the world and about our place within it.

The problem of existential groundlessness can be restated simply: all attempts to ground an orientation to existence in an understanding of the world tend to fail. To say that they must forever fail would be to make an unjustifiable claim about the future of human insight and initiative. What we have to instruct us is the history of our struggles to deal with the threat of existential groundlessness, in the space in which philosophy passes over into religion.

Consider three families of efforts to manage this threat. They are the three major spiritual options, dominant over the last two millenniums, that I explore in the next three chapters of this book. The consequences of this survey can be succinctly summarized. The better the news, the less reason there is to believe it. The more credible the news, the less satisfactory it is as a response to the perplexities and anxieties motivating the experience of existential groundlessness.

There appears to be an adverse sliding scale, which opposes our desire to see things as they are to our search for encouragement as well as for guidance. Moreover, even the more credible positions on this sliding scale, the ones that least require us to assent to the unbelievable, are unsatisfactory; if they do not tax our credulity, they nevertheless make light of our powers of resistance and self-transformation.

The most encouraging, and the least believable, news is that we have a friend in charge of the universe. That is the news delivered by the Semitic monotheisms: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Our friend made both the world and us. He did so out of an abundance of his creative, life-giving love. We are formed in his image. Not satisfied to make us, and stand aside, he has a plan for our salvation. In the implementation of that plan, he may even, according to one version of this narrative, have become incarnate in a man a couple of thousands of years ago. He calls us to eternal life and to participation in his being and requires that we change how we live and deal with one another. A community of the faithful will uphold and spread this good news.

This message is not without its terrors. Our spiritual freedom creates the risk that we may fail to heed the message and follow the path. We may be cut off and suffer estrangement from him. Like our salvation itself, this separation may become irreversible and eternal. Nevertheless, the view that we have a friend in charge of the universe is the best news that we could expect to receive, given our impending death and apparent groundlessness. He is the ground of being, and particularly of our being. In him we hope to overcome death.

The trouble is that belief in this narrative may be hard to achieve or to sustain. If it is not simply acquiescence in the conventions of a family and of a culture, it must be the result of undergoing certain experiences. Although these experiences violate our ordinary beliefs about the workings of nature, they may impose themselves on us with compelling if not irresistible force. However, apart from the matter of whether we should allow ourselves to be overwhelmed in this way (in view of our tendency to mistake wishful thinking for insight), we may simply, despite all efforts, not undergo such experiences. Having undergone them, we may fall out of them.

More particularly, reception of the good news requires us to suspend disbelief in a story of redemption from death and groundlessness that presents us with three sets of difficulties. Call them the scandals of reason. The first scandal is that we must accept a sudden and radical interruption of the regular workings of nature, as distinguished from the transformation of everything into everything else and from the change of change. The second scandal is that particular individuals and events have a privileged part to play in a narrative of salvation for all mankind: only the particular plot conveys the universal message. The third scandal is that we must not allow ourselves to be demoralized by the formidable objections that can be leveled against each of the main candidates for an idea of God, from the very standpoint of the belief systems in which this idea plays a certain role: God as person, God as impersonal being, and God as neither person nor being—an unnameable negation. When we are not in the self-induced grip of either social convention or religious enthusiasm, we may conclude that the good news is too good to be true.

A second family of responses to our existential groundlessness, of which the teachings of Buddha and the philosophy of the Vedas are the

most important examples, emphasizes the impermanence of all the kinds of being—the natural kinds, as they are sometimes called—through which nature momentarily presents itself, and therefore as well of all the regular relations among these types of beings. Under the changing disguises of nature, it discerns changeless and unified being. This radical impermanence suggests that not only is all phenomenal distinction, including distinction among selves, illusory, but that time itself is only “the moving image of eternity.”

Our sole reliable grounding, according to this view, is the one that enables us to disentangle ourselves, through insight and striving, from the coils of the phenomenal world and to increase our participation in the underlying one reality: the reality of being. Such is also the route to an inclusive compassion, seeing beyond the shallow and ephemeral divisions among us and within the world.

Death confirms, with respect to our embodied existence, the truth of impermanence. It signals our return to the ground of being, from which we never truly departed. Thus, the responses to death and to groundlessness have the same source and work in the same direction.

Here is news that is not as good as the news about our friend the creator and master of the universe and his plan to rescue us from death and groundlessness. It bears a loose resemblance to the outcome of the argument about speculative groundlessness, the view prophesied by Anaximander: “All things originate from one another and vanish into one another, according to necessity, . . . under the dominion of time.” A major difference may lie in the rejection of the reality of time, often albeit not invariably associated, in this tradition of thought, with the devaluation of phenomenal distinction and of the distinction among selves. If time is illusory, so is history, and our worldly engagements turn out to be either paths without goals or goals without paths.

To accept this way of dealing with our existential groundlessness, we would have to begin by denying or by devaluing the reality of the manifest world and of time. It is one thing to affirm the thesis of impermanence. It is another to diminish the reality of the impermanent so long as it exists. It is in this respect that the news is incredible.

Then, we would have to entertain our merger into hidden and unified being as a substitute for our embodied and individual existence. In exchange for the unique self, we are offered the one mind constitutive

of the world. Who would accept such a trade if he could avoid it? It is in this regard that the news is disheartening.

The disadvantages of the exchange are aggravated by the practical consequences of following the road marked out by the approach to reality informing it. Despite the basis that it offers for the assertion of an encompassing kinship with other people, and indeed with the whole of reality, and notwithstanding the call to compassionate action that it may inspire, its fundamental proposal is that we put the phenomenal and temporal world in its place. We are to discount its authority and reality, the better to achieve communion with the one being.

By conforming to this recommendation, we place the theoretical antidote to the experience of groundlessness at odds with the most reliable practical antidote that we have. For if the sense of the dream-like character of existence has any effective remedy, the cure lies in our engagements and attachments rather than in self-help through metaphysics. Nothing can better reconcile us to life than more life. It forms part of the peculiar character of this approach to the world, however, to cast doubt on the (ultimate) reality and authority of the phenomenal and temporal world, the world of history and of distinct human agents, in which such engagements and attachments flourish.

A third approach to our existential groundlessness, illustrated by the teachings of Confucius (as well as by many strands in Western secular humanism), begins from a wholly different point of departure. It accepts our speculative groundlessness but refuses to see it as implying our existential groundlessness. It proposes that we ground ourselves by building a culture and a society bearing the mark of our concerns and fostering our better selves.

The great spectacle of nature is, according to this view, meaningless. We can hope to master a small part of it and to make it serve our interests. We cannot, however, bridge the chasm between the vast indifference of the cosmos and the requirements of humanity. All that we can do is to create a meaningful order within an otherwise meaningless cosmos.

Our best chance of establishing such an order is to refine who we are and how we deal with one another. We can do so through a dialectic between the rules, roles, and rituals of society and the gradual strengthening of our powers of imaginative empathy: our ability to understand

the experience of other people and to minister to their needs. By performing our obligations to one another, as chiefly defined by the roles we perform in society, we can secure the humanized structure that nature denies us.

The best among us, those in whom the power to imagine the experience of others has been most developed and the disposition to minister to their needs most pronounced, will no longer need rules, rituals, or roles to guide them in the conduct of life.

This view makes two mistakes that compromise its prospect of disposing of the problem of existential groundlessness: a mistake about society and history and a mistake about the self. The mistake about society and history is to credit any particular social regime with the power to accommodate all the experiences that we have reason to value, or represent the authoritative setting for the discharge of our obligations to one another. Because no social regime can be incontestable, none can hope to provide a grounding for human life that could make up for the grounding that nature denies us.

The mistake about the self is to depreciate a truth about humanity that is revealed in the third irreparable flaw in the human condition (which I next discuss): our insatiability. We demand of one another, as well as of the social and cultural worlds that we build and inhabit, more than we and they can offer. The advancement of our most fundamental material and moral interests regularly requires us to defy and to revise any settled plan of social life. The ultimate source of this power of resistance and defiance is that there is more in us, individually as well as collectively, than there is, or ever can be, in such regimes. We depend on others to make a self, but fear dependence as subjugation: the making and the undoing of the self have similar sources.

It follows from our conflicted relation to the structures of social life, as well as from our ambivalent relation to one another, that the improvement of society cannot amount to the self-grounding of humanity. It will not, unless we deceive ourselves or collude in our own enslavement, assuage the anguish of existential groundlessness.

The provisional conclusion is that none of the ways in which the major civilizations of world history have attempted to prevent speculative groundlessness from turning into existential groundlessness succeed. They are defective as theory, however, only because they are also

defective as practice. Their practical consequences reveal their theoretical deficiencies.

The combination of our mortality with our groundlessness imparts to human life its pressing and enigmatic character. We struggle in our brief time in the midst of an impenetrable darkness. A small area is lighted up: our civilizations, our sciences, our works, our loves. We prove unable to define the place of the lighted area within a larger space devoid of light, and must go to our deaths unenlightened.

There is an unequal relation between our groundlessness and our mortality. The latter is a more fundamental defect in the human condition than the former. If we enjoyed eternal and perennially rejuvenated and embodied life in historical time, our inability to discern the ground of our existence might not seem so daunting. We could always hope to make progress later on, in discovering the ground of our existence. We would always be brought back to the concerns arising out of the next moment of existence. Our groundlessness might seem what it does to some philosophers: a theoretical curiosity. It would, in the terms of the preceding argument, amount to a merely speculative rather than an existential groundlessness. Although it would remain baffling, it would lose much of its terror.

If, however, we did understand the ground of existence, our understanding might or might not assuage our fear of death. Whether it would or not would depend on our conclusions. There are understandings that might calm our fears: those, for example, that assure us that a friend of ours is in charge of the universe, that he has given us life, and that he will deliver us to death only to endow us with yet higher life but also those that invite us progressively to submerge ourselves in the self-making and the self-perfection of impersonal being. We have many reasons desperately to want one of these views to be true.

A central issue in the history of religion is whether it will remain content to perform the role of providing the consolation that we desire. A subsequent issue is what we are entitled to hope for if we cannot rest assured in the expectations that those consoling beliefs hold out for us. Both issues form major concerns of the argument of this book.

We must die without grasping reasons for our existence other than those fragments of necessity and chance that scientific inquiry suggests

to us. It does not seem that the growth of scientific knowledge ever would or could alter this circumstance. If there is one universe or many, if the universe is eternal or time-bound, if it had a beginning in time or began together with time, we would simply have different ways of expressing a riddle that we would remain powerless to solve.

Insatiability

Our desires are insatiable. We seek from the limited the unlimited. We must fail. Our insatiability is a third incurable defect in human life.

Our insatiability is rooted in our natural constitution. Human desires are indeterminate. They fail to exhibit the targeted and scripted quality of desire among other animals. Even when, as in addiction and obsession, they fix on particular objects, we make those particular objects serve as proxies for longings to which they have a loose or arbitrary relation. We force the limited to serve as a surrogate for the unlimited. This misalliance, revealed most starkly in our obsessional and addictive behavior, carries over to our entire experience of wanting and seeking.

The retreat or vagueness of biological determination in the shaping of our desires opens space for the working of four forces that, together, make our desires insatiable.

A first root of insatiability is the imprinting of the dialectic of embodiment and transcendence on the life of desire. We suffer when desire goes unsatisfied and, when it is satisfied, we are briefly relieved of pain. Our desires, however, are unlimited in both their number and their reach. The moment of dissatisfaction is soon followed by other unrequited wants. Contentment remains a momentary interlude in an experience of privation and longing that has no end.

How could it be different? No narrowly directed set of desires defines our natures. Hence no particular satisfactions can leave us lastingly at ease. The problem with the particular desires and the particular satisfactions is that they are particular and that we, in a sense (the sense of our excess over all the social and conceptual regimes that we engage), are not.

A second root of insatiability is the social construction of desire. Our desires lack a predetermined content. To a large extent, we get the

content from one another; our desires represent a kidnapping of the self by society. This commandeering of desire by other people makes the content of desire seem empty, as if it always remained on the periphery of the self, as if it never penetrated the inner and empty core of the personality. We stand forever ready to exchange one invasion of the self by society for another.

A third root of insatiability is the prominence among our desires of those that by their very nature can never be satisfied by most people most of the time. We want from one another acceptance, recognition, and admiration as well as things and power. In particular, we want from one another what every child wants from every parent: an assurance that there is an unconditional place for him the world. No such assurance is ever enough, because every assurance is both ambiguous and revocable. Even if we can accumulate enough of scarce material resources, we can never get enough of the even scarcer immaterial ones. What is given to one man is taken from another, so that we find ourselves in a circumstance of perpetual dissatisfaction. Only love, freely given but easily destroyed, could free us for a while from this endless yearning.

A fourth root of the insatiability of desire is that we seek, in the satisfaction of our desires, not just to rid ourselves of the pains and privations to which they refer but also to supply a response to both death and groundlessness. A man may seek to become rich because he cannot become immortal or because he cannot find any more reliable grounding for his existence. This ceaseless metonymy, this trading of the ultimate for the homely, is bound to disappoint him.

There is a common element in these sources of insatiability. We cannot access the absolute, the unconditional, the unlimited. Therefore, we try to get it from the limited. We are unable to convince ourselves that, despite our mortality and our groundlessness, everything is all right. Therefore, we use whatever material and immaterial resources we are able to obtain to compensate for the fundamental defects in life that we are powerless to redress. We can never achieve enough acceptance from one another. Therefore, each of us continues the hunt for more tokens of assurance that there is an unconditional place for him in the world. We cannot restrict our strivings to a limited set of objects and goals. Therefore, we walk a treadmill of desire, satisfaction, boredom, and

new desire, and take from others the cues that we are never adequately able to give ourselves.

The result is exposure to a free-floating anguish that it has been the aim of much of religion, philosophy, and art to quiet. Speculative thought and religious practice, enlisted in the cause of self-help, have often served as devices by which we cast a spell on ourselves the better to free ourselves from the sufferings of insatiability. From them we garner the stories about the cosmos and our lives within it that make the spell seem to be a reception of the deepest truths about the world.

At the center of the experience of insatiability lies the emptiness of human desires: their indeterminacy in comparison to the desires of other animals. This negativity influences even those drives—for food and for sex—that most clearly tie us to the rest of the animal world but that, in the human being, have an unfixed, inclusive, and roaming quality.

The emptiness of desire appears under two main aspects: it is mimetic (to use René Girard's term), and it is projected (to use Karl Rahner's term). The preceding discussion has already suggested how each of these traits of desire plays a part in the genealogy of insatiable desire. Together, they help clarify the nature of our insatiability.

Because our desires are empty, the void will be filled up by other people. To a large extent, we desire what those around us desire. Their desires contaminate us; they take us over. This takeover establishes a basis for both competition and cooperation, according to both the content of what is desired and the range of social alternatives available for its pursuit.

If we failed to resist the imitative character of desire, even as we surrender to it, we would not be the context-shaped but context-transcending individuals who we are. We would not be the beings whose relations to one another are shadowed by an inescapable ambivalence because they seek connection without subjugation and who understand, however darkly, that “imitation is suicide.” There is no making of selves without connection in every domain of our existence, and there is no connection, in any realm of experience, without the risk of loss of self. “Accept me but make me free” is what every human being says to another.

This conflicted relation both to the others and to the organized contexts of life and of thought takes place in the midst of a struggle for the

fulfillment of our desires, desires that we discover to be not really ours. They came to us largely from the influence of others. Unless we can somehow criticize these borrowed desires, change them, and make them ours, our ambivalence to other people and our resistance to the context are powerless to free and to empower us. Therefore it is not only to other people that we are ambivalent; it is also to our own desires because they are ours and not ours. This confusion enters into the experience of insatiability and endows it with its tortured and desperate quality.

It is widely believed that these complications are the result of a historically specific set of developments in society and culture, associated with the ascendancy of democratic, liberal, and romantic ideals in some societies over the last few centuries. The truth, however, is closer to being the opposite: it is the power of these fundamental experiences of the self, which no regime of society and culture can entirely override or suppress, that accounts for the irresistible seductions of these forms of life and consciousness. The prophetic voice in politics and in culture would fall on deaf ears if it failed to find an ally in the innermost recesses of the self.

Desire is projected as well as mimetic. It is projected in a twofold sense. On the one hand, it always yearns for something beyond its immediate and manifest object. This something beyond shares in the quality of the unlimited, the unconditional, the absolute, the infinite. Thus, desire is projected in the sense that it projects forward beyond its visible horizon. On the other hand, however, the something beyond remains remote and obscure. We approach it, almost always, by indirection, mistaking it for something tangible and accessible, the proximate and visible object of our longing. Thus, desire is projected in the sense that we project the hidden absolute onto a manifest, contingent, and all-too-particular object.

In obsession and addiction, the disproportionate and even capricious bond between the hidden horizon of the unlimited and the paltry surrogate for it becomes extreme and paradoxical. It is, however, only the limiting case of a pervasive feature of the life of desire. In boredom, we experience directly the failure of the particular objects of desire, and of the habits and routines surrounding their pursuit, to hold our interest by engaging our capabilities. In every quarter, the phenome-

nology of desire bears the mark of our insatiability and reveals its connection with our powers of transcendence, with our longing for the infinite.

The projected quality of desire shows, as well, how our insatiability relates to our mortality and our groundlessness. The brevity of life lends urgency to the pursuits of desire: our time will end while we continue to seek one unworthy object after another, each the proxy for the unreachable horizon of that which could satisfy us. The terrors of death grow in the imagination with the expenditure of life on this equivocal chase.

Our uncertainty about the grounding of our existence (or rather the failure of all the available proposals to ground it) leaves us without a route by which to go from the tangible and defective particulars that we can grasp to the intangible and indiscriminate absolute that we voicelessly seek.

We have not understood our insatiability until we have formed a view of whether and under what conditions we might overcome it. In describing insatiability as an incurable defect in the human condition, I mean to claim that we cannot escape it, not at least without prejudice to the attributes that make us human and that might make us more human by making us more godlike.

Consider first the suggestion that in certain societies and cultures men and women cease to experience desire as insatiable. Insatiability would then be a local rather than a universal feature of human experience. Those who study savage societies from the vantage point of the ideas that have been dominant in modern anthropology often represent those societies as marked by a theology of immanence and a pragmatics of sufficiency.

The theology of immanence, in contrast to the spiritual beliefs that have been dominant since the religious revolutions of the first millennium B.C., places the sacred or the divine squarely within the natural as well as the social world. It thus provides no basis for a personal or impersonal divinity transcending what is manifest in this world in which we find ourselves. If our insatiability has theological or cosmological presuppositions, these presuppositions are denied by such a view of the world.

The pragmatics of sufficiency forms men and women who work only to uphold a certain customary form of life. When they have done so, they stop working. They do not allow themselves to be driven by an impulse toward relentless striving and accumulation. The character of their experience of life in society guards them—so the argument goes—against the ordeal of insatiability.

The question can then be presented squarely: Are we the beings who become insatiable only when we depart from the theology of immanence and the pragmatics of sufficiency? It is true that there is a history of desire, as there is a history of ideas informing desire. This history, however, is not aimless or random. It does not converge to a single end. Nevertheless, it has directions. Its directions are not to be mistaken for the scales of divine justice. However, they reveal, in the course of time, who we are and what we can become.

The restraints imposed by the theology of immanence and by the pragmatics of insufficiency inhibit the development of our powers: not just of our powers of production but also of all our powers of invention and innovation. They prevent us from pressing against the limits of the practices, institutions, and assumptions about human association that hold all our interests and ideals ransom. They require us to treat one structure of life and thought—the established one—as our definitive and authoritative home in the world. We cannot do so, however, without pretending to be more like the other animals than like gods.

The falsehood of this pretense is prefigured by the irrepressible element of uncertainty about what the established regime of life and of thought is, and about how this regime is to be understood and upheld as circumstances change and conflicts arise. No real society can fully conform to such a script. No real individual can be made into the passive performer of the lines that the script assigns to the occupant of each social role. If he does not defy the script openly, he will nevertheless rewrite it secretly. The falsehood of the pretense is further confirmed by the irreversibility of any departure from this supposed Arcadia. No people and no individual could ever return to this Eden, once having experienced the advantages as well as the troubles of its disruption.

The revolutionary changes that are associated with the rejection of both the theology of immanence and the pragmatics of sufficiency have

aroused, and will continue to inflame, all humanity. Their influence, despite all calamities and reversals, will appear as a force that is irresistible and providential not only because it empowers us but also because it reveals us to ourselves.

If the variations of society and culture cannot save us from our insatiability, can some of our initiatives as individuals nevertheless shield us against it? Can we not have in love and in work experiences that wholly absorb us, modify or even suspend our sense of the passage of time, without depriving us of consciousness, and interrupt the cycle of unrequited desire?

Indeed, we can, if we are both lucky and wise, but only for a while. The work will come to an end, and no longer represent for its creator what it represented in the throes of creation. The love, ever tainted by ambivalence, will cease to waver only if it ceases to live. The work and the love will be seen to be the particular engagement and the particular connection that they are, and we will continue to seek, absurdly and inescapably, something that is not just one more particular. Our reprieves from insatiable desire will be momentary; our insatiability will remain as the lasting undercurrent of our experience, thrown into starker relief by its remissions.

Insofar we are death-bound, existence is urgent and frightful. Insofar as we are groundless, it is vertiginous and dreamlike. Insofar as we are insatiable, it is unquiet and tormented.

Belittlement

“The true sorrow of humanity consists in this;—not that the mind of man fails; but that the course and the demands of action and of life so rarely correspond with the dignity and intensity of human desires; and hence that, which is slow to languish, is too easily turned aside and abused.” So wrote the poet Wordsworth, describing what we may be tempted to mistake for a fourth irreparable flaw in the human condition.

No feature of our humanity is more important than our power to go beyond the particular regimes of society and of thought in which we participate. We can always do, feel, think, or create more than they

bless, allow, or make sense of. The fecundity and amplitude of experience outreach all the formative limitations imposed upon it.

For the same reasons and in the same sense, no social role in any society can do justice to any individual human being. No scheme of social organization can accommodate all the activities that we have reason to value or all the powers that we have cause to exercise and to develop. This excess over the determinate circumstances of existence should excite in the mind the idea of our greatness, or of our share in the attributes that some of the world religions have ascribed to God.

Nevertheless, the ordinary experience of life, although punctuated by moments of joy, which may be sustained and prolonged by our engagements and attachments, is one of blockage and humiliation. The persistent disproportion between our context-transcending powers and the objects on which we lavish our devotions threatens to turn existence into an ordeal of belittlement. “In every house, in the heart of each maiden, and of each boy, in the soul of the soaring saint, this chasm is found,—between the largest promise of ideal power, and the shabby experience.” “So each man,” wrote Emerson, “is an emperor deserted by his states, and left to whistle by himself.”

The extremes of economic deprivation and social oppression to which most of mankind has been condemned for most of history make this ordeal seem all the more bitter and inescapable. If, however, we look beyond the surface of life, we see that not even the privileged, the powerful, the gifted, and the lucky are free from the burdens of belittlement. For these burdens result universally from the recurrent, shaping incidents of a human life. Even a man whose circumstances and fortune have shielded him from deprivation and oppression must face these trials in three successive waves in the course of his existence.

First, at the beginning he must be driven out of the sense that he is the eternal center of the world. He must come to understand not only that he is just one among countless many but also that he will soon be nothing. Even if he allows himself to be persuaded that he will gain eternal life, he cannot regain the illusion of being at the center.

Later, he must resign himself to taking a particular course in life, if indeed the course is not imposed on him by the constraints of society. If he resists committing himself to such a course, he does not become universal; he merely becomes sterile and sick. However, the conse-

quence of the particularity of the course of life is to open a rift between who we ultimately are and know ourselves to be and how we must live. The individual knows himself darkly to be more, much more than his outward existence reveals. Instructed by the world religions and, today, by the democratic and romantic creeds, he may even feel that he is entitled to scale the heights of experience and vision because he has unplumbed depths. That, however, which he knows himself ultimately to be he is unable to express in a course of action in the world. The result is that existence becomes an ordeal of self-distortion and self-suppression. It is not the tragedy of Hamlet alone; it is every man's pain.

He faces the burdens of belittlement a third time as he grows older, and settles into an existence that he has embraced, or that has been forced upon him. A carapace of routine, of compromise, of silent surrenders, of half-term solutions, and of diminished consciousness begins to form around him. He turns himself over to the rigidified version of the self: the character. He begins to die small deaths, many times over. He fails to die only once, which is what he would desire if he were able fully to recognize the value of life. This third encounter with belittlement reveals belittlement for what it in fact is: death by installments.

It is crucial to a moral and political vision, and therefore as well as to any religion, that it mark in the right place the division between the inalterable circumstances of existence and the alterable arrangements of society. To represent flawed and revisable ways of organizing social life as inescapable is the characteristic form of superstition about society and history: the illusion of false necessity. The consequence of such illusion is to help entrench a particular ordering of society against challenge and transformation. It is to leave our ideals and interests hostage to the institutions and practices that represent them at a particular moment, and thus as well to inhibit our efforts to reconsider their meaning. A contemporary example of such institutional fetishism is the unwarranted identification of the abstract ideas of a market economy or of representative democracy with a particular, path-dependent way of organizing markets and democracies.

To deny the inescapable features of existence—death, groundlessness, and insatiability—is to commit no less grievous an insult against

ourselves. In failing to confront them, we cease to awaken to a greater life from the sleepwalking of compromise, conformity, and the petrified self. We seize upon devices and stratagems that divide and enslave us under the pretext of empowering us.

Our susceptibility to belittlement is a persistent and pervasive feature of our experience. However, it is not, like mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability, an irreparable defect in human life. It allows for a range of response, both individual and collective, in biographical as well as historical time. It is, consequently, not to be mistaken for a fourth incurable deficiency in the human condition.

Just what we can and should do about our susceptibility to belittlement, as individuals and as societies, is crucial to the course of life and to the advance of humanity. Our struggle with the threat of belittlement can easily be misdirected. One such false direction seeks to avoid or overcome belittlement by holding before us false hope of escaping our mortality, our groundlessness, or our insatiability. Another mistaken path accepts a particular established, or proposed, regime of society or of thought as the definitive template for our triumph over belittlement. The most important disorientation of all fails to see how the conduct of life may preserve us from the evils of belittlement, so long as we are not overwhelmed by the frailties of the body and the cruelties of society. It regards belittlement as no more avoidable than death.

What we are to do about our susceptibility to belittlement has always been a theme in the religious consciousness of humanity. For the more than twenty-five hundred years that witnessed the emergence, spread, and influence of the present world religions, it has, however, remained largely a subterranean theme. An argument of this book is that it should now become a central and guiding concern.

The generic antidote to belittlement is empowerment, collective or individual. There are principal false forms of individual and collective empowerment: a species of each that now exercises commanding influence. They are not false in the sense that they fail to increase the power of the species or of the individual. They are false in the sense that, despite their contribution to our empowerment, they cannot keep their promises; they fail to repair our susceptibility to belittlement, as it must be faced by each man and woman in the course of life. I call the chief

false collective remedy to this evil the romance of the ascent of humanity, and the chief false individual remedy Prometheanism.

The romance of the ascent of humanity and Prometheanism fail as responses to the perils of belittlement, or respond to them at an intolerable cost to the enhancement of life. Nevertheless, each of them resembles another direction of response that does indicate the path by which we can hope to triumph over belittlement. The development of these better counterparts to the errors of Prometheanism and of the romance of the ascent of mankind is one of the main aims of this book.

Here is a rendering of the romance of our ascent. Humanity rises. Its rise is not inevitable, not at least in the more guarded and realistic versions of the romance of ascent, but it is possible. (Auguste Comte and Karl Marx, two philosophers of this romance, were not so circumspect.) We the human race, the species, have already gone far to diminish our haplessness before nature. When we depended completely on her, we used to worship her. Now we have built great civilizations. We have formed, through science and technology, instruments with which to extend our powers and to prolong our lives. We have created opportunities for many more people to have much more time to explore the secrets of the universe as well as the workings of society and of the mind. All these achievements are only a beginning. The watchword of the romance of the ascent of humanity is: you have not seen anything yet.

We used to believe in a pre-established harmony, a foreordained convergence, between the institutional conditions of our material and of our moral progress: the development of our powers of production and innovation and the disentanglement of the possibilities of cooperation from the rigid schemes of social division and hierarchy that have weighed on them in all the historical civilizations. We no longer take such a convergence for granted. However, we are entitled to hope that there is an area of possible overlap, a zone of potential intersection, between the arrangements that can help make us richer and more powerful and the arrangements that can help make us freer.

Some day, if we learn to restrain our hatreds and our wars, we shall escape our corner of the universe. We shall establish presence far from our earthly home. Our powers will assume measures and forms that to us now would be unimaginable. Although we will not achieve eternal

life, we shall live not only longer but also much better. Our successors will look back on us and wonder how the human race could ever have been so fragile, so powerless, and so confined.

We, their precarious forerunners, can look forward and share in the vision and in the joys of this rise. We are entitled to hope that all the good that we do to one another and to ourselves will live on, as part of the adventure of mankind.

This romance of ascent supplies a response to our trials of belittlement that is inadequate in two distinct ways. It is, in the first instance, inadequate because unless the individual can share in his own lifetime in this rise, he casts himself in the role of instrument of the species, as if we were ants rather than human beings. We allow biographical time to vanish within historical time, or make it figure only as a period of servitude, even when our indenture is voluntary. We become estranged from the supreme good, indeed the only good that we ever really possess: life in the present.

Augustine said that all epochs are equidistant from eternity. What are we to tell the individual who, in a scheme like those of Comte or of Marx, happens to have been born far before the consummation of history? That the miseries of slave society or of the capitalist sweatshop were necessary to the emancipation of an unborn humanity? The positive social theorist, or the philosopher of history, who believes that he has uncovered the hidden script of historical necessity may profess no interest in such an anxiety. The individual, however, who has resorted to the ascent of humanity as a response to the trials of belittlement must ask himself how the future empowerment of the species makes up for his present subjection. If he has come to understand that history has no such script and that although the future rise of the race is possible, it is neither inevitable in its occurrence nor foreordained in its content, his dissatisfaction will be all the greater.

The romance of the ascent of mankind is inadequate, in the second instance, as a solution to the problem of our susceptibility to belittlement because its true and hidden attraction comes from another, largely unacknowledged quarter. Under cover of being a response to belittlement, it is in fact also an answer to death. If we cannot bring ourselves to believe the metaphysic (which I call in this book the overcoming of the world) according to which the distinct existence of the

self, and indeed the entire phenomenal and temporal world, are less real than the unified and timeless being from which all emanates and to which all returns, we can nevertheless persuade ourselves to accept a weaker version of that doctrine.

According to this version, we are indeed the real individuals that we seem to be, living in a historical world that is also for real. We shall have to accept death and the dissolution of the body to which consciousness remains tied. We shall nevertheless survive in the onward rush of emergent humanity.

I, the individual, however, will not survive. The future glories of the human race will not elate me now, nor its future absurdities and savageries now cast me down. Each of us can indeed work, out of love or ambition, for the unborn. Only a fool, bent on consolation, no matter what the cost in self-deception, would find in our sacrifice to them rescue from death.

Once the specter of this secondhand immortality vanishes, the romance of the ascent of the human race loses much of its luster. It loses it not only as a compensation for death but also as a cure for belittlement. What we do must make us greater now, even at the price of abruptly shortening the life in which this greatness is manifest. All true greatness may be sacrificial. However, as the beneficiaries of sacrifice, those who have yet to live enjoy no priority over the living.

As a response to the risks of belittlement, rather than as a vision of the future capable of inspiring and informing action in the present, the romance of the ascent of humanity must fail. It performs in this role the part of an illusion that is related to a moral and political truth. The truth to which it is related is that we diminish our susceptibility to belittlement now by beginning to reorganize society now.

We can establish universally an education that recognizes in every child a tongue-tied prophet, and in the school the voice of the future, and that equips the mind to think beyond and against the established context of thought and of life as well as to move within it. We can develop a democratic politics that renders the structure of society open in fact to challenge and reconstruction, weakening the dependence of change on crisis and the power of the dead over the living. We can make the radical democratization of access to the resources and opportunities of production the touchstone of the institutional reorganization of

the market economy, and prevent the market from remaining fastened to a single version of itself. We can create policies and arrangements favorable to the gradual supersession of economically dependent wage work as the predominant form of free labor, in favor of the combination of cooperation and self-employment. We can so arrange the relation between workers and machines that machines are used to save our time for the activities that we have not yet learned how to repeat and consequently to express in formulas. We can reshape the world political and economic order so that it ceases to make the global public goods of political security and economic openness depend upon submission to an enforced convergence to institutions and practices hostile to the experiments required to move, by many different paths, in such a direction.

The aim guiding and unifying all these initiatives is the cumulative reformation of the institutions and practices of society in the service of the ideal that was ever paramount for the progressives and leftists: not equality, whether of outcomes or of opportunity, but greatness, the greatness of the ordinary man and woman, the discovery of light in the shadowy world of the commonplace, which is the defining faith of democracy. To this marriage of the effort to lift up the ordinary lives of ordinary people with the method of institutional experimentation and reconstruction I give the name deep freedom.

Deep freedom, rather than the romance of the ascent of humanity, is the collective answer to the problem of belittlement. Because it is within our power to move in the direction of deep freedom, we must never mistake our susceptibility to belittlement for an irreparable defect in human existence, alongside our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability.

Deep freedom offers a legitimate and effective antidote to belittlement. It is also an incomplete one. It has the present, as well as the future, for its terrain. It builds in the penumbra of the adjacent possible, and demands down payments on its dreams. However, like every social construction, it calls on many minds and many wills. It evolves in historical, not in biographical, time. It is not within the purview of the individual, no matter how powerful, to direct. It cannot replace a change in the conduct of life: a change of heart, a change of consciousness, a change in the orientation of existence.



Prometheanism is what I call the most influential individualist response to the evil of belittlement. Its core is the idea that the individual can raise himself beyond the plane of ordinary existence in which the mass of ordinary men and women allow themselves to be diminished. He can do so by becoming the radical original that he already inchoately is and by turning his life into a work of art. To say that he turns his life into a work of art is to affirm that he raises it to a level of power and radiance at which it becomes a source of values rather than a continual exercise of conformity to values that are imposed on him by the conventions and preconceptions of society.

As with the romance of the ascent of humanity, the text is reacting to belittlement but the subtext is dealing with mortality. Prometheanism beats the drums in the face of death. By exulting in his powers, above all in his power to fashion himself and to become a creator of value, the individual fails to achieve literal deathlessness; he remains condemned to the annihilation of the body and of consciousness. Nevertheless, he may hope to achieve the next best thing to immortality; he lives, among men and women who remain below, on a lower rung of the ladder of existential ascent, as if he were one of the immortal gods. The clearest sign of this election—in truth, a self-election or a self-crowning—is change in the experience of time. It is our absorption in activities that, without denying our mortality and finitude, suspend for us the oppressive passage of time. Thus, we have a taste of eternity without leaving our mortal bodies.

I name this view Prometheanism by poetic license, for in so calling it I do injustice to Prometheus. He stole fire from heaven to give it to humanity. These Prometheans steal fire to give it to themselves.

It is a position that was given voice by Nietzsche more than by any other thinker. Rousseau and Emerson approached it, but never surrendered to it. The professors of philosophy now like to call it moral perfectionism, only to contrast what Henri Bergson called the morality of aspiration to the morality of obligation. Both its insights and its illusions escape them. Its revealed enemies are not the stunted ethics of duty but rather conformity and belittlement. Its hidden enemy is death.

Accordingly, the overt defect of Prometheanism is its denial of the claims of solidarity in the making of the self. No man makes himself. We are made by the grace of others, through connection with them, in every realm of existence. Because every connection threatens us with loss of freedom and of distinction, even as it may give us the self that we have, or can develop, our dealings with others are fraught with an inescapable ambivalence, the other side of the mimetic character of desire.

The idea that the triumph of the individual over belittlement must take place against the backdrop of a distinction between a small number who become artificers of their own lives and creators of value and a hapless mass that sinks back into conformity and enslavement entangles the winners as well as the losers, the powerful as well as the powerless, in anxious vigilance to uphold or to undermine the arrangements of this dominion.

The specific nature and consequence of such a denial of our dependence upon others becomes clear when we compare Prometheanism to its precursor in the history of moral sensibility, the heroic ethic, prestigious and even predominant, in the cruder form of an ethos of martial valor and self-assertion, in many of the societies in which the present world religions arose. The hero imagines himself ennobled by a task of indisputable worth, often requiring the commission of acts of violence prohibited within the confines of normal social life. It is a theme retaken, in the romantic vision, by the artist in bourgeois society, who subverts the ideals and attitudes supporting the established social regime.

The hero flatters himself that his preeminent worth results directly from such acts rather than from the approval of his nonheroic fellows. In this belief, he is deceived. The heroic task is designed by them and for their benefit. His craving for their approval and admiration is aroused rather than assuaged by the extremity of his actions.

Prometheans imagine that they can solve this problem in the heroic ethic by becoming the inventors of their own selves and thus as well of their own values and tasks. In so thinking and acting, however, they fail to acknowledge the inability of the individual to make or to rescue himself, and the contradiction between the enabling conditions of self-assertion. They also disregard the empty and mimetic character of desire, and the limitations of any attempt to overcome it.

The greatest and fundamental mistake of Prometheanism, however, is its hidden program: to overwhelm, through power and power worship, through the raising up of the strong self over the weak herd, the irremediable defects in our existence, death first among them.

The cure for insatiability, according to the Promethean, is to direct desire inward, to ourselves. Only the infinite self, towering over circumstance, can quench our desire for the absolute, which the believer sought mistakenly in the love of a God who was only the alienated projection of his own self. By such a projection, the believer leaves enslaved what the Promethean proposes to unchain.

The remedy for groundlessness is to ground oneself through successive acts of creation of a form of life for the design of which no man need apply to his fellows. From this self-grounding, forms, values, and practices will result, cleansed of conformity to the social regime. How is this self-creator to know what to create? He will discover himself through non-conformity to his society and resistance to his time. Having discovered himself, he will become, by that same struggle, himself.

The antidote to death, the most important concern of Prometheanism, is a surge of creation. The objects of creation are the elements of such an inner-directed and self-grounded form of life. The aim is to act as if we were not the hapless and inconsolable creatures that we seem to be. It is acceleration and empowerment in the face of an imminent dissolution. It is to fill existence with activities that make time stop.

Prometheanism fails above all because it lies to us about the human condition. Like the religions that it despises, it is a lullaby: a feel-good story, and an effort to arouse the will, in its confrontation with circumstances that the will is unable to alter.

The self-deception has a price. The cost is to undermine the very good of life that it affects to prize. It does so by discrediting the context-bound engagements and attachments on which the quickening and heightening of life depend. It does so as well by treating truth—the truth about our situation in the world—as subsidiary to power. Because the fables to which Prometheanism resorts misrepresent our existence, they cannot guide us in the enhancement of life.

It is the irreparable flaws in existence that help give our lives their shape and potential. It is their terrors that awaken us from the slumber of conformity and bring us to the encounter with time. In turning away

from them, we make the mistake of supposing that we can become more godlike by becoming less human.

Like the romance of the ascent of humanity, Prometheanism is a falsehood that resembles a truth, a dead end easily mistaken for a path. The falsehood is power worship, the subordination of solidarity to self-reliance, and the failure fully to recognize and to accept the incurable defects in the human condition. The truth is that the enhancement of life is our chief interest. In the pursuit of this interest, we must seek to die only once. What this purpose implies for the way in which we live, and in which we deal with ourselves as well as with one another, and for the relation of this way of living to the reorganization of society are among the major topics of this book. The commitment to die only once inspires a certain way of escaping belittlement. It also guides a response to each of the incidents in the course of life that threaten to make us accept belittlement as the corollary of finitude: our early expulsion from the center of the world, our confinement to a particular trajectory and station, and our threatened encasement and slow dying within a shell of character and compromise. The enhancement of life is central to what I here call the religion of the future.

The approach to existence that results from this argument does not deny the relation of morals to politics. The vision informing it can be enacted only to the extent that we move toward the ideal of deep freedom and embrace the institutional changes that the achievement of this ideal requires. The political program of deep freedom has consequences for the reconstruction of society in the present, not just in a remote future. Nevertheless, it is a collective task that advances or fails in historical time, not in the biographical time in which as individuals we must live and die. The less far we go in the transformation of society, the greater is the weight that must be borne by self-transformation.

The vital distinction to be drawn between the insuperable limitations, of mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability, and the corrigible defect of our susceptibility to belittlement helps make clear my aims in this book.

My argument has two central themes. The more we reflect on them, the better we understand them to be aspects of the same conception.

The first theme is the relation between our acceptance of death, groundlessness, and insatiability and our rejection of belittlement, for each of us and for all mankind, as both an individual and a collective task, a moral and a political endeavor.

The second theme is the nature and direction of a religion of the future. The religion of the future (if, for the reasons I later invoke, we may call it a religion) is to be created through a series of innovations different in method as well as in content from those that generated the world religions of today, themselves the products of religious revolutions that spread through the world over a thousand-year period, long ago. It is also a religion about the future. It concerns the bearing of the future on the present. It calls us to live for the future as a way of living in the present, as beings uncontaminated by the circumstances of our existence.

The statement and enactment of such an orientation to life offer our best hope of overcoming belittlement without deceiving ourselves about death, groundlessness, and insatiability. The two themes of the book are two sides of the same reality.

Religion and the flaws in human life

With respect to these flaws in the basic circumstance of existence, everything will never be all right. A simple way of understanding what religion has been in the past and what it can become in the future is to plot its position with respect to this fact.

Imagine three moments. In a first moment, the irremediable defects of our existence do not even come into view. People are concerned chiefly to contend with their dependence on nature, which threatens at each moment to crush them. The point is to deflect the threat and to tell a story about the world that instructs us in the execution of this task. The frightening fundamentals of our existence seem less pressing than the need to do something about the imbalance between the power that nature exercises over us and our power to protect ourselves from nature and to use it to our benefit.

In a second moment, when we have achieved some measure of freedom from complete dependence on nature and developed further the

high cultures that offer accounts of our place in the cosmos, the basic flaws in our existence come to the center of our consciousness. We embrace beliefs that put these flaws in a larger context: a context that gives them meaning and shows them to be less terrifying than they appear to be. We assure ourselves that we will find decisive help against the terrors and the realities of death and of groundlessness, that we will be freed from the torment of vain desire, and that we will find a way to live, now and hereafter, that can bring our circumstance-bound existence into accord with our circumstance-transcending identity.

It would be perverse to reduce the religious orientations that have emerged in world history to so many incantations against the fear that the unfixable deficiencies in our existence will always arouse in us. Nevertheless, without appreciating this element in these orientations, it is hard to make sense both of what they have and of what they have not said and accomplished.

In one such line of religious belief and experience, we devalue the reality of the manifest world of change and distinction, affirm the unity of mind and nature, seek to submerge ourselves within real and hidden being, dismiss death as if it were powerless to touch our essential bond to this one and undying being, and nourish in ourselves the serenity and the universal fellow feeling that such a view of the world may help inspire.

In another direction of faith, we step back from the abyss of groundlessness and mortality, of diminished life and tormented desire, into a social world of humanized social relations, focused on what we owe one another by virtue of the roles that we occupy. We eschew metaphysics in favor of solidarity, internalized in each of us as an ethic of self-denying service. The social creation of meaning in a meaningless world becomes our watchword.

In yet another mode of consciousness, we come to think that a divine friend of ours is master of the universe that he created; that he has intervened and will intervene in history on our behalf; and that his intervention has already rescued us, and will continue to save us, from the otherwise unbridgeable rifts in our existence.

A religion offering us no assurance that everything is all right would differ from what religion has been, so far, in history. It would amount to a third moment in the history of our spiritual experience. The major

spiritual orientations to the world, prominent over the last two and a half thousand years, assure us that, appearances notwithstanding, everything will indeed be all right. We shall be able to redress the flaws in our existence—our mortality, our groundlessness, our insatiability, and our susceptibility to belittlement—or, at least, to rob them of their terrors. Without some such faith, it may seem, life, our life, would remain both an enigma and a torment, and could cease to be a torment only insofar as we contrived to forget the enigma. Nothing could attenuate the sufferings of these wounds other than our absorption in life in our connections and engagements.

The chief point of religion, it may seem, is to prevent such a result. In religion we would find a rescue on the basis of a vision, a reason for hope, achieved through an appeal to realities that counterbalance and override the force of those evils.

The trouble is that the antidotes supplied by the historical religions may all be fanciful: wishful thinking dressed up as a view of the world and of our place within it, consolation in place of truth. The religion of the future should be one that dispenses with consolation. It should nevertheless offer a response to the defective character of our existence: not just a set of ideas but an orientation to the life of the individual and the history of society. It should show us to what hopes we are entitled once we have lost the beliefs in which we once found reassurance. The disposition to acknowledge our situation for what it is would signal a change in the history of religion.

A simple criterion of advance in the history of religion is that our future religion would cease to take as its maxim the attempt to make the irremediable defects in our existence seem less real and less frightening than they in fact are. To mark the path of a religious evolution defined by this standard is one of the goals of this book.

This criterion of progress in religious beliefs is, however, far too vague to mark a definite trajectory. It needs to be supplemented by a view of the religious revolutions that took place in the past and of the religious revolution that can and should take place in the future. I address the nature of the contrast between the past and the future religious revolutions in greater detail later in this book. Something of the contrast should be stated right now, the better to make clear the intent of my argument.

The three responses to the flaws in our existence that I have mentioned—call them overcoming the world, humanizing the world, and struggling with the world—took shape in the thousand-year period extending from some time before the second half of the first millennium before Christ to some time after the first half of the first millennium after Christ.* The religious and moral orientations that have dominated the life of the great civilizations took on at that time their identities.

Such were the religious revolutions of the past. They gave rise to religions that I shall call the world religions, or the religions of transcendence, or the higher religions. They are world religions because their voice, although louder in some civilizations than in others, has been heard in every civilization for many centuries. They are religions of transcendence because they are all marked by a dialectic between the transcendence of the divine over the world and the immanence of the divine in the world. They are higher religions because, from the standpoint of the philosophical and theological argument of this book, they represented a breakthrough to a form of insight and power denied to paganism or cosmotheism, the identification of the divine with the cosmos, against which they rebelled. When I refer to the inventions and innovations that produced the three approaches to existence that I next study—the dominant spiritual alternatives available to mankind over the last two and a half millenniums—I shall call them, by shorthand, the religious revolutions, or revolution, of the past.

My argument is philosophical and theological; it is not a thesis in the comparative-historical study of religion. Insofar as it is philosophical, it

*See the note at the end of this book about Karl Jasper's idea of an Axial Age and the writings that have taken this idea as a point of departure. The note opposes the historical presuppositions and claims, as well as the philosophical intentions, of the view developed here to those that have been advanced under the banner of the theory of the Axial Age. For the moment, it is enough to say that nothing in the argument of the early parts of this book, concerning the religions and philosophies representative of the three major orientations to life ascendant over the last two thousand years, should be read in the context of the thesis of the Axial Age. My aims and assumptions not only are different from those that have largely inspired this literature; they also stand, in many respects, in direct conflict with them.

does not amount to philosophy of religion in any familiar sense, because the discourse with which it experiments is itself religious, in the ample sense of the concept of religion that I propose later in this chapter. Insofar as it is theological, it is a kind of antitheology, because it sees all our ideas of God—as person, as being, or as non-person and non-being—as incoherent and unusable. It cites the religious revolutions of the past, but only for the purpose of gaining clarity about the path of a religious revolution in the future. It refers to the world religions, but only to the extent that they exemplify the three major orientations to life that I consider and criticize.

The religion of the future must break with these orientations. Above all, it must rebel against the ground that they share in common. If it finds more inspiration in one of them than in the others, it must nevertheless learn from the criticism of what it repudiates.

Any religion expressing the turn to transcendence embraces contradictory elements. It will always be found to be closely related to one of the major approaches to existence that I discuss in the early parts of this book. If it were equally related to several of them, it would convey a muddled message. If it rejected the assumptions that are shared by these three approaches, it would represent something different from what these religions have in fact been. Each of the higher religions has nevertheless always also reckoned with aspects of the approaches that it rejects. Moreover, none of the orientations to life that form the subject matter of the next three chapters of this book speaks with a single voice, the voice of a single religion. Each has become an enduring spiritual option, available to any man or woman, anytime and anywhere. Each has spoken through the apparatus of different doctrines, stated in distinctive vocabularies.

In the following pages, I explore the internal architecture of these major spiritual options—overcoming the world, humanizing the world, and struggling with the world. I do so with the intention of going beyond them, not with the aim of making claims about the distinctive doctrines and singular histories of the particular religions that have expressed them. Here, the historical allusions remain ancillary to a philosophical and theological argument. The argument is chiefly concerned with the choice of a direction. I call this direction the religion of the future.

The common element in past religious revolution

The religions and philosophies that became the bearers of the three orientations to life that I next explore shared something significant in common notwithstanding the immense differences among them. What could be common among early Buddhism (as an instance of overcoming of the world), early Confucianism (as an example of humanizing the world), and the Near Eastern salvation religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (as the earliest and most powerful expressions of the struggle with the world)?

Not only did they represent the place of man in the world in radically different ways but they also prescribed starkly different responses to the flaws in our condition. So different were these responses that they may seem, with some reason, to exhaust the major possibilities, our possibilities, not of ways of representing the world but of ways of contending with it. Nevertheless, five shared and connected impulses overrode these real differences. All five were marked by an ambiguity—at the bottom, the same ambiguity in five different aspects. Its resolution helps define the agenda of a religious revolution of the future.

A first common element of the three major religious orientations—overcoming the world, humanizing the world, and struggling with the world—is the rejection of cosmotheism: the identification of the divine with the world. The divine was separated from the world and then placed in relation to it. With this rejection, there began a dialectic of transcendence and immanence that has ever since been central to the religious history of humanity.

For the overcoming of the world, the divine is the underlying, unitary being, of which the time-drenched phenomena and all individual selves are less real expressions. Such reality as they have, they enjoy on loan from the one, real being and possess only to the greater or lesser extent that they participate in that being.

For the humanization of the world, the transcendent divine is personality and the invisible bond among persons. This sacred force can become immanent, to a greater or lesser extent, in the roles, rituals, and arrangements of social life. By establishing social and cultural regimes that organize our relations to one another in conformity to a

conception of our humanity, we create meaning in an otherwise meaningless world.

For the struggle with the world, as originally exemplified by the Semitic monotheisms, the divine is the transcendent God, conceived at first in the category of personality. This God seeks us, his creatures. He does his saving work in our imperfect history. The transactions between God and mankind, conceived on the model of the interactions among individuals, are the means by which we ascend to a higher life, smashing, one by one, all idols—including the established forms of society and culture—that divert us from our ascent.

There is a basic ambiguity in the rejection of cosmotheism. This ambiguity touches, in its variations, all other aspects of the past religious revolutions. The issue is whether the separation between the world and the divine is merely a shift of view or also a transformative project. Does it suffice to change consciousness, or must we also change the world if we are to establish, in place of cosmotheism, the dialectic of transcendence and immanence?

A second shared attribute of these revolutionary spiritual orientations is their insistence on providing a response to the problem of nihilism aroused by awareness of the flaws in our existence, in particular by our mortality and our groundlessness. By nihilism in this context I mean the suspicion that our lives and the world itself may be meaningless: that they may bear no meaning capable of being translated into the idiom of human concerns. The combination of mortality and groundlessness threatens to reduce existence to hallucination.

The need to deal with nihilism helps explain why each of these spiritual directions anchors an imperative of life in a metaphysical representation of the world. To be sure, only one of the three—the overcoming of the world (exemplified by the religion of the Vedas and by Buddhism)—can be comfortable with metaphysics, appealing as it does to the conception of a hidden, underlying reality. The other two must have trouble with metaphysics. The humanization of the world (of which classical Confucianism represents the most important example) is an anti-metaphysical metaphysics, which places its hope in the power of society and culture to secure meaning in an otherwise meaningless cosmos. The struggle with the world (of which the Semitic salvation religions represent the most radical and influential expressions) cannot readily

make peace with metaphysics (despite the ancient and yet unfinished flirt with Greek philosophy) because it affirms the superiority of the personal over the impersonal, and views the transcendent God and his dealings with mankind under the aegis of the category of personality. Where the personal takes priority over the impersonal, and history over timeless being, the metaphysical representation of reality remains at a disadvantage. Only a metaphysic of the personal and of the historical, if it could be formulated, would do.

Nevertheless, both the humanization of the world and the struggle with the world attempt, within and beyond metaphysics, to provide an account of our place in the world that not only supplies a guide to life but also defeats the threat of nihilism. Under the overcoming of the world, we devalue the superficial or illusory experience of individual selfhood and phenomenal distinction and make contact with the one true being. This communion supplies the ground that we lacked, even as it robs death of its sting. Under the humanization of the world, we secure meaning in human life by informing the practices and arrangements of society with our power to imagine the experience of other people. This imaginative empathy makes possible the integrity of a self-sufficing human world in a universe indifferent to our concerns. Under the struggle with the world, in either its sacred or secular forms, we enter a path of ascent promising to increase our share in the attributes that we ascribe to God. Each of these reactions to the threat of nihilism encounters characteristic difficulties, as I later show.

In one way or another, these anti-nihilistic messages convey the message that everything is fundamentally all right with the world or will be all right in the end. But for everything to be all right does it suffice to receive reality in the right way, with a correct understanding and attitude, or must we change the world—and ourselves within it—cumulatively and in a particular direction? Is the struggle with nihilism an argument, such as a metaphysician might have with a skeptic, or is it a campaign of resistance, such as a general might wage against an enemy with vastly superior force?

A third common element of the higher religions resulting from the religious revolutions of the past is the impulse to affirm the shallowness of the differences within humanity by contrast to our fundamental unity: the differences of caste, class, race, nation, gender, role, and culture.

The point is not to deny any measure of reality to these differences or to claim that they are bereft of moral and social consequence. It is to recognize that they pale in comparison to our fundamental unity. The basis of this unity lies not only in our physical constitution but also and chiefly in our predicament: a predicament shaped by our mortality, our groundlessness, our insatiability, and our difficulty in overcoming the disproportion between who we are and how we must live. To be justified, any division within humanity must deepen and develop the unity of mankind. Otherwise, it deserves to arouse suspicion and to be torn down. Until it is torn down, it should be disregarded in our most important choices and conceptions.

Most of the major world religions were authored and disseminated in societies marked by a strong hierarchical segmentation. Prominent among these societies were the agrarian-bureaucratic states that represented, until the present age of world revolution, the most important political entities in the world. In the Indo-European species of this segmentation, there were three major ranks in the social order: those who guide and pray—the priests and philosophers; those who govern and fight—the rulers and warriors; and those who work, produce, and trade—everyone else. To this hierarchical division in the ordering of society there corresponded a hierarchical division in the ordering of the soul: the rational faculties that place us in communion with the supreme order and reality, whether viewed under the aspect of cosmotheism or of its rejection; the action-oriented impulses that inspire vitality; and the carnal desires that pull us toward particular sources of satisfaction. These two hierarchies, in society and in the soul, support each other.

Part of the religious revolution consisted in denying the ultimate reality and authority of such an ordering of ranks within humanity. As a result, any parallel hierarchical division in the soul was left ungrounded in a sacrosanct organization of society. To that extent, it became more open to challenge and revision. The possibility arose of an inversion of values, by which the supposedly lower faculties could come to play a subversive and prophetic role in the building of the self, if only by robbing the person of some of his defenses against other people.

Once again, there is an ambiguity. Is the unity of mankind to be affirmed only as belief or is it to be secured through a reorganization of

society? The Stoic—to take a form of belief only loosely related to the connected religious revolutions of the past—could affirm in his heart the fundamental similarity of master and slave without defying the institution of slavery. For him, it might have been enough to show the other—slave or master—an empathy resulting from the recognition of their fundamental similarity.

For the votary, however, of any of the religious orientations shaped by the spiritual revolutions that gave rise to the present world religions, the question unavoidably arose as to whether this unity could simply be affirmed as a thesis or needed to be carried out as a program. As a thesis, it would require a change of attitude: a different way of performing within the established roles and arrangements rather than a path to their reshaping. As a program, it might demand the radical reconstruction of the established social arrangements.

A fourth shared feature uniting the spiritual innovations that produced the world religions and the approaches to existence that they exemplify was their attack on the authority and the ascendancy of a prevailing ethic: the ethic of heroic virtue, of power worship, of triumph of the strong over the weak, of winning in every worldly contest, of vindictive reassertion of one's place with regard to others, of glorious recognition, renown, and honor, of manly pride. In each of the civilizations and states within which these religious orientations arose, this heroic and martial ethic was associated with a particular class or caste—the rulers or fighters. The link was especially strong within the structure of the agrarian-bureaucratic empires that formed the most important setting for the emergence of the world-historical religions.

In addition to being the characteristic ethos of a caste or status group of warriors and rulers, this moral vision was also associated with young men. “Disrespect me and I will kill you” was its refrain. The struggle for recognition can easily be translated into a prescriptive conception: into a view of what makes life most valuable and into an account of the way in which the moral interests of the ruling caste were bound up with the practical interests of society.

The religions and moralities fashioned by these spiritual innovations were unanimous in their rejection of this ethos. When they did not denounce it as evil, they nevertheless refused to grant it the primacy that its

adepts had always claimed on its behalf. They recognized, with greater or less clarity, the psychological and moral contradiction lying at the heart of the martial and heroic ethic. Those who aspire to be their own creations, in the name of an ideal of self-possession and self-construction, turn out to be all the more dependent on the approval of others. The ends to which their heroic striving is devoted are supplied adventitiously, from the outside. These ends are the conventional concerns of a particular society or culture. Instead of breaking bonds, they bind.

A close connection has always existed in the higher religions between the repudiation of the heroic-martial ethic and the affirmation of the unity of mankind. For one thing, divisions and hierarchies established within the great states of world history were under the guardianship of the caste of warriors and rulers. For another thing, the ethos of valor and vengeance was patently connected with the ideals and interests of a narrow part of humanity: of the rulers over the ruled, of fighters over workers, of men over women, of the strong over the weak.

What the religious revolutionaries proposed to put in the place of heroic pride and vengeful self-assertion was a sacrificial ethic of self-bestowal, of disinterested love: the *agape* of the Septuagint, the *jen* of the Analects, the world-renouncing self-abandonment of the Buddha. Both the erotic and the sacrificial impulses that formed part of the background of attitudes and ideas from which these analogous revolutions emerged were transformed. The erotic element underwent what the vocabulary of a later age would call sublimation: transmuted from the physical to the spiritual. Sacrifice ceased to be focused on an animal or human victim on which the collectivity could expend its fear, its anxiety, and its rage. The burden was taken up, for Christianity, by the incarnate God himself, and in every one of these connected religious revolutions transformed into an ideal of self-sacrifice as the price and the sign of a sympathy no longer bound by blood or even proximity.

It would be obtuse to collapse ideas as far apart in their visionary content and in their moral implications as Christian *agape* and Confucian *jen*. Nevertheless, the common elements were thick as well as thin: they arose from transformative insight into the link between the moral primacy of sacrificial love or fellow-feeling and the visionary

anticipation of the unity of mankind, asserted against the shallow and transient divisions within humanity.

The result was a radical reversal of values: more than a rejection of the ethic of the class/caste of rulers and warriors, a turning upside down of it. That this inversion might be tainted, as Nietzsche would come to argue, by the resentment of the weak against the strong, did not annul one of its central promises: to turn self-sacrifice into self-empowerment, and to make it part of a response to the irremediable defects in our existence.

There was in this turn, as in all the others, an ambiguity. Was this love to be a fleshless benevolence handed down from on high and from a distance, by the enlightened or the saved to the unenlightened and the unredeemed, with sacrifice but without inner risk? Or was it a love that required from the lover that he unprotect himself and accept a heightened vulnerability? To the extent that it was the former, it might represent the continuation of the power impulse in the ethic of valor and vengeance, in even more potent and more twisted form, as Nietzsche saw: the practice of altruism confirming the superiority of the benevolent will without ever placing the agent in intimate jeopardy or acknowledging his need for the supposed beneficiary of his self-sacrifice. If, however, it was the latter, it required from the lover much more than altruism: the imagination of the other person, the unprotection of the self and the recognition of its need for the other, the acceptance of the risk of rebuff or failure.

It may not be immediately apparent how this ambiguity related to the ambiguities besetting the other shared features of these religious revolutions, but it did. As a substitute for the ethic of honor and valor, benevolence given from a distance and from on high represented a turning upside down rather than a reinvention. As the will to power persisted, under the guise of this inversion, little radical transformation of the self was required. The old impulses took new form, as the weak turned their weakness to advantage against the strong. However, the substitution of this guarded altruism by a risky love among equals was a wholly different project. It did require a radical transformation of the self. In so doing, it raised the question of the changes in the arrangements of society and culture that might help strengthen the conditions for such a self-transformation.

A fifth common characteristic of these religious revolutions lay in their ambiguous relation to the real world of power and of states in history. Each of these orientations to life exemplified by the religions originating from these spiritual upheavals has been a two-sided ticket.

One side of the ticket admitted the individual to join a triumphal procession: a culture or a collectivity, embraced by a civilization and by a state, of which it formed a guiding or even established doctrine. By using the ticket, the individual joined the winners, even when the doctrine was one that claimed to exalt the losers. Participation in a community of belief, supported by worldly power and accredited by cultural authority, established a union among the believers that transcended both kinship and social station.

The other side of the ticket authorized the individual to escape from the nightmare of history and the savagery of society into a realm of inner experience in which other standards held. Even the humanization of the world (as in Confucianism), with the central value that it placed on the moral logic of our engagement in society, offered the individual refuge from the verdict of history: an inner life that would be proof against the seductions of worldly power and the demons of worldly failure.

The two-sided ticket, of admission and escape, is essential to understanding the immense effect exerted by the spiritual approaches arising from these religious revolutions. To understand these religions in the spirit of this two-sided ticket meant, however, to diminish the transformative significance of their teaching. At every point, there was another option: to tear up the two-sided ticket, of admission and escape, in favor of a progressive attempt to change both self and society and to widen our part in the attributes of divinity. It is at once the most general and the most explicit form of the same ambiguity touching all the other shared characteristics of these spiritual orientations, the most influential in the history of mankind.

We can best understand the specific character of the religious revolutions of this long historical period as the combination of changes of attitude with a series of narratives and worldviews. The worldviews and narratives differed starkly. In one direction they devalued the phenomenal world of time and distinction, and asserted the higher reality of unified and timeless reality. In another direction, they offered progress

toward a humanized social world capable of overriding the meaninglessness of the cosmos by the human creation of meaning in a network of social roles. In a third direction, they described a course of decisive and salvific divine intervention in human history.

Different in almost every respect, these conceptions nevertheless agreed in offering their adherents consolation for the incorrigible flaws in our circumstance. In one way or another, they presented a vision of the world and of our place within it that robbed those flaws of much of their horror. They did so, however, with the following difference. The two orientations that required from the faithful the greatest change in their way of life—the ones that I have called the overcoming of the world and the struggle with the world (exemplified respectively by early Buddhism and by the Semitic monotheisms)—made the most radical claims, the ones most at variance with our ordinary experience of those tormenting facts. In one case, they denied the ultimate reality of the phenomenal world of change and distinction that is the scene of our suffering. In the other instance, they represented human history as enveloped within a narrative of divine creation, intervention, and redemption.

By contrast, the view that demanded relatively less by way of redirecting the conduct of life, and consequently less as well of an abrupt break with the established worldly ethic—the humanizing creation of meaning in a meaningless world, developed through an elaborate account of what we owe one another by virtue of the social roles that we perform—did not require so stark a denial of our apparent condition. There is nothing in this humanizing response that justifies us in dismissing the reality of death, of groundlessness, of empty and insatiable desire, of the disproportion between the largeness of our natures and the smallness of our circumstances. Instead of a dismissal, it offers us a reprieve, by way of a step back into a world of our making.

It is as if there exists a secret correspondence between how radically we are asked to change our lives and whether we must be promised, in return, freedom from death, groundlessness, and insatiability. The transformative will receives encouragement and guidance from a vision of the world assuring us that, with regard to what is most terrifying and incomprehensible in our existence, everything will or can be to the good.

What religion is, or has been

In addressing the major spiritual orientations to have emerged over the last two and half millenniums and in presenting a view of what can and should succeed them, I use the contested concept of religion.

We in the West today are accustomed to define religion having in mind chiefly the Near Eastern religions of salvation: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Such a view organizes the concept of religion around the idea of a transcendent and interventionist God and the truth revealed by him to humanity. It disregards the objections that have led some students of two of these religions—Judaism and Islam—to reject the term religion altogether.

It also excludes two of the three major orientations that have represented, for about two thousand years, the chief spiritual alternatives available to humanity. It fails to include the overcoming of the world insofar as this approach to existence rejects, as the example of Buddhism shows, the notion of a personal deity. It does not apply to the humanization of the world to the extent that, as the example of Confucianism suggests, this response to our circumstance puts a this-worldly spiritualization and moralization of social relations in the place of a partnership between human will and divine grace.

I call all three approaches to existence that I explore here, as well as the spiritual and intellectual movements that have represented and developed them, the world religions, the religions of transcendence, or the higher religions. I treat the Semitic monotheisms or salvation religions as the original and most influential form of one of these approaches: the struggle with the world. This usage requires elucidation and defense of the disputed concept of religion.

In contemporary religious studies, the idea of religion lies under a cloud of suspicion. In a move characteristic of the situation of social and historical thought today, this idea is criticized as a historical construction, and a relatively recent one at that. The construction is often said to be modeled on Protestant Christianity and to suffer the influence of Protestant beliefs about the actual or desirable relation of Christian faith to the rest of social life. Such beliefs first won influence in early modern Europe. The word religion gained broad currency, as a

way to designate both communities of faith and their creeds, only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, under Protestant influence. The earlier uses of the word and of its cognates had been narrower and more selective; ritual practice had been their chief connotation.

The move to repudiate the term religion betrays a characteristic confusion. This confusion should not be allowed to bar deploying the concept of religion, so long as we are clear about the meaning that we choose to give to it and the uses to which we intend to put it. The advantages of the concept of religion over any rival category for use in argument like the one that I conduct in this book are palpable and decisive.

No human practice has an unchanging core. If our practices are historical and mutable, and open to revision, addition, and subtraction, there cannot be such an essence of religion any more than there can be an essence of law, of art, or of science. Religion is not the name of a stable entry in an encyclopedia of human activities. No such encyclopedia exists. The experience of which it forms part can be carved up in different ways. Its commonalities and continuities are those of a history: a history of reorientations and of stabilizations.

If practices lack essences, the words that we use to designate them are even more mutable in meaning. There is hardly a word of any consequence in the labeling of our enacted beliefs that has not suffered successive conversions of meaning, or not had origins suspect to those who later appropriate them to a changed use. What matters is clarity of purpose on the part of the converters of meaning, not fidelity to the assumptions of the dead.

Every revolution in the beliefs and activities that we now call religious is bound to change our idea of what religion is. If the same principle applies to the practice of natural science, constrained as it is by the reach of our scientific equipment, the discipline of its mathematical expression, and the pressure exerted by the inherited agenda of scientific problems, it must apply in spades to the practices we call religion, which labor under none of these constraints.

When we were terrified by nature, and sought to placate gods who represented natural forces and who were not unequivocally on the side of any supreme good or reality in the world, and when we sought from such gods only the protection of our worldly welfare, our worship of the invisible powers meant something different from what would later be called

religion. The scope and nature of what we now call religion changed when we began directly to address the implications of our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability; envisioned a higher realm of reality or value above or within us; and sought to enhance our share in the life of that higher order, thus transforming rather than merely protecting ourselves. This emergent set of practices and beliefs shares no common essence with the first set. What it shares with it is a history, rooted in the circumstance, the struggles, and the discoveries of mankind.

For the purpose of my argument here, the concept of religion has three advantages over any manifest rival. The first advantage regards the present; the second, the past; the third, the future.

The present-regarding advantage is that the idea of religion comes already laden by its history, which is also our history, with two connotations that are central to the intellectual perspective from which I propose to engage the past and future of comprehensive orientations to existence. The first connotation is that of the need to take a position, to commit our lives in one direction or another, even when our grounds for taking one position rather than another may seem inadequate to persuade anyone who has not shared the same experience by which we came to our belief. In this domain, we cannot stop, as we do in science, at the boundaries of knowledge that we can hope to defend by readily available and widely accepted argument and evidence. We must take a stand, implicitly if not explicitly, whatever the limitations of our insight. A person who professes to take no such position will be shown by the course of his existence to have taken one in fact.

The second connotation of the concept of religion is that the vision in the name of which we take such a stand cannot be cabined in any department of experience. It has implications for every feature of the conduct of life and of the organization of society. Those are mistaken who object to the concept of religion (in its application, for example, to Islam or to Judaism) on the ground that it separates a religious and a non-religious sphere of existence. The main line of belief and action in all the orientations to existence explored here moves against any such separation.

The privatization of religion, especially in part of the history of Protestant Christianity, is, from this standpoint, an exception to a tendency that has been dominant in all these approaches to existence for much of

their history: the demand to touch and to transform, in the light of their message, every facet of human action. Even in Protestantism a contrast between a religious and a non-religious part of experience has been anomalous. It characterized much of Protestant spirituality and theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it gained an afterlife in the United States, given the predominant political and constitutional doctrines, in that country, about the place of religion in a pluralistic society. However, it was foreign to Luther as well as to Calvin. Much of the most influential Protestant theology of the last hundred years has been in rebellion against this bias, characteristic of the middle period in the history of Protestantism.

Similarly misguided is the view that a separation of the religious and the non-religious is regularly associated, at least in a Christian context, with the idea of a Church. For a Christian, the Church is primarily the community of the faithful, sustained by the presence of divine spirit and engaged in the transformation of every aspect of human life. It is only secondarily an organization. The validity and the meaning of the doctrine of the apostolic succession have been a source of division among Christians almost since the beginnings of Christianity.

It is also important not to mistake the contrast between the religious and the secular for the distinction between the orders of grace and of nature, which gained force in the nominalist Christian theology of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and has beset Christianity ever since. Later in this book, in exploring the direction of a religion of the future, I use the opposing words sacred and profane to mark a contrast different from the contrasts between religious and secular as well as between grace and nature. Sacred and profane distinguish a vision that sees our ascent to a higher life as enveloped in a narrative of transactions between a transcendent God and his human creatures from a vision dispensing with any such story.

Any distinction between a sphere of private life and devotion penetrated by religious faith and a remainder of existence on which faith has no purchase negates a defining impulse of the religions of transcendence: not just of those that worship a creative God—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—but also of Buddhism and Confucianism, and indeed of all the spiritual orientations that broke with cosmotheism. That distinction is the operational meaning of secularization. What we chiefly

mean by secularization is not that people have ceased to believe in some version of the dialectic between transcendence and immanence but rather that they see whatever such belief they do hold as inapplicable to much of existence. Such a distinction between the domain of religion and the realm of a secular residue, in fact most of everyday life and social order, impoverishes religious experience. To say that the category of religion presupposes or implies such a division between the part of life in which religion takes an interest and the part to which it remains indifferent is to look at religion from the perspective of its enemies and to take the world religions as tools in their hands.

There is no good reason to acquiesce in such a reversal. The suggestion that the term religion has been irremediably compromised by the Protestant beliefs shadowing its wide adoption in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is abdication of our freedom to say what we mean. Such an abdication sacrifices something deep and enduring (the shared characteristics of the orientations to existence that have prevailed over the last two and a half millenniums) to something local and short-lived (the privatization of religion in the middle period of Protestantism). Why should Kant, Schleiermacher, and Madison determine, from their graves, how we use our words?

Expunged of this confusion, the historically contingent concept of religion, even if we employ it to designate only the living reality and the discontinuous history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, would already suggest the seemingly paradoxical sum of two connotations: a commitment that exceeds its grounds, or a vision that goes beyond its reasons, demands to penetrate the whole of existence and of society. No concept that we took out of a book, or devised in the study, would be likely to exhibit such a startling and improbable combination, vital to my inquiry and to my proposal.

The past-regarding advantage of the concept of religion is that it offers a ready-made imaginative space in which to compare the major comprehensive and practical orientations to existence over the last twenty-five hundred years. I claim that, as a matter of historical fact, three such approaches to life have commanded, above all others, the attention of mankind during this long historical period. Each of these approaches has an internal conceptual order: a moral and a metaphysical logic. The historical instances of belief and of practice that have exemplified these

orientations to existence have common, non-trivial characteristics, of form and of substance, despite the immense differences, of substance as well as of form, distinguishing them. In an earlier section, I explored the extent to which they share a program for society and for the self. In this section, I discuss the degree to which they can all be understood as instances of a similar practice. I call this practice by the conventional name religion, modifying the conventional idea of religion in the double light of a thesis about the past and an intention concerning the future.

The future-regarding advantage of the idea of religion is the most significant in the argument of this book. Given that a historical construction about historical realities, such as the concept of religion, lacks a fixed reference or a stable essence, it should not be surprising that it has a pragmatic horizon. The meaning that we give to it should depend on what we propose to do with the activities and beliefs that at a given time we use it to describe. What this form of experience has been until now matters chiefly by virtue of its bearing on what it can and should become: on what we should do with it, and turn it into.

I view the past and the present of what I call religion in the light of an idea about its future: the concept of religion must be large enough to accommodate the transformation for which I argue as well as the most important approaches to life to have marked the history of humanity over the last two and a half thousand years. It must make room for the full array of the religious revolutions that resulted in the three positions considered here. It must include the two of those three positions that dispense with the conception of a transcendent God, locked in an embrace with the humanity that he created and that he has saved, or will save, through his engagement in human history. It must, however, also have space for the religious revolution that is needed next.

That a concept of religion can be inclusive enough to perform these multiple roles and yet exclude enough of neighboring areas of belief and action to prevent its descent into emptiness may seem unlikely. Yet that it can be adequately inclusive and exclusive in this fashion and to these ends is just what I next claim. The vindication of this claim can lie only in the execution of the argument.

What this idea of religion chiefly excludes is philosophy and, by extension, art and politics. The three orientations that I explore and the

one that I propose to succeed them are not simply philosophies or worldviews, as these conventional concepts have generally been used. They are not mere philosophies or worldviews, even when they make no appeal to the idea of a transcending and redemptive God who reveals to mankind, through his prophets, the path of its salvation. The will to take a stand in the commitment of existence in a particular direction, despite the apparent absence of adequate grounds on which to do so, and then to insist that the whole of individual life and social experience be penetrated by the vision informing such a commitment, sets religion apart.

According to these present, past, and future-oriented standards, to count as religion a set of enacted beliefs or belief-informed practices must have three characteristics.

A first characteristic of religion is to respond to the incurable flaws in our existence: our movement toward death, our inability to place our existence in a definitive context of understanding and meaning, and the emptiness and insatiability of our desires, to which we are wrongly tempted to add (wrongly because we can redress it) the disproportion between the force of our circumstances and the reach of our nature. Whether the response offered by religion to these defects is one that robs them of their sting or on the contrary acknowledges them unflinchingly remains an issue at stake in the unfinished history of religion.

The beliefs that comprise a religion may represent a more or less oblique answer to those terrors and sufferings. The answer, however, must never be so indirect that it cannot be understood by the believer as responding to these sufferings and terrors in ways that engage the will as well as the imagination.

However, religion has almost never cordoned these problems off from the rest of experience and addressed them in isolation. A religious vision has consequences for every aspect of existence: no part of individual or social life is so prosaic or so technical, none so this-worldly or unreflective, that it cannot be influenced and penetrated by a religious orientation.

If in the midst of our ordinary affairs we stop to think about the intensity of life and the certainty of death, of life and death unexplained in a universe whose ultimate contours, origin, and future we are unable

to grasp, all the while tormented and aroused by our desires and conscious of a power that we are unable adequately to deploy before our decline and annihilation, we may experience our existence as a hallucination. We turn away in dread from this delirium into our affairs, into the devotions of our attachments and engagements. We hope that they will absorb and rescue us.

Religion is neither the awareness of the delirious nature of our consciousness nor the turning away from the delirium into our everyday business. It is the cognitive and volitional position that we take with respect to a circumstance in which we seem compelled to choose between these two attitudes. No wonder that its development has taken place under the shadow of the temptation to console.

The consolation has characteristically taken a double form in accordance with the twofold nature of religion as both belief and practice. As belief, it has been a way of representing our situation that reads this situation as less terrifying than it seems to be. As practice, religion has been a set of collective activities and individual habits that enables us to cast a spell on ourselves: to quiet not only our empty and insatiable desires but also our anxiety about our mortality and our groundlessness. A story about how everything can or will be all right becomes part of a fix we place on ourselves.

The work of consolation, however, has consequences for the substance of our view of the world and for the direction of our activity within the world. The work may be compatible with one level of enlightenment and emancipation but incompatible with the next level: compatible with the enlargement of vision and the freedom from prejudice achieved by the religious revolutions that gave rise to the three approaches to life considered here but incompatible with the further revolution that we may need now.

Nothing in the history of religion is harder to overcome than the impulse to reassure us about the irremediable flaws in life. The difficulty is aggravated by the need to rely on ideas that are, by the very nature of our groundlessness, contestable and fragmentary. It is if, by a strange paradox, we could put an end to wishful thinking only by a practice of thought overreaching what we can hope to understand.

A second characteristic of religion is that it relates an orientation to life to a vision of our place in the world. The link between orientation

and vision provides a kind of answer to the incorrigible defects in our circumstance. The answer recognizes the defects as more or less real, and more or less susceptible to redress or response. It interprets their implications for the conduct of life.

The vision acquires its power to guide because it addresses what is most disturbing in our existence: that we must die although we feel that we should not; that we seem unable, by the light of the understanding, to place our lives in a reliable context of meaning; that we always remain at the mercy of desires that are both empty and unlimited and that pursue us until our final end; and that little or nothing that we can do with our lives seems adequate to our context-transcending powers. The position that we take with respect to these problems acquires prescriptive authority. It enjoys such force both because of their intrinsic importance and because the way in which we deal with them has consequences for every other aspect of our experience.

The distinction between the *is* and the *ought*, between description (or explanation) and prescription, has force with respect to views about part of our experience. However, it ceases to be feasible and legitimate when we must deal if not with the whole of our experience at least with its general contours, with the limits that give it its disconcerting and mysterious shape.

Any account of the irremediable defects in our experience will have a pragmatic horizon. We cannot infer from such an account a canon of rules and standards by which to conduct ourselves. It will nevertheless orient our lives in some directions and away from others. It will appear to us to be invested with the power of an existential imperative.

Conversely, any such imperative will presuppose or imply a way of dealing with the major flaws in our existence. Our practiced view of how to live will reveal better than our professed doctrines how we understand our situation in the world and what we make of its defects. Only when we shift the focus from the whole of a situation to a region of our experience, only when we begin to address discrete problems and to parse isolated arguments, will the distinction between the *is* and the *ought* again start to make sense.

An analogy helps clarify the problem. In the tradition of physics inaugurated by Newtonian mechanics, no distinction carries greater weight in the structure of explanation than the difference between the

initial conditions of a set of phenomena to be explained and the laws of motion governing the workings or the change of those phenomena within a certain configuration space. The laws fail to determine the initial conditions. These conditions may, nevertheless, be explained by other laws. From the standpoint of the relevant laws, the initial conditions are factitious and stipulated givens.

When, however, we try to generalize this style of explanation from a part of the phenomena to the whole of the universe—from mechanics to cosmology—the distinction between initial conditions and law-like explanation breaks down. There is no outside, from the vantage point of which we could stipulate the initial conditions as starting points for the operation of the laws.

What is good, by way of explanatory style, for the part is no good for the whole. It is just this sort of breakdown through generalization that occurs when we try to impose the distinction between the *is* and the *ought* on the enacted beliefs that deal with our existence as a whole and with its most basic defects. We call such action-oriented and comprehensive beliefs religion.

A third characteristic of religion is that the imperative of life, rooted in a vision of the world, responsive to the incurable defects in our existence, requires us to commit our lives in a certain direction. It requires us to commit our lives without having what, by the prevailing standards of rational discourse, could ever be an adequate basis on which to do so. Neither the evidence of the senses nor the application of our reasoning, within any established discipline or method or outside all particular methods and disciplines, can suffice to provide such a basis.

Our faculties, our methods, our sensory access to the world all address aspects and fragments of our experience. They shadow and extend the range of our actions. No matter how extensive their subject matter or scope of application may become, they never lose their fragmentary and restricted character. In religion, however, we must take a position with respect to the limiting and shaping features of our experience as a whole. For this task, our equipment is, by its very nature and origin, inadequate. Nevertheless, the need to do what we will always be unprepared to accomplish is inescapable.

If the position to take were only cognitive, we might be able to take no position at all. However, it is not merely cognitive; it goes to our

need to form an attitude, implicit and unelaborated if not explicit and fully formed, to the most disturbing and perplexing aspects of our condition. We will have an attitude, whether we want to or not and whether or not we are fully conscious of the ideas informing it. In arriving at such an attitude, however, we are condemned to cognitive overreach: we must stake the course of our lives on suppositions whose grounds fail to do justice to the gravity of their implications and to the scope of their claims.

This paradoxical feature of our situation—our need to enlist the most fragile ideas in support of the most important decisions—is the half-truth in Pascal’s account of faith in God as a wager: a bet that pays off fabulously if it succeeds and that leaves us no worse off than we otherwise remain, death-bound in the darkness of a godless world, if it fails. The truth in this account is that we must take a stand—a fateful stand—without having such grounds as we might demand even for decisions of much less consequence. The falsehood is the suggestion that the spirit in which we take such a stand could or should mimic the calculus of the gambler. It is not about a particular benefit or cost (although the Jansenist focus on salvation and damnation might make it seem so); it is about the meaning or meaninglessness of our lives, as viewed from the outside, from the perspective of their defining limits, for what goes on inside our existence, for the way we live.

This inescapable cognitive overreach, imposed on us by our circumstance, is what the vocabulary of the Semitic monotheisms calls faith. To suit the purpose at hand, a conception of faith must not depend on the distinctive tenets of each religion. It must acknowledge the two sides of faith: risking and trusting.

The risking side of faith is the consequence of the unavoidable overreach: the stand without grounds that could ever suffice to justify it by the lights of the criteria that we apply to our decisions of more limited scope. However, such overreach is also prophecy, and self-fulfilling prophecy at that. The vision that results in an imperative, on a basis that is always dubious, prompts us to act, individually and collectively. By our actions we change the world in the light of the vision; thus, the self-fulfilling aspect of the prophecy.

However, we do not change the world at will; we only bring it a little closer to the prophetic message and to its imperative of world

transformation. The world resists the prophecy. This resistance tests the truth of the faith. It is an always ambiguous test, but a test nevertheless.

The trusting side of faith has to do with the consequences of this cognitive exorbitance for our relations to other people, including our dealings with God, when we represent him in the mode of personal being. Because the actions undertaken in the light of religious ideas concern matters of ultimate significance, but at the same time are bereft of adequate grounds for belief, they amount to an adventure. In this adventure we become relatively more vulnerable to others; in one sense or another, we are forced to lift our shields. To put ourselves in other people's hands on account of our beliefs, or in the hands of God when our relations with him are represented by analogy to our relations with other people, and to do so in a way that must seem reckless by the standards of our worldly calculations, is one of the marks of faith.

The risking and the trusting sides of faith are inseparable. The element of trust shows that the risk is never just about a conjecture, however grand, concerning our place in the world: it reveals its meaning in its implications for our connections with other people. The element of risk shows that what we make of such connections remains entangled in our understanding of the limits to our existence and to our insight.

To see religion as the mode of experience defined by these three attributes is to understand why we suffer a perpetual temptation to treat many other forms of practice and of thought—philosophy, art, and politics—as substitutes for religion. It is also, however, to grasp why they are unable to perform this surrogate role without violence to them and to us.

Philosophy may deal with the penumbra of what lies beyond our achieved knowledge. It may wrestle with the insoluble contradictions that arise when we try to overstep the bounds of sense and of understanding. Nevertheless, when it abandons or dilutes the requirement of reasoned justification, it loses direction as well as force.

Art may conjure up the flaws in our condition, and promise a happiness lying beyond them, through some resolution that we can achieve right now despite them. When it tries to reproduce the link between a

vision of the world and an imperative of existence that lies at the heart of religion, it degenerates into didacticism. It then degrades its transforming power.

Politics, represented and conducted in a visionary voice, may relate the reordering of society to a view of the ascent of humanity. Notwithstanding the potential scope of our political beliefs and aspirations, no program for social improvement is capable of bearing the full weight of our ultimate anxieties about us. If made to do so, the result is likely to be mystification in the service of oppression.

Religion has no unchanging essence, any more than philosophy, art, or politics. Like them, it is a historical construction and part of the self-making of humanity. Nevertheless, as we have constructed it and as it has constructed us, it cannot without danger and illusion be replaced by these other forms of experience. We must reckon with religion, and decide what to make it of it: what to turn it into, now.

2

Overcoming the World

Central idea, historical presence, and metaphysical vision

The vision of the world embraced by this first direction in the religious history of humanity is one that has always been exceptional in Western philosophy since the time of the Greeks. However, it has been predominant in many other civilizations. It is the position to which, outside the modern West, philosophy and religion have most often returned. (The focus on impersonal being at the heart of this view of reality weakens the distinction between religion and philosophy.)

The Indic Vedanta, the Upanishads, early Buddhism, and early Daoism represent the clearest instances of this religious and philosophical path. In these traditions it has had any number of metaphysical elaborations: for example, Nagarjuna's doctrine of emptiness (*sunyata*) in the context of the Madhyamaka school of Indian Buddhism. It describes aspects of the doctrines of Parmenides, Plato, the Stoics, and the neo-Platonists, especially Plotinus. In modern Western thought, the teaching of Schopenhauer is its consummate expression, both as metaphysics and as practical philosophy. We can also find it, however, under different cover, in both the monism of Spinoza and the relationalism of Leibniz: the decisive common element is denial of the ultimate reality of time and thus as well of distinctions among the time-drenched and seemingly mutable phenomena for which we mistake the real.

The overcoming of the world resonates in the mystical countercurrents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. In Jewish, Christian, and Muslim mysticism, the opening to a personal God risks being sacrificed to a

vision of impersonal, unified, and universal being. This vision in turn inspires an ethic of selfless benevolence and a quest for indifference to suffering and change. It does so, however, on the basis of a devaluation of the reality of time and of the distinctions among beings, including the distinction among selves. No wonder these mystics have regularly fallen under the suspicion of heresy in each of the Semitic monotheisms.

The metaphysical idea informing this approach to existence is the affirmation of a universal being lying behind the manifest world of time, distinction, and individuality. Our experience is the experience of the reality of time in this one real world. It is an experience of a world in which there is an enduring structure of different kinds of things and the individual mind is embodied in an individual organism. The philosophy and theology of the overcoming of the world tell us, however, that time, distinction, and individuality are unreal, or that they are less real than they seem to be.

In the history of thought, this view has taken both radical and qualified forms. The radical versions of this view (as we have it, for example, in the Vedas or in Schopenhauer) deny time, distinction, and individuality altogether. They proclaim the illusory character of each of these features of our experience. However, even these radical teachings acknowledge that there must be some limited element of truth in these illusory experiences: enough truth to explain why the world appears to us under the disguise of a differentiated structure of distinct types of being.

Unified and timeless being becomes manifest, according to this radical form of the metaphysic of the overcoming of the world, in a manifold of distinct natural kinds: types of being. Some of these types of being possess sentient life and will. They find themselves housed in a particular body, with a particular fate, susceptible to the ills and risks that attend embodiment, and doomed to die. They may be tempted to form an idea of their own distinction and reality that the truth about the world fails to support. In fact, they are passing expressions of what is really real: the one, timeless being that stands behind the screen of time-bound and divided experience.

But why has unitary and timeless being become manifest in divided and time-bound experience? We cannot know. No philosophical

statement of this worldview (not even Schopenhauer's) has ever provided a developed account of why or how underlying being becomes expressed in phenomena that generate such illusions. Why does there exist not just a world but a world that appears—at least to us—under an aspect contradicting its ultimate reality?

Within the bounds of such a view of the world, this question may remain unanswerable. We dare not attribute to unified being the intentions of a person. We are separated from this ultimate reality by the abyss of embodiment and by all the illusions accompanying it. For the metaphysic of the overcoming of the world, our most reliable connection with the one being and the one mind is the experience of consciousness, understood to soar above the divisions that are imposed on this ultimate reality by the incarnation of universal mind in individual bodies. Nothing in the experience of consciousness explains why universal mind should appear to us thus partitioned in the form of individual minds. Nothing in the metaphysical systems associated with the overcoming of the world accounts for why the supposedly illusory experiences of time, distinction, and individual selfhood should form part of the process by which the truth about unified and timeless being is affirmed. The prevalence of these illusions in our experience seems to represent a superfluous and mysterious detour.

This radical version of the metaphysic of the overcoming of the world rests on two bases: one, cognitive; the other, practical. The latter may be stronger and more appealing than the former.

The cognitive basis of this radical metaphysical doctrine is the claim to make sense of a world in which all distinctions are impermanent. The trouble is that impermanence is not the opposite of being or reality. The distinctions among beings in the world may be real, although they are impermanent, if time is real. Then we must form an account of how things turn into other things, in the course of time. To provide such an account is the proper goal of science.

On the other hand, if time is not real, as the radical philosophical statements of the overcoming of the world commonly claim, we can give no account of transformation. Transformation presupposes time. The distinctions among things, or beings, must therefore be illusory. Moreover, the hold of this illusion on our experience must be explained.

The strong point of this radical version of the metaphysics of the reality of the world is its notion of the impermanence of all types of being. Its weak point is its denial of the reality of time. Impermanence with time affirmed means something very different from impermanence with time denied, and has very different implications for the conduct of life and the significance of history. These contrasts come more clearly into focus when we consider them in relation to the discoveries and disputes of contemporary cosmology.*

There is much in what science has discovered about the universe and its evolution to suggest the impermanence of the structural distinctions that we observe in nature. We are familiar in the life and earth sciences with the principle of the mutability of types: there is, in the history of the earth and of life on earth, no permanent typology of natural kinds, whether the kinds of being are living or lifeless. Every part of this typology is historical; its content changes, albeit discontinuously in time.

The types of being change. So does the character of the ways in which one natural kind differs from another. An igneous rock does not differ from a sedimentary rock in the same way, or in the same sense, that one animal species differs from another.

The mutability of types is in turn connected with a principle of hysteresis or path dependency. The history of mutable types is the concomitant product of many loosely connected sequences of change that cannot persuasively be reduced to one another or inferred from a higher-order explanation: for instance, in Darwinian evolution the relation among the distinct influences of natural selection, of the structural constraints and opportunities created by an established repertory of body types, and of the historical movement and separation of land masses, studied by plate tectonics.

The larger meaning of the principles of path dependency and of the mutability of types becomes clear in the light of a third principle of

*Lee Smolin and I develop these ideas in *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time*, 2014. If the claims of that essay in natural philosophy are well founded, nothing in the entire argument of this volume, or in the philosophical program that it shares with my book *The Self Awakened*, contradicts what science has to teach us about how nature works: not at least if we learn to interpret the findings of science without the blinkers of unwarranted metaphysical prejudice.

natural history: the coevolution of the phenomena and of the laws of nature governing them. It is only by sheer dogma, without consequence for the practice of scientific explanation, that we can, for example, suppose that the regularities governing life preexisted its emergence.

We now have reason to believe that these principles, rather than being restricted to the phenomena addressed by the earth and life sciences, apply to the universe as a whole. The most important discovery of the cosmology of the twentieth century is that the universe has a history. The best interpretation of this history is that there was once a time when the rudimentary constituents of nature, as they are now described by particle physics, did not yet exist.

In the very early history of the present universe, nature may not have presented itself as a differentiated structure. There may not have been a clear contrast between states of affairs and laws of nature governing them. Susceptibility to change and the range of the adjacent possible may have been larger than that susceptibility and this range subsequently became in the cooled-down universe studied by the physics that Galileo and Newton inaugurated. It is only thanks to an anachronism, amounting to a cosmological fallacy, that we suppose nature to wear no disguises other than those that it exhibits in the universe as we observe it now, long after its fiery beginnings.

This reasoning may at first suggest that the intransigent form of the metaphysic of the overcoming of the world, rather than being a philosophical fantasy, finds support in the revelations of science. The specific forms of being are evanescent; this metaphysic teaches that it is only being itself that remains. As soon, however, as we introduce into our thinking the idea of the inclusive reality of time, we find that this apparent affinity between the course of modern science and the radical metaphysic of the overcoming of the world starts to vanish.

It is not just the typology of natural kinds that changes in the course of the history of the universe as a whole, as well as in the course of the history of the earth and of life. Change also changes. The ways in which things are transformed into other things are themselves subject to transformation. This susceptibility to uneven and discontinuous change, including to the change of change, is what we call time. If time is not only real but also inclusive, nothing can be beyond its reach, not even the laws, symmetries, and supposed constants of nature. They, too,

must have a history and be, in principle, mutable. Their mutability is consistent with the stability that they display in the cooled-down universe, with its well-differentiated and enduring structure.

The prevailing ideas in physics and cosmology take a different direction. They either equivocate about the reality of time or deny it altogether. In rejecting the idea of a fixed background of space and time against which the events of nature take place, they nevertheless reaffirm the notion of an immutable framework of laws, symmetries, or constants of nature.

If time is inclusively real, and everything is subject to its ravages, if it is the only reality that does not emerge, there can be no such unchanging framework. On the other hand, however, if there is such an unchanging framework, there then also exists a basis for a permanent differentiated structure in nature, or a typology of natural kinds, if not in the derivative and emergent phenomena studied by natural history, then in the more fundamental constituents of nature that are explored by physics.

The radical metaphysic of the overcoming of the world affirms the ephemeral character of all distinctions among types of being, at the same time that it denies the reality of time. Its similarity to the scientific view that I have described is therefore merely apparent. In this view all structure is mutable precisely because time is inclusively real. Moreover, the metaphysical conception informing this approach to existence must account for how and why we come to entertain the illusions that it dismisses. In so doing, it cannot appeal to our experience, which is thoroughly penetrated and shaped by those illusions.

By its reliance on this conception, the overcoming of the world arouses the contradiction that I earlier remarked between the theoretical and the practical antidotes to the threat of nihilism. Its theoretical answer to the fear that our lives and the world itself may be meaningless is to cast aside the beliefs, the attachments, and the engagements that prevent us from recognizing our participation in timeless and universal being. By casting them aside, however, it weakens the sole practical antidote to the threat of nihilism, which is life itself, with all its engagements and attachments. On the pretext of increasing our conscious participation in that being, it dissuades us from the

complications that give an actual life its fullness. Such invulnerability as we attain risks being achieved through the demoralization and the thinning out of the only kind of experience that we can really undergo.

If time is real, the distinctions among things are historical and therefore transitory, but they are not illusory. They are real so long as they exist. We can understand them only as products of a history of transformation.

The importance of this difference between a view denying the ultimate reality of both distinction and time and a view affirming the inclusive reality of time while insisting on the historical character of transformation becomes clear when we consider its consequences for action in the world. A conception that insists on the illusory character of phenomenal distinction, of individual selfhood, and of time undermines the will from two directions. It does so, first, by attacking the seat of the will in the self. It does so, second, by discounting the reality of the habitual objects of the will. These objects assume the reality and significance of the distinctions and changes that the radical metaphysic of the overcoming of the world denies. If there are ultimately one being and one mind, there is nothing that this one being and one mind can will other than to be themselves.

The overcoming of the world thus becomes, as well, an overcoming of the will: the development of an attitude to the world that is, so far as possible, will-less. We might call this orientation to existence overcoming the will rather than overcoming the world. The dismissal of time, distinction, and individual selfhood and the supersession of the will are thus the two fixed and central points in this metaphysical conception. The campaign against the will in turn serves as a bridge connecting this metaphysical view to the ideals of serenity through invulnerability and of detached, universal benevolence that are characteristic of this approach to life.

By contrast, a view that recognizes the contingent and mutable character of all types of being and affirms the inclusive reality of time assures the will of both a basis and an object. Its basis is the real, individual self. Its object is a world of distinctions that are no less worthy of attention for being ephemeral. For such a view, history is not a shadowy backdrop to our engagement with timeless and unified being. It is the set-

ting in which everything that we have reason to value is created or destroyed.

The metaphysical extremism of the view that denies the reality of time, difference, and individual selfhood has always had a practical as well as a cognitive foundation. Under the guise of metaphysics, it has offered self-help. It has promised a route to happiness even more forcefully than it has offered a road to reality. This promise has taken both a minimalist and a maximalist form.

The minimalist form of self-help is the hope of becoming invulnerable, or less vulnerable, to the sufferings that result from our entanglement in the world. By no longer crediting the distinctions and changes of the world with reality, we also cease to give them value. We diminish their power over us. Our relation to a world the distinctions of which we endow with both reality and value is a relationship dominated by the will. The will at odds with a world that it cannot master is the source of all our suffering. To escape suffering we must overcome the will. The best way to overcome the will is to deny its object: the illusory world of change and distinction. In this minimalist mode, the promise of happiness is a promise of invulnerability, or of diminished vulnerability.

The maximalist form of self-help is the hope of establishing contact with the only true reality and source of value: hidden, unified, and timeless being. If there are one being and one mind, then our best hope of happiness lies in overturning the obstacles to our experience of absorption in that one being and one mind. On such a basis, we can experience our kinship with all other manifestations of the One, and express this kinship in an inclusive fellow feeling.

The metaphysical vision of the overcoming of the world has more often appeared in a qualified version than it has spoken in the language of the intransigent view that I have just discussed. The hallmark of this qualified version is the idea of a hierarchy of degrees of reality or of forms of being. In the West its earliest and most compelling expression was the middle and late philosophy of Plato: in particular, Plato's doctrine of forms. It took another expression in the neo-Platonist view of the phenomenal world as the last stage in a series of emanations of the One.

Consider the qualified version of this metaphysic freed from the distinctive concerns and categories of Plato's or Plotinus's philosophy. The

individual phenomena that we encounter are instances of types of being. These types are in turn formed on the model of invisible archetypes, which may be capable of representation only in the language of mathematics or of a metaphysic eschewing all reference to particulars. What is most present to our experience is less real than what is least present. Our unexamined sense of reality is a delirium brought on by our embodiment and by the consequent limitations of our perceptual apparatus.

Theory can, however, liberate us from the burdens of embodiment and present the world right side up. Once again, however, our practical reasons for adopting such a view will always seem more persuasive than our theoretical reasons. The correct understanding of the hierarchy of being and of reality should allow reason to rule over the action-oriented impulses and these, in turn, to prevail over the carnal appetites. It can equip us to curb our insatiability by overcoming the perspective of the will, entranced with the shadowy world of appearance. It offers to help us achieve serenity in the face of death, which, according to this line of reasoning, annihilates only the lesser reality of ephemeral individual selfhood. It holds open the promise of communion with what is most real and most valuable: the universal being and mind in which we share.

In both the radical and the qualified versions of the metaphysics of the overcoming of the world, the relation between the denial of time and the denial of distinction and individuality plays a central role. The world of individuals and individual things is also the world in which each of these individuals remains subject to the ravages of time. It is a world in which our engagements and connections function as the most important clocks by which we measure the passage of our lives.

Time and distinction are internally related in experience. If different parts of the world, or states of affairs, did not change differently, there would be no time. The reality of time presupposes a world made up of distinct elements that fail to change in lockstep.

On the other hand, if time did not exist, there could no causal interaction among parts of the world. There could be only a timeless grid or manifold (as represented, for example, by the philosophy of Leibniz). Different kinds of being might continue to be distinguished from one another in such a world, as nodes in a grid. Nevertheless, the sense in

which things are distinct from one another and identical to themselves would be very different from what it is in the world that we actually inhabit. Their natures would be hidden, at least to us.

We understand a state of affairs by grasping what it can become in a range of circumstances: the understanding of the actual is inseparable from the imagination of the possible—of the adjacent possible, of what can next happen or of what we can make happen next. So if there were no time, we would be unable to understand the grid by appreciating how its different parts work. In a sense, all we could do is stare at it, not even to see it, if seeing connotes a measure of understanding.

The intimate relation between time and distinction is further shown by our ability to put both of them aside in our mathematical and logical reasoning. Such reasoning takes place in time (if indeed time is real). We can use our mathematical and logical discoveries or inventions to represent time-bound events. Newton and Leibniz developed the calculus, for example, for just that purpose.

Nevertheless, the relation among logical and mathematical propositions is not itself time bound. A conclusion is simultaneous with its premise, but an effect must come after its cause. In mathematics and logic we explore a simulacrum of the world, from which time and phenomenal difference (the distinctions among kinds of being) have been sucked out. We consider the world under the aspect of bundles of relations, unrelated to the time-bound particulars that we experience.

We can readily recognize the evolutionary advantages that such a power affords us: thanks to its exercise, we vastly expand our repertory of ways of understanding and of representing how parts of the world can interact with another. We do so, however, at the cost of letting into the inner citadel of the mind a Trojan Horse built against the recognition of distinction and time.

No wonder the qualified versions of the metaphysic of the overcoming of the world—the versions that represent the phenomena as less real than their hidden archetypes—have so often been expressed in the language of mathematics. There is a sense in which our mathematical and logical reasoning gives us a foretaste of the overcoming of the world. The adherents to the overcoming of the world treat this foretaste as a revelation of the nature of ultimate reality. We who resist both this metaphysics and the moral project it helps inspire may prefer to understand

mathematics and logic as inquiries into a simplified proxy for the one real world, a proxy reduced to the most general features of reality and therefore robbed of individual difference and of time.

Incitements to overcoming the world

The direction in the religious experience of humanity that I am calling the overcoming of the world is, like the other two directions to which I next turn, more than a long moment in the religious history of mankind. Viewed as a mode of consciousness rather than as systematic doctrine, it is not confined to particular philosophical or theological traditions. It presents itself under different disguises as a way of thinking and of feeling that will forever be persuasive. Two forces, each deeply rooted in our experience, perennially renew its life.

The first force is our experience of mind and of access to other minds. Viewed from a certain perspective, all that we ever have direct access to is a mental state now, in the augmented present allowing for an experience of the passage of what has been to what is beginning to be. Our past and future mind states, which we are accustomed to regard as expressions of our embodied and continuous selves, are fabrications or representations of the mind caught in that augmented present.

In each such moment, our view of what came before and of what is to come later changes. Whether our past and future mind states deserve to be regarded as the mental experience of the same self, like the photographs that make up a moving film, is a conventional belief that may be supported by a wide range of theoretical justifications. It is not an immediate and indubitable experience.

On the other hand, despite the hiddenness of other people, of their fears and longings, impressions and perceptions, we regularly feel that we do have some access to other minds: to the present mind states of those around us and to the past mind states that are recorded or remembered. All our spoken or silent dealings with them presuppose such an access. All our conduct is a perpetual testing of the rightness of our conjectures about them.

No nation is so distant in historical time or in cultural remoteness that we cannot hope to penetrate something of its sensibility and consciousness. Our ability to imagine alien experience finds nourishment in an understanding of ourselves, enlarged by an education that gives us access to the subjective life of humanity in times and places distant from our own. If the unity and the continuity of our own mental experience are in doubt, so may the otherness of the mental experience of other people seem to be only relative.

The baffling character of our relation to our own as well to other people's conscious life has suggested to many, in the course of the history of thought and of feeling, that there is only one mind or that mind is one. The unity of mind would be the true basis for our power to imagine the alien. It would be the material that appears to us broken up in the present moment—the simultaneous dying away of what has just been and coming to be of what is to become—that is the only experience we ever have in the world. It is distributed in different mind states only as light is refracted in rays. It is nevertheless always the same thing, like light itself.

This unified being or mind is the ultimate reality; everything else is either unreal or less real. Its site of revelation is the present, the now; the past and future are mental constructions rather than mental experiences. The exigencies of our embodiment are what lead us to them. Once we begin to doubt the reliability of those constructions, we begin to doubt as well that time is what we habitually take it to be. We start to take as the cornerstone of our view of the world the present mindedness that is not only the most reliable form of experience but, strictly speaking, the sole form.

The second force inspiring the effort to overcome the world is a paradoxical feature of our experience. We must face the ineradicable defects in our circumstance: the terror of death, the vertigo of groundlessness, and the treadmill of desire and frustration, aggravated by our susceptibility to the insult of belittlement. Of these defects, we many succeed temporarily in suppressing our awareness of the first two and of resigning ourselves to the fourth by lowering our expectations of life. From the third, however—the relative emptiness of our desires, our tendency to fill them up under the pressure of the ideas of and behaviors of those

surrounding us, our struggle to demand the unlimited from the limited, the relentless move from privation to frustration or satiation and in either event to disappointment and boredom—from this ordeal we can never escape.

On the other hand, the world seduces us at every turn. The possession of life is the gateway through which we move toward its irresistible glories. The radiance of being, of its unity and diversity, threatens to dazzle, blind, and paralyze us if we fail to turn away from it to the business at hand.

The doctrinal expressions of the overcoming of the world offer an account of the sources and meaning of this contradictory character of our experience. The sensibility and consciousness expressed and enhanced by these doctrines promise relief from this rift within us. They propose to show how we can see and live in such a way that the charms of the world may prevail over the flaws in existence. The quest for invulnerability to change and suffering, as well as for benevolence given from on high, provides a practical route by which to achieve this goal.

It is thus a mistaken prejudice to associate the overcoming of the world with a philosophical pessimism, as it is associated in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, the sole thoroughgoing development of this point of view that we have had in the West. Like the other two major orientations in the history of world religion, the overcoming of the world connects insight with hope and salvation. The question to ask next is whether it looks for salvation and hope in the right place.

Serenity and benevolence

These ideas and incitements inspire a vision of how to live. In that vision, the two central commitments are to serenity and benevolence. They are closely linked.

We achieve serenity by conquering the will, which, seated in the embodied self, seeks the attractions and prizes of a realm of shadows. We cultivate an inner reserve from the commotions of this shadowy domain, a reserve founded upon our acknowledgment of the truth—of the One being or of the archetypes of reality—lying behind the veil of time, distinction, and individual selfhood. We discount the signifi-

cance of the ups and downs of worldly fortune. We become, to that extent, invulnerable; invulnerability and serenity represent two aspects of this same ideal of existence. We experience, right now, our share in the hidden reality of the One or in the hidden realities of the models of being.

The right understanding of the world may be a necessary condition of our detachment. However, it is generally recognized by the votaries and philosophers of the overcoming of the world to be an insufficient condition. Right understanding must be supplemented by disciplines that, under the light of this understanding, turn the will against itself. One such discipline is that of intense concentration, filtering out all extraneous elements in consciousness, and turning consciousness on itself, until it comes to experience itself as a piece or as an expression of universal mind. Another discipline is the cultivation, through art and speculative thought, of a contemplative view of reality, uncontaminated and undistracted by the interests of the embodied and individual will. Yet a third discipline is sacrificial action, which not only acknowledges our universal kinship with all other beings but also practices renunciation of our self-regarding and partial interests.

The intended effect of these disciplines is not to prevent us from acting. It is to allow us to act as the conscious citizens of a higher order of reality. The serenity that it seeks is therefore compatible with courageous and even heroic intervention in society. The risks and costs of such intervention, rather than placing the ideal of serenity in jeopardy, reveal its nature. Serenity results from self-possession. The self that is thus possessed, however, is not the one that awakens to find itself tied to a dying organism. It is the one that recognizes its participation in an order of reality and of value lying beyond the parade of phenomenal difference and change. We can more readily confront or renounce the epiphenomenal because we have come to view our experience in the light of the real, which is also the timeless.

A disinterested and universal benevolence forms, alongside this ideal of serenity and self-possession, the second part of the existential imperative that results from the overcoming of the world and of the will. It is the specific form taken, in this approach to life, by the inclusive fellow feeling that all the higher and historical religions sought to put in the place of an ethic of proud self-assertion.

Its distinctive tone is sacrificial attentiveness to the needs of others, marked by distance and detachment. Such benevolence is highest and purest when uncompromised by any erotic interest or by any proximity of blood, community, or common interest. It is best experienced and offered by a person who has already triumphed over the illusions of the will. Although it may be attended by great costs and risks, including death, it brings no inner trouble. It cannot be troubled by being rebuffed. On the contrary, it is marked by a joy signaling our discovery that we are not simply the individuated selves, the partial minds, and the dying organisms that we appear to be. It is both enabled by serenity and productive of serenity.

A benevolence of this nature presupposes no equality between the lover (if we can call disinterested benevolence love) and the beloved. For one thing, different human beings achieve different degrees of advance in the overcoming of the world and of the will. Only those who advance furthest toward this goal are capable of the greatest generosity. For another thing, the lover needs nothing from the beloved, not even disinterested love in return. The less his benevolence is requited, the more perfect it is.

The metaphysical basis of this ideal of benevolence is the same as the metaphysical foundation of the ideal of serenity. It is the acknowledgement of the falsehood or shallowness of all the divisions within the cosmos as well as within mankind. The overcoming of the world infers the denial or devaluation of the barriers within humanity—a shared theme of the religions of transcendence—from its most general thesis about the ultimately real. The practical consequence for the ideal of benevolence is that our sacrificial good will should reach out not just to other human beings and to non-human sentient creatures but even, as well, to all beings, caught in the toils of illusory distinction and change.

From the combination of the radical or qualified metaphysic of the overcoming of the world with the twofold imperative of serenity and benevolence, there results a response to death, groundlessness, insatiability, and belittlement.

The overcomers of the world and of the will deny death by affirming that the life of the individual self was, to begin with, an illusory or derivative phenomenon. In the radical versions of the metaphysic of overcoming, the dissolution of the body breaks down the barrier that sustained

the illusion of our estrangement from one and timeless being. In the qualified versions, with their hierarchy of degrees of being and reality, death represents an incident in an itinerary (for example, of the transmigration of the soul, to be embodied in other individual organisms) that has our reunion with one and timeless being as its goal.

The overcomers deny groundlessness by moving toward what they regard to be the ground of existence, concealed from us by the phantasms of our mendacious experience of time, distinction, and individual selfhood. Communion with that ground is the ultimate source of both insight and happiness. It is the sole trustworthy guarantee of the serenity that we should seek and of the benevolence that we should practice.

The overcomers deny insatiability by professing to teach us the only way in which we can free ourselves from insatiable desire: to turn aside from the source of desire in the unquiet and embodied self. By negating both the seat and the target of desire and by dismissing or devaluing the impermanent, we escape the ordeal of insatiability. Our escape begins in the right understanding of the world and in the pursuit, on the basis of such understanding, of the ideals of serenity and of benevolence.

The overcomers deny the inescapability of belittlement by affirming our connection to the source of all reality and value: one and timeless being, concealed under the disguise of transient and misleading phenomena. The phenomena separating us from the real and the valuable can also, if we understand them correctly and act according to this insight, become the bridge to the hidden truth of our being. By crossing this bridge, we can experience divinity now.

Criticism: betrayal of the past

My criticism of the overcoming of the world moves from a point of view internal to this way of thinking and acting to a perspective external to it. I first ask whether this direction in the religious consciousness of humanity has enabled its adepts to do justice to the concerns shared by the religious revolutions of the past. Next, I discuss the psychological stability of this set of enacted beliefs: its chances of success in adapting

its program to what we are like and can turn ourselves into. Finally, I take up the aspirations to which this form of consciousness is almost entirely blind, and pass judgment on it from the anticipated standpoint of the religion of the future.

The forms of belief and of conduct characteristic of this religious orientation respond to the common and fundamental concerns of the past religious revolutions: most notably, the tearing down of the barriers within humanity and the supersession of the ethic of the strong and of their lordship over the weak. However, although they address these aims and hold out the tantalizing prospect of satisfying them, they cannot in fact achieve them. The fundamental reason for this inadequacy is simple: we cannot change the world or ourselves by standing and waiting. We can do so only by acting.

The overcoming of the world is not closed to a horizon of action; it has regularly served as the basis for an ethic of inclusive fellow feeling and compassionate initiative. However, it cannot inspire and inform a sustained program of transformation of the social order without being false to its central message. It must treat history as a nightmare from which we seek to awake rather than as the stage of our salvation.

The denial or demotion of the reality of the historical world has as its practical consequence an accommodation to the social order that exists within this world. A priestly or philosophical class performs in this order a high but limited role. It connects the this-worldly reality of the established arrangements to what is supposed to be a realm of higher value and reality. The practices of the Indo-European peoples assign a place to the priests and philosophers alongside, not against, the rulers and warriors. Some versions of these beliefs in Hinayana and especially in lamaist Buddhism have been frankly theocratic, demanding to turn spiritual authority into worldly power, but only the better to subordinate the supposedly shadowy realm of historical experience to a source of truth beyond time. They have never had cause to view the reconstruction of society as the place where the work of salvation must begin.

The occasional exercise of theocratic power in this tradition has confirmed rather than contradicted the claim that it lacks, by virtue of its central message, any program for the reform of social life, other than the subordination of economic activity to the incantatory foreshadow-

ing and embodiment of the higher, hidden reality. No step-by-step remaking of earthly reality could prepare society, under such a dispensation, for the reign of spirit other than an incessant reverence, expressed through prayer. Such a reverence supposedly signals the surrender of the epiphenomenal world to the real one.

It is true that Plato envisaged the government of society by philosophers informed by a metaphysic representing the phenomenal and historical realms as shadows of the archetypes of true being. However, this government ruled only in a book, never in the reality of power. Nothing in the book explained how or why such a power reversal would take place. What remains, instead, is a thought experiment, an exercise in wishful thinking, designed to jump over the abyss between the admonitory parables of the philosophical dreamers and the harsh realities of an unchanged world.

Just as the religion of the overcoming of the world is unable to support in fact the destruction of barriers within humanity, because its quietism reduces the this-worldly significance of its message, so too, for the same reason, it is incapable of supplying an effective substitute for the lordly ethic of honor and dominion. The otherworldliness of the priests ends in the de facto acceptance of a division of labor between the world renouncers and the world rulers. To Caesar what is Caesar's: almost everything. To the other world, a testimonial, within this world, that ordinarily threatens no this-worldly interest but lives alongside it in submissive or anxious retreat.

If, however, the focus of the ethic that is to take the place of lordship and honor shifts from reverence and renunciation to generosity and fellow feeling, even if offered from on high, without the perils of personal love, grounds for a struggle with the world begin to emerge. (They emerged most notably in the evolution of Mahayana Buddhism, in the devotional or *bakhti* forms of Hinduism, and in the mystical counter-currents within the Semitic monotheisms, which brought them closer to the religion of the overcoming of the world.) Then the moral basis for a division of labor between the ruler-warriors and the priests-philosophers starts to crumble, and a vision capable of speaking to all humanity takes form.

The trouble is that the effort to enact this vision through a reshaping of social relations inspired by the ideal of a world-embracing sympathy is

pushed in contradictory directions by the view of ultimate reality that informs it. This view affirms the deep unity of suffering humanity and indeed of all living creatures. In contesting the firm boundaries of the self, it provides a basis for benevolent action in universal selfhood. However, in denying or diminishing the significance of what goes on in both the historical time of societies and the biographical time of individuals, it undermines the reasons, and obscures the guideposts, for transformative action. It takes humanity to the threshold of struggle with the world and leaves men and women there, with an emotion but without a program.

Criticism: the school of experience

Having addressed the overcoming of the world by the light of the shared goals of the religious revolutions that resulted in the major orientations to existence discussed here, consider now this approach to existence by the standard of its psychological reality and stability: its connection with our most deep-seated dispositions. Viewed from this perspective, its flaw is its war against life, life as it really is, manifest in the living individual and the mortal organism.

The denial of the reality of the individual self is a denial of death. It is also an anticipation of death, as if we could rob death of its terrors by foreshadowing right now the dissolution of the self into universal mind. Death is denied by a series of connected, self-fulfilling prophecies that are to free us from the cares and distractions of mortality and to put us in communion with a reality that the decay of our mortal bodies cannot corrupt.

Life, however, fights back. We cannot protect ourselves in this way against death without diminishing or devaluing our dealings with the world and with the people around us, which is to say, without suppressing life. It is as if the way to redress the irremediable flaws in our existence were to have less existence. We transport ourselves out of the coils of our alienated existence into a universal experience, without the dangerous boundaries, of embodiment and time, in which we seem to find ourselves encased.

In the realm of practical action, the consequence at the limit is a progressive disengagement. If our struggle to be free of the subjugating

and depersonalizing perils of intimate connection remains at odds with our recognition of the need to affirm and to develop ourselves through connection, then the solution to this contradiction in the requirements of personal existence is to lengthen our distance from both sides of this polarity. We shall still be able to recognize our kinship with our fellow creatures, but we shall do so from a distance, the distance of a benevolence offered from a superior position, with the double privilege of higher place and limited exposure, without danger of rebuff or disappointment. We shall give up the attempt to form connections that diminish the conflict between the value and the danger of attachment to others. We shall not see in personal love among equals, and in the social arrangements that spread its influence to broader parts of our experience, the supreme instance of such a reconciliation.

Our need to engage in a particular society and culture for the sake of self-construction and of fidelity to our beliefs threatens to result in our surrender to the ideas and standards of other people. Our refusal to surrender drives us into an isolation that denies us means for productive action in the world. The solution that the overcoming of the world proposes to this second contradiction among the requirements of a strong self in society is to withdraw into an inner citadel.

Under the terms of this solution, we renounce the effort permanently to change the relation between spirit-limiting structure and structure-defying spirit by creating societies and cultures that enable us to engage more and to surrender less. We lose hope in the possibility of developing institutions and practices that weaken the contrast between the ordinary moves we make within a framework of established arrangements and assumptions and the extraordinary moves by which we change that framework. Instead, we place our hope in another realm of value and reality, one in which worldly power counts for little. Of the social order in which we have refused to place our hope, we demand chiefly that it not bar our access to higher reality and value and not inflict unnecessary cruelty on our fellow sufferers, who await with us their liberation from the perceived circumstance of an embodied self, exposed to suffering and death.

Life is the cumulative sum of our engagements and connections. The more we shield ourselves against change and illusion, the less we shall have to shield. The spell that we cast on ourselves to ensure serenity

through indifference will sometimes work. However, it will work only at the cost of dimming vitality. It deals with death by anticipating it in contained and reassuring form.

Sometimes the spell will fail to work. Life embodied within us, in the individual self and the dying organism, not in universal and deathless mind, reasserts itself. We experience boredom: the weight of unused capacity, the intimation of undeveloped life. We find the spell degenerating into crankiness, under the principle of addiction: the fixation on particular formulas or routines from which, in vain, we try to win a definitive serenity. Such is the futile attempt that shadows all existence but appears here, in concentrated form, as an effort to make the limited yield the unlimited.

The followers of the overcoming of the world will deny that they wage a war against life. They will claim, in accordance with their vision, that their road to salvation enables us to get off the treadmill of insatiable and frustrated desire and allows us to live in the present, open to the world and to the people around us. If each moment and each experience are to be valued as steps to what could or should succeed them, then we shall never live for now. We shall postpone the fuller possession of life. Our anxious striving will make us less receptive to the people as well as the phenomena within reach. We shall have denied ourselves the self-possession that is the condition for the enhancement of vitality.

However, we cannot be fully alive without engaging the world. We cannot engage it without struggling with it, in imagination as well as in practice. We cannot wage this struggle with conviction unless we have reason to take our phenomenal and historical experience seriously rather than to discount the reality of its sources and objects.

The overcoming of the world conflicts with these requirements at two decisive points. It conflicts with them, first, in its vision: the denial of the ultimate reality of time and therefore of history as well as of phenomenal and individual distinction. It contradicts them, second, in its proposal for how we should live our lives by urging on us a search for serenity through invulnerability. Such a search turns us away from the engagements required for the enhancement of life. It promises serenity, but delivers a foretaste of death.

The need for transformative engagement with the world as a requirement of vitality is not confined to practical activity. It already arises in the work of the imagination. That work relies on two recurrent moves. The first move—the only one acknowledged by Kant—is distancing. The phenomenon must be evoked in its absence; an image is the memory of a perception. The second move is transformation; to understand a phenomenon or a state of affairs is to grasp what it can become under certain conditions or by virtue of particular interventions. Insight into what can happen next is internally related to insight into the existent; the latter deepens in proportion to the advance of the former.

In all these respects, the imagination accompanies and outreaches our practical activities. In its evolutionary setting it serves the purposes of a mindful organism that must solve problems in particular circumstances, equipped with a limited perceptual apparatus, and contend with uncertainty, contingency, and constraint. Thus, in its origins and evolutionary uses, it already stands in the service of life and of power.

However, the imagination soon goes beyond its immediate service to practical problem solving. It develops our understanding of what is in the light of our insight into what may come to be. Its focus is less the phantasmagorical horizon of ultimate possibilities, which we are powerless to discern, than the content of the proximate possible: of what can happen, or we can make happen. The commanding principle of the imagination is its affinity to action, grounded in their shared element: enacted or anticipated change. Openness to transformation, in biographical and historical time and in a world in which the differences among phenomena are both real and subject to change, is part of what we mean by life.

The religion of the overcoming of the world is hostile, both as a vision and as a project, to the enhancement of life. In tempting us to don a coat of armor against the sufferings induced by our mortality, our groundlessness, our insatiability, and our difficulty in living as beings who transcend their contexts, it cannot in fact make us more receptive to the people and to the phenomena surrounding us. It cannot do so because it denies us the means and the occasions by which to imagine them. It fails to strengthen the sentiment of life within us because it prefers serenity to vitality.

Criticism: betrayal of the future

The religion of the overcoming of the world was never capable of carrying out the shared element in the program of past religious revolution. Moreover, it could never be reconciled to the tenacious dispositions and aspirations of humanity except through a deliberate dimming of consciousness and vitality, undertaken in the futile quest to achieve serenity through invulnerability. Similarly, it cannot serve as a starting point for a future revolution in the religious affairs of mankind that is animated by the aim of lifting humanity up, of enhancing its powers, of intensifying its experience, of giving it a wider share in the attributes of divinity, of acting on the principle that we can become better servants of one another if we become greater masters of the structures of society and of thought to which we habitually surrender our humanity.

At the heart of the program of this future religious revolution lies a problem that is squarely presented by the third of the three world-historical religious orientations—the struggle with the world—but that is as foreign to the overcoming of the world as it is to the humanization of the world. In posing this problem, I can rightly be accused of judging one of these traditions by the standards of another. And so I do. I profess no neutrality among them. I claim for one of them an authority that the other two have never gained, and can never hope to gain, in the eyes of humankind: the authority that results from having helped inform and inspire the revolutionary projects that have shaken the world in the last two centuries. These projects fall into two main types: the secular programs of emancipation (democracy, liberalism, and socialism) and the worldwide popular romantic culture.

I later return to the question of the sense in which we have reason to defend and to reinvent these projects. What, however, not even their enemies will be able to deny is that these twin revolutionary messages have exerted an influence in the recent history of mankind unparalleled in its reach. This message derives its power from its promise to elevate human life for the many right now and to continue doing so in the future. In their discourse, common humanity has identified an offer—of recognition as well as empowerment—that it cannot refuse.

A major part of this offer turns on the prospect of enhancing and transforming, by the way in which we connect them, two varieties of individual and collective self-assertion. One variety regards our relations to our fellow human beings. The other variety refers to our relation to the organized institutional and conceptual settings of our life and thought.

There is a problem about our relation—practical, emotional, and cognitive—to other people: we both need them and fear them. It is only through encounter and connection that we develop and sustain an individual self. Nevertheless, every social attachment threatens to entangle us in a structure of dependence and domination and to make the individual self bend to the demands of a collective stereotype. To be freer and bigger would be to see the conflict between the enabling requirements of self-assertion attenuated: more connection, achieved at less of a price in dependence and depersonalization.

There is, as well, a problem about our relation to the institutional and conceptual settings of our action: the institutional organization of society and the discursive organization of thought forming the collective backdrop to individual existence. To act, we must engage these social and conceptual regimes on their own terms. It is only through such engagement that we develop and sustain individual personality; without it, we remain empty. However, every such engagement threatens to become a surrender. We risk giving up to the institutional and conceptual regimes under which we live the powers that we should properly and ultimately reserve to ourselves. To be freer and bigger would be to be able to share in these contexts without surrendering to them our powers of resistance and reconstruction.

The point is not just to challenge and change the social and conceptual frameworks in which we habitually move; it is to change our relation to them. Here are two equivalent ways of describing the change that is to be desired.

In one description, the distance between the ordinary moves that we make within a framework, leaving it undisturbed and even unseen, and the extraordinary moves, by which we bring pieces of the framework into question, will diminish. Our social arrangements and discursive practices will provide instruments and opportunities for their revision. Society and thought will be so arranged that we can be better equipped

and provoked to reconsider and to revise the order as we go about our daily business within it. As a result, we shall be able to say to a greater extent that we can both engage particular social and conceptual regimes and go beyond them. In the old theological language, we can describe ourselves as being in such a world without being of it.

In another description, change will become less dependent on crisis. In society, crisis takes the form of an exogenous shock, such as war or ruin. In thought, it appears as an accumulation of facts that cannot be accommodated within an established theory or discourse. The less a social or conceptual order is designed to open itself up to experimental challenge and revision, the more it will require crisis as the midwife of change. It will break before it bends.

Our stake in bringing about such a change is intimately related to some of our most powerful material and moral interests. It is also associated with the development of our practical capabilities of production through the radicalization of the freedom to recombine people, resources, and machines. It is connected as well to overcoming the forms of social hierarchy and division that hold our relations to one another ransom. Moreover, it is itself, apart from its causal connections with these moral and material interests, the bearer of a spiritual interest: our success in addressing the last of the irremediable flaws in human existence, evoked at the beginning of this book. By transforming, in this way, the character of our relation to the limiting contexts of our existence, we lighten, although we cannot lift, the burden of belittlement: the disproportion between our circumstances and our circumstance-transcending nature.

Progress toward this end takes place in historical time. However, we live in biographical time. What good will it do us if we happen to have been born before this collective work of the ascent of the spirit? Are we condemned to be exiles in worlds of which we are both the builders and the prisoners? We can hope to foreshadow in biographical time what would otherwise be available only in historical time.

We can do so in one way by developing with respect to our character—the rigidified form of a self—an approach analogous to the relation that humanity has reason to develop with regard to the organized forms of society and of thought. We break out of the carapace of compromise

and routine in which we gradually cease to live, at the cost of accepting a higher level of vulnerability, and seek so to live that we may die only once.

We can do so in another way by changing, in the light of an iconoclastic attitude to the social and conceptual settings of our existence, our relation to one another. We can then more readily recognize one another as the context-transcending beings that we secretly know ourselves to be, rather than as placeholders in a social and cultural order—an order that not only shapes our life chances but also teaches us how to think and feel and treat one another by virtue of the roles we perform in that order. Thus may a change in our relation to our circumstances become a change in our relation to other people, not automatically or necessarily, but by the joint effort of the imagination and the will.

A thesis of this book is that this vision of the possibilities of human life stands in an especially intimate relation to the third of the three world-historical religious traditions that I here discuss: the one that I call the struggle with the world. Another thesis, however, is that the advance of this vision is largely incompatible with the present forms of the religious and secular beliefs and practices with which that vision has been historically associated; thus the need, and the chance, for a revolution in the religious experience of humanity.

The religion of the overcoming of the world is an adversary of such a revolution, by virtue both of how it asks us to understand our situation and of how it calls us to act. The understanding discourages us from engaging in the successive confrontations with society, culture, and ourselves that are required to advance this undertaking. The call takes us in a direction that is opposite to the one we must pursue to achieve the needed religious revolution. It does so at the very outset of its proposals to the self by teaching the individual to raise a shield against suffering and change when his first task is to cast his shield down.

Nevertheless, the overcoming of the world is not simply a superseded moment in the religious history of humanity. It gives voice to a permanent possibility of religious experience. It will live again in other forms,

both as a view of the world and as an imperative of life. Its power results from the directness and simplicity of its response to each of the irremediable flaws in our existence.

It responds to the troubles of mortality by assuring us that, with regard to what matters most, we will not die at all. It teaches us not that the individual self will survive death but rather that, properly considered, such a self never existed at all. Individual selfhood is an epiphenomenal illusion, destined to give way to the revelation of our original and indestructible relation to universal being.

It answers the enigmas of groundlessness by telling us that the explanation of the mystery of being and of life lies before our eyes if only we could free ourselves from the distractions of the phenomena and the illusions of time. Once freed, we shall be able to receive the world in all its splendor; the world will be enough to itself. The effort to apply to all of reality the habits and methods of thought developed to deal with part of it will be exposed as misguided. Our highest science and art will tend to confirm the truth of these metaphysical propositions.

It counters the agonies of insatiable desire by proposing, on the basis of this vision, a series of practices meant to help us escape the ordeal of longing, satiation, and boredom. It promises to free us from the force by which our empty and fickle desires chain us to our peers, whom we allow to fill this void with arbitrary content. To disentangle ourselves from such coils, to recognize the vanity of these pursuits, to steel ourselves against disappointment and disillusionment until we have learned to combine a disillusioned indifference to the world with a disinterested, distant benevolence toward other people—all this forms a path to salvation that will forever exercise its attraction when higher hopes fail.

It responds to the experience of belittlement—the disparity between the circumstances of our lives and the inner reality of our natures—by proposing that we discount the significance and even the reality of the former the better to affirm the latter. It urges us to place value where nothing can corrupt it. The only freedom and greatness worth having are those that circumstance is powerless to diminish.

Such a road to salvation will have adherents so long as there are human beings. The language and the arguments will change, to suit the vocabulary and conditions of the time and place, but the spiritual program will survive. It will continue to tempt those who are disappointed

with the reconstruction of society, undertaken in the name of successive revolutionary programs, and skeptical of the transformability of the world. The world such as it appears to us, in its phenomenal diversity and temporal evanescence, does not, they will think, deserve to be changed. It deserves to be overcome. They may seem to go about their business as if time and diversity were for real. They will nevertheless insist that the only reliable way of dealing with the irreparable flaws in human life is to increase our share in an impersonal reality more real and reliable than the individual, mindful organism and than its consciousness of itself as embodied spirit.

3

Humanizing the World

Central idea, historical presence, and metaphysical vision

The natural world—the stage for our tormented passage from birth to death—is indifferent to mankind and largely impenetrable to the mind. It is inhuman and vastly disproportionate to us. Unable to peer into the beginning or the end of time or to measure the outer limits or hidden depths of reality, we remain confined to explaining parts of the world, without ever being able to grasp the relation of the part over which we cast light to the indefinitely larger part that stays unseen. We flatter ourselves in vain that our more or less successful ways of explaining pieces of nature will enable us to explain nature as a whole. The whole remains eternally beyond our reach.

With respect to our greatest good, the good of life, nature works against us. It cheats us of what matters most. It responds to our experience of boundless fecundity, of power to surprise and to overcome, by dooming us to decline and destruction. It is little consolation that life may be denied to the individual only to be granted in spades to the species. We live as individuals, and will not survive to witness the fate of the collective for whose persistence our annihilation is supposed to be indispensable.

The world is meaningless. Its meaninglessness lies in our inability to make sense of its reality and history in terms pertinent to human concerns: our commitments, attachments, and engagements. If the world is meaningless, so, until further initiative, is our place within it. Will this larger meaninglessness—the groundlessness and aimlessness of

human life when viewed from outside, in its cosmic context—overshadow all that we are able to experience and accomplish within our human realm? Or shall we succeed in preventing the meaninglessness of the world from undermining our ability to ground ourselves?

We can step back from the edge of the abyss and build a human realm sufficing to itself. In this realm, human beings create meaning, albeit in a meaningless world. The power and authority of their production of light can be all the greater by virtue of its contrast to the surrounding darkness and of the consequent urgency and value of the saving intervention. Only in this way can we rescue ourselves from the absurdity of our condition.

The creation of meaning in a meaningless world is not, however, a matter of mere speculative fabrication. It is not enough to spin out consoling stories about our position in the universe. In fact, such an activity forms no part of our rescue, the premise of which is to acknowledge unflinchingly the reality and the gravity of our situation. It is the securing and the improvement of what is human, not a changed description of what is non-human, that can save us.

The aim is to ensure that society not be contaminated by the meaninglessness of the world, that it not operate under the sway of forces and according to standards that make life among our fellows almost as alien to our deepest concerns as is nature to the shared experience of humanity. If this inner line of defense fails, all is lost. If we can hold the enemy, of life-shadowing meaninglessness, at bay, in the zone between an indefensible outer line and an indispensable inner line, we can go forward. We have reason to hope.

In the transformation of the human world, we must succeed in preventing force and guile from overtaking cooperation and solidarity. At any moment a struggle may break out over the terms of social life—the terms on which people lay claims to one another's loyalty and labor and to the resources produced, or made useful, by labor. This struggle may be accompanied by war among states or societies.

Any social and cultural order amounts to a temporary halt in this practical and visionary fighting. However, if that is all it is—an unconditional surrender of the defeated to the triumphant, the order will not be stable because it will not be legitimate in the eyes of either the losers or the winners. Its arrangements will not be susceptible to being read as

fragments of an intelligible and defensible plan for cooperation. Consequently, they will be incapable of being translated into laws that can be interpreted, elaborated, and applied in the mutable and varied settings of social life.

Will society amount to the enslavement of the many by the few under disguise? Will its principle be the exhaustion and despair of the enslaved and the anxious vigilance of their masters? Will the disguise be culture? Will the possibilities of cooperation and the claims of solidarity be held hostage to the requirements of a scheme of subjugation, tolerated as the sole remaining alternative to continued violence and insecurity and sanctified by the hopelessness of both its manifest victims and its supposed beneficiaries?

If all these evils come to pass, the order of society and culture will take on the attributes of meaningless nature. The inner line of defense will be broken. We shall have to retreat into what Max Weber called "the pianissimo of personal life." In that domain of intimacy, we may hope to sustain what remains of a life that speaks to our most intimate concerns.

It is not enough to describe the modification of social life necessary to avoid such a result in negative terms. It has an affirmative content. The overriding goal is to reshape our relations to other people according to a vision of what we owe one another by virtue of occupying certain roles: friend and friend, husband and wife, parent and child, teacher and student, ruler and ruled, boss and worker. In this saving exercise, we shall be guided not only by the practical imperatives of the division of labor in society but also and above all by a sense of the relativity of these roles with respect to our common humanity.

Fate has cast us in different roles. The centrality of roles to the organization of society reveals our dependence on one another. This dependence is a mark, rather than a denial, of our humanity. It reveals our strength as well as our weakness. Cooperation, organized through the performance of roles and the observance of social conventions, is not only a requirement for the advancement of our practical interests; it is also an expression of a basic fact about our humanity. Incomplete in ourselves, we complete ourselves through service to others. To serve them, we must understand them. Thus, the development of our imagination of the otherness of other people—the perception of their states

of consciousness—forms part of the process by which we complete ourselves, affirming and developing our humanity. Such imagination must inform our performance of social roles.

What is sacrosanct is the person, together with the fine texture of relations among individuals. All else in society and culture remains subservient to the experience of personality and of personal encounter. In a meaningless world, only personality and the relations among persons are hallowed. We should recognize one another as instances of the sacred—that is to say, of that which can create meaning. Everything else in society is a means to an end.

The nourishment of personality and of personal encounter can alone count as an end in itself: its value is not ancillary to the attainment of any other purpose. To turn ourselves into beings who act in this spirit because they understand one another and their situation in this way is the overriding goal of social reform. Our success in this enterprise determines whether we can make a practical success of life in society and prevent it from degenerating into a nightmare of force and guile.

In conformity to this aim and in the service of this goal, the division of labor in society must be softened and spiritualized. It must become the vehicle of our role-based practices of cooperation and of our slowly developing capacity to imagine one another. Our cooperative practices, anchored in the performance of social roles, must be both accommodated and spiritualized, according to the demands and the resources of each historical circumstance. Ravenous self-interest must be mastered in the interest of such a humanization of social life. Some element of hierarchy may be admitted, but only so long as it can be justified by the practical requirements of coordination (rather than by belief in the intrinsic qualities of different classes and castes). Only to the extent that we reform society in this way can we prevent its fall into a nightmare of domination, and tame selfishness.

Such a program affirms its fidelity to the goals inspiring the past religious revolutions. It upholds, in practice as well as in doctrine, the preeminence of our shared humanity over the divisions and hierarchies within humankind. It repudiates the heroic and martial ethic of lordship and honor, and replaces it with a vision of the attenuation of the contrast between the instrumental and the non-instrumental, the brutal and the spiritualized, the prose and the poetry of social life.

It remains far from offering a full-fledged political and moral program. It does, however, describe the starting point of such a proposal.

This program may at first seem not to exemplify the first and most fundamental attribute of those religious revolutions: the establishment of a dialectic between the transcendence and the immanence of the divine in the world. For the overcoming of the world, the transcendent divine is impersonal and unified being, in which the beings that populate our phenomenal experience must find ultimate reality and value. For the humanization of the world, it is the experience of personality itself, dwelling in our social experience but never exhausted by it or reducible to it.

Here is an idea of transcendence that is neither identical to the expression of transcendence in the Semitic religions of salvation nor entirely foreign to that expression. In those religions, the narrative of transactions between God and humanity represents a deepening and a reevaluation, rather than a cancelling out, of our experience of personality and of personal encounter. God himself is represented in the category of personality; the dangers of anthropomorphism stand balanced against the stratagems of the analogical imagination.

That is a sketch of the humanization of the world as a long-standing option within the religious history of humanity, presented in its core beliefs and without regard to the varieties and specificities of its evolution.

The most comprehensive and influential example of this orientation is the teaching of Confucius, as presented in the *Analects*. The subsequent tradition of neo-Confucianism often departed from this tradition by trying to ground the reformation of society in a metaphysical view of the cosmos. In this respect, it resembled the Hellenistic philosophies that connected a practice of self-help against the flaws in human life to a view of the world.

Thinkers sympathetic to this tradition have often tried to ground it in a metaphysical doctrine rather than to conform to the discipline of an anti-metaphysical metaphysic. None have succumbed to this temptation without paying a price damaging to the force of this response to the world. The price lies in the need to make the metaphysical conception shape the existential imperative—the message about how to live; otherwise the pretense of inferring the latter from the former will seem an empty gesture.

However, such a metaphysical system risks being no more than a fairy tale, easy to devise and easy to reject. Persuasively to inform the project of humanizing the world, it will need to be much more specific in its claims about the structure and evolution of nature and society than the philosophies that inform the overcoming of the world. For these philosophies, it may be enough to propose a radical simplification that either denies phenomenal distinction and temporal change or re-interprets them against the backdrop of the supposed archetypes of manifest reality. A metaphysic operating under such constraints cannot appeal to a dramatic historical narrative of dealings between God and humanity like the stories central to the Semitic monotheisms. Such narratives invite a shaking up of the social order, a rebellion against conventional morality and its role-encoded standards of conduct.

It is an outcome that conflicts with the humanizing program; it brings struggle instead of humanization. Although a metaphysic intended to support the humanization of the world may speculate about the reasons for which nature and society take one form rather than another, it remains bereft of the experimental practices, the empirical disciplines, and the technological tools of modern natural science. It is condemned to be a waking dream: an argument in which the conclusion is already set and only the premises remain open to exploration.

Moreover, the special pleading required to provide the humanization of the world with a metaphysical prop faces the speculative humanizer with a dilemma. If he leaves loose the connection between metaphysics and morals, he makes the prop seem a transparent attempt to conceal the failure of the humanizing effort to be grounded in any feature of natural reality outside society and humanity. If, however, he insists on the tightness of the link between morals and metaphysics, he not only draws attention to the flimsiness and arbitrariness of the metaphysical conception but also risks imposing on the moral view a direction alien to the motivations inspiring it. The invocation of a privileged, suprahuman or extrasocial perspective on humanity and society threatens to blunt our claims on one another. It dims the significance of our relations to our fellows by making these attachments and commitments seem secondary to our citizenship in a cosmic order.

So it is that in the rerouting of the humanization of the world into metaphysics, a doctrine of human connection, translated into a role-based

conception of our duties to one another, has regularly given way to a quest for individual perfection, or to a search for composure in the face of suffering and death, or to a calculus and classification of the most reliable pleasures. Self-help takes the place of solidarity. Eudaimonism and perfectionism—the happiness and the improvement of the individual—become our guides. Other people recede into the distance; at best they become the beneficiaries of a superior benevolence, not the targets of a devotion that we express and sustain through the fulfillment of our role-based responsibilities.

The intended result becomes ever less the humanization of a meaningful social world as a bulwark against meaningless nature. It becomes ever more the rescue of the individual from the injustices of society as well as from the sufferings of the body, thanks to a superior access to fundamental truths. Instead of being reformed and humanized, society is dismissed; it is pushed into the background of an existential ordeal that we must overcome through the marriage of virtue to philosophical insight. Such was the course of neo-Confucianism, of the Hellenistic metaphysics of self-help, and of all the many ways in which the proponents of the idea that human beings create meaning in a meaningless world wavered in their doctrine.

Making meaning in a meaningless world

Free from the failed attempt to base its response to the defects of the human condition on the vision of a cosmic order, the humanization of the world is made out of three building blocks. Each of the three is vital to its conception and to its program.

The first component in this orientation to existence is the link that it establishes between the meaninglessness of nature and the human construction of meaning in society. The human world must be self-grounded in a void. It cannot be grounded in anything external to itself—whether extra-human nature or supra-human reality—that would guide and encourage us.

We are natural but nevertheless context-transcending beings. Our embodiment, however, fails to establish our kinship with inhuman nature. We can explore nature around us, extending our powers of per-

ception with the physical tools of science. We can develop our understanding of the relations among phenomena with the conceptual tools of mathematics. When, however, we project our concerns unto nature, and suppose it sympathetic to our purposes and intelligible from within, as if animated, we deceive ourselves.

Viewed from one angle, nature has favored us because we live. Viewed from another, it is set against us because we are doomed to die without any chance to grasp the ultimate nature of reality or the origin and end of time. We know, however, that our reckoning of the favors and burdens of nature is wholly one-sided; there is no one here but us to whom to make complaint or give praise. There is no mind on the other side, neither the universal mind invoked by the overcomers of the world nor the transcendent mind of the living God. Mind exists exclusively as embodied in the mortal organism.

Only our own efforts can create meaningful order—meaningful to us—with the meaningless void of nature. Meaning is constructed in culture and expressed and sustained in society in networks of relations among individuals. Each of us will die. Each of us stands at the edge of the precipice of groundlessness. Each of us remains subject to the call of wild desire. Each of us must content himself with a particular course of life and a particular place in society, and resign himself to being denied a second chance. However, within the space defined by these unsurpassable limits, we can shape a collective order that is made in the image of our humanity, and by the standards of our concerns, rather than in the image of meaningless nature.

The supreme expression of the social creation of meaning within the meaningless void of nature is law: law understood as the institutionalized life of a people, developed from the bottom up. Through the self-regulation of society as well as from the top down, through state-made order. It is in law that a coercive division of labor becomes an intelligible and defensible plan of cooperation.

Although the struggle over the terms of social life never ceases, it can be contained. Law is the expression of this truce. However, if such an armistice is all that law were, it could be understood only as the repository of a haphazard correlation of forces between the winners and the losers in earlier contests for advantage. Law must be revised and reinterpreted as the repository of a way of organizing social life. Such a

scheme will transform the generic idea of society into a series of images of association: views of how the relations among people should and could be arranged in different domains of social life. Such images of association will in turn inform the ideas used to guide the elaboration of law in context.

Our situation and our task

The second component of the humanization of the world is the view of the work to be done: our quandary, our task, and the resources available to us to execute it.

Interdependence and the imagination of others are constitutive features of our humanity. We depend on one another for everything, and remain helpless without the cooperation of others. The development of the capabilities of mankind in every realm and at every level depends on the progress of our cooperative practices and capabilities.

Our imaginative access to other people deepens the significance of interdependence. The consciousness of the individual, however, although expressed by a mind embodied in an individual organism, cannot adequately be understood as a self-sufficient entity, a natural object with a defined perimeter, a fortress from which we anxiously look out on the other citadels around us and try to discern what goes on within them.

The brain is individual. However, the mind as consciousness is from the outset social. The means by which we develop a subjective life, from language to discourse, from ideas to practice, are all a common possession and shared construction. A central paradox of consciousness is that we can be both obscure to one another (in the enigmas of intention and experience) and entirely dependent, even for our self-awareness, on practices and powers, such as language, that must exist socially to exist at all. In a world that is meaningless, except by virtue of the meaning and value that human beings create within it, only the personal is sacred, sacred in the twofold sense of the ancient Indo-European civilizations: of what has commanding value as well as of what presents the greatest danger.

No philosophical vocabulary is wholly complete and adequate as a means with which to describe the sense of this sanctity. In one vocabulary, to recognize the sanctity of personality and of interpersonal rela-

tions is to see and to treat the person—both one self and the other—as an end in itself rather than as a means to an end. In another vocabulary, it is the view that personality and the interpersonal represent our closest approach to the absolute: that which has value and meaning unconditionally and without limit, and therefore resists comparison, as infinite quantities are incomparable.

This absolute, unconditional good exists, however, only as manifest in the natural incidents of human life—beginning with the facts of birth, ascent, decline, and death, and the sequence of generations—as well as in the practical organization of society. The issue central to this second part of the humanization of the world is how we are to understand and to guide the relation between the facts of interdependence, intersubjectivity, and sanctity of the personal and the building of a real social order against the background of the natural circumstances of social life. There is a danger, and there is a remedy.

The risk is that interdependence, reciprocal subjectivity, and the sacred value of personality will be overwhelmed and degraded in the course of the events by which the social order is made and sustained. The order always has an accidental and violent history. It begins in a struggle, and then in the containment of the struggle: its partial and temporary interruption. The war, interrupted in the large, may continue in the small; the peace may be the continuation of the war in veiled and hamstrung form. Each individual will assume his place and play his part according to the distribution of winners and losers in the conflicts from which the order arose. Stability will result from exhaustion, impotence, and fear. The victorious will be as anxious as the defeated are resentful.

The exercise of oppression may over time be modulated by reciprocity. Subordinates as well as superiors may begin to find advantage in the acceptance of their respective lots. Exchange and power will combine in the same relationships. However, reciprocity will always remain a supervening and accessory influence, circumscribed by arrangements and assumptions that it did not create and cannot reconstruct.

In such a circumstance, interdependence will be shaped in the mold of the grinding hierarchies of power and advantage, transmitted and reproduced from generation to generation, to which the settlement of the struggle gave rise. Our understanding of other people's experience

will take the form of a shared surrender to beliefs that lend a patina of naturalness, necessity, and authority to that settlement. Awareness of the sanctity of the personal will be suppressed, or survive only as a residual hope, clinging to the familiar and to the intimate.

It is not the interpretation of interdependence and intersubjectivity from the perspective of the sanctity of the personal that will turn the social order into something more than the temporary resolution of an ongoing conflict; it is the practical imperative of the division of labor in society. Suppose that the economy has already attained a level in the development of its productive capabilities at which vast combinations of people, put to work in specialized tasks, under stark hierarchical supervision, can yield a large surplus over present consumption. Imagine, however, that society has not yet reached the point at which we have learned how to repeat most of the initiatives needed to produce such a surplus, to express the activities susceptible to repetition in formulas, and to embody the formulas in machines so that we can devote most of our time to the actions that we do not yet know how to repeat.

Such an intermediate situation has been the circumstance of the major historical civilizations, at least until very recently. It was in particular the circumstance of the agrarian-bureaucratic empires that represented, before the last two hundred years, the most important states in the world. The world religions characteristically emerged at the periphery, rather than at the center, of such states.

This situation favored a strongly defined social division of labor: the division of society among distinct classes, estates, or castes, reproduced through the hereditary transmission of advantage, and marked by distinct forms of life and of consciousness as well as by different degrees of access to the key society-making resources of economic wealth, political power, and spiritual authority. A particular way of organizing the social division of labor, and the distinct roles to which it gave rise, reduced the possible forms of cooperation to what the triumphant institutional and ideological settlement countenanced. The characteristic Indo-European distinction between the rulers and priests, the warriors, the merchants, and the workers represented a simplified and widespread instance of such a system.

It is not that this hierarchical ordering of society into hereditary classes was in any sense necessary, given these opportunities and limi-

tations; a much more egalitarian and flexible regime of cooperation might, and sometimes did, face the limitations and seize the opportunities all the more effectively. It is rather that such a social division of labor provided a way of organizing cooperation that respected the preexisting distribution of advantage. Just as this distribution of advantage favored a class or caste order, the existence of the order supported a technical division of labor marked by extreme hierarchy and specialization.

The technical division of labor—the allocation of powers and responsibilities in the organization of work—was likely to assume, under such circumstances, its most hierarchical and specialized form: rigid contrasts between tasks of supervision or planning and tasks of execution, clear-cut contrasts among the jobs of execution themselves, unequivocal distinctions between the activities judged appropriate for cooperation and for competition. Industrial mass production—the production of standardized goods and services, with the help of rigid machines and production processes, reliance on semiskilled labor, and very specialized and hierarchical work relations—as it developed in the historical period from the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of the twentieth was at once the latest and the most extreme example of this approach to the technical division of labor.

This scheme is no mere historical parable. It is a rudimentary account of a way of organizing social relations that prevailed, in one variant or another, in all the societies in which the religions of transcendence emerged. It served to entrench both the hierarchical organization of labor and the coercive extraction of an economic surplus over current consumption. This form of social organization exacted a high price in return for its uses as an instrument for the accumulation of an economic surplus as well as for the hierarchical direction of labor on a large scale. It drastically limited the range and varieties of cooperation: the extent to which the ways in which we organize cooperative work track the analytic and synthetic operations of practical reason. Any such scheme required those activities to conform to a script—the two-part script of the social and of the technical division of labor. The result severely limited the potential for cooperative effort.

It also generated second-order problems for this approach to life. Many attempts have been made in the history of civilization to give

higher meaning and value to a social division of labor with the characteristics that I have enumerated. None was more striking in influence and ambition than the grounding of the actual Indian caste system in a scriptural caste order validated by the high Hindu doctrine of reincarnation of an indestructible soul.

Insight into the essential unity of mankind and into the shallowness of the divisions within it, an idea central to the religious revolutions of the past, made any such doctrine seem repellent and incredible. How can we acknowledge the force of this insight into the shallow and ephemeral character of our divisions and hierarchies while continuing to tolerate a social and technical division of labor with such features?

If we cannot abolish and replace a social order of this kind, we must at least be able to change it. However, it has seemed throughout most of history, which has been the history of class society, that such an order cannot, or cannot yet, be abolished or replaced. The mere attempt to do so threatens to make the war over the basic terms of social life break out again.

If, however, we fail to transform the character of that order, we risk defeat in the most important effort: the effort to create meaning in a meaningless world. For if the attempt to sanctify the class or caste regime of society fails, if its sole basis remains its contestable practical use in the development of the productive capabilities of mankind and the coercive extraction of a surplus, turning the individual into the hapless instrument of a supposed advantage for the future race, then the inner line of defense against the meaninglessness of the world will be broken. The content of interdependence and mutual subjectivity will be determined by forces without meaning and value in the biographical time in which we must live our lives rather than in the historical time in which the human race advances. The sanctity of the personal will count for nothing and will be discredited by daily experience.

What matters most to the humanizers is that society offer a bulwark against nihilism, if by nihilism we mean the idea that the world and our lives within it are meaningless, that is to say without meaning in any terms that have weight within our discourse, the discourse of humanity. Humanism so conceived has as its precondition nihilism about the world—or rather about our ability to make sense of our situation in the world on terms that communicate with our concerns and commitments.

From this perspective, any attempt to ground the realm of human values in natural facts outside human life is self-defeating as well as futile: it makes humanity subservient to something inhuman. Nihilism about the world and the self-grounding of humanity are therefore not opposites; on the contrary, they are complements. Humanity snatches the crown away from the cosmos and puts it on itself.

The tragic aspect of this undertaking lies in the contradictions of the social order rather than in the shadow cast by nihilism. The individual is powerless to ensure the necessary self-grounding; only men and women in society can achieve it through collective action. They may fail. The building and reproduction of a social order can fall victim to forces that pervert interdependence and curtail social imagination, because they disrespect the sanctity of the personal. Then nihilism will have its day. To avoid that outcome is the aim of this orientation to existence.

Something, however, remains missing from this account: the centerpiece of the political and moral strategy by which this goal is to be achieved. To define this strategy is the work of the third part of this direction in the religious experience of mankind.

The ennoblement of our relations to one another

The third component of the humanization of the world is a view of what can and should be the basic structure of our relations to one another. The social division of labor is a system of social roles: the stereotypical, regulated positions that individuals occupy in society serve as platforms from which they deal with one another. If we are to humanize the social division of labor, and by extension the technical division of labor, we must ensure that the performance of such roles vindicate the sanctity of the personal. We must prevent people's dependence on one another from serving as the occasion for a barely contained war over the basic terms of social life, in which only a self-interested reciprocity attenuates the harshness of endless struggle.

An ethic of roles, of what we owe one another by virtue of playing the parts that we do in society, is therefore the characteristic moral instrument of the project of humanization: the superior to the underling,

the teacher to the student, the husband to the wife, the parent to the child, and, more generally, each according to his station or trade, his assumed responsibility in the larger life of society as well as in his immediate family and community. That public order is best which best creates the conditions most propitious to the adoption of such an ethic.

We can understand the supposed relation between this ethic of roles and the public order by analogy to the relation between the nineteenth-century doctrine of private law and its corresponding conception of public law. Private law defined the system of freedom, the scheme of ordered liberty, to be upheld against any contamination by the initiatives of a state bent on making this system serve the interests of particular groups (e.g., redistribution as the law-subverting capture of the state by class or factional interest). In such a view, the most important standard by which to judge a regime of public law was that it not corrupt, through politically directed redistribution, what was supposed to be the distributively neutral law of coordination among free and equal individuals: private law. At the same time, it was charged with creating a political space within which the system of private rights could flourish, for example, by providing for the public goods of security and education.

But what is the content of an ethic of roles? General ideas about the sanctity of the personal and the rescue of interdependence and reciprocal subjectivity from the continuation of war by other means remain powerless, all by themselves, to supply the answer to this question. The answer begins to become clear only against the background of the ways in which societies have actually been organized. A defining issue is whether we are to accept the established structure of society as the horizon within which to pursue the humanization project or to resist that structure as the chief obstacle to the implementation of this project. To bring this question into focus, consider two circumstances.

One circumstance has been characteristic of most societies and cultures in world history before the national and world revolutions of the last two hundred-odd years. It is the association of power, exchange, and sentiment in the same social relationships. Its characteristic formula is the sentimentalizing of unequal exchange—a relation between individuals in more powerful and less powerful roles, involving a trade of practical advantage, overlaid by reciprocal allegiance. The patron-client

relation, so precious to the ancient Romans, provides a characteristic example. It was in such a circumstance that the most comprehensive statement of the ethic of roles—classical Confucianism—emerged.

Another circumstance is that of a nineteenth-century European society with its liberal ideology. Now the authoritative ideological formula proscribes what relations between patrons and clients require: the mixture of power, exchange, and allegiance. One of the consequences is to draw a distinction between the domestic sphere, in which the mixture of sentiment, power, and exchange continues to be tolerated or even cherished, and the workaday world, in which such a mixture has become anathema. In this world, exchange supposedly rules, and power is validated by consent, by the requirements of cooperation, and by the rights of property.

In such a setting, speculative thought may seek to base and to expound ethics in a discourse of universalistic rules and principles. However, this academic moral philosophy will bear little resemblance to the forms of moral thinking and argument deployed in much of social life. A discourse of role-based claims and responsibilities will continue to prevail in practice, although recast on the basis of the new assumptions. What chiefly replaces the amalgam of exchange, power, and allegiance is an ethic of professionalism: respect for the public duties pertaining to the specialized roles that the individual performs.

The role-based responsibilities may be owed to strangers, with whom the individual had no preexisting relation. As a result, it becomes impossible to accept the distinction, characteristic of societies at ease with the mixture of exchange, power, and allegiance, between a realm of high-trust relationships among insiders and of no-trust relationships among strangers. A modicum of trust, albeit of low trust, among strangers, must be universalized as the indispensable backdrop to an ethic of professional responsibility.

Instead of supposing that we owe everything to those to whom we have a connection that precedes or transcends the will and nothing to those with whom we have no such connection, we come by steps to think that we owe something to everyone, but that what exactly we owe is modulated by the roles we perform in society with respect to them. On the foundation of minimalist and universal trust among strangers, we superimpose the more stringent demands that attend the performance of

our individual roles. The market economy itself can be represented as a form of simplified cooperation among strangers, unnecessary when there is high trust and impossible, given the ineradicable incompleteness of contracts, when there is no trust.

Gradually, the levels of both generalized trust and specialized responsibility can rise. Their joint ascent will, in this new circumstance, signal the advance of the project of humanization. The individual, however, may continue to live in two worlds: the public world of work and of dealings among strangers, given over to the new moral dispensation, and the domestic world in which, uncomfortably and under pressure, the ancient marriage of exchange, power, and allegiance survives.

This second world may be more than a residue of the old, now forbidden combination. It may also be the seat of a prophecy of a higher form of life. Its guiding aspiration may cease to be the superimposition of allegiance and sentiment on the harsh realities of power and exchange and become instead the softening of the tension between spirit and structure, love and routine, with regard to the possibilities of reconciliation between two individual beings. The life plan of each becomes part of the other one's plan. Here, however, we reach the limits of a role-oriented mode of moral thinking and confront problems and possibilities with which such a form of thought is unable to deal.

Criticism: betrayal of the past

I now apply to the humanization of the world the same method of criticism applied earlier to the overcoming of the world: its power to realize the goals that were common to these three orientations to existence, its prospect of conforming human nature to its view of the good, and its relation to the concerns that may or should be central to the next revolution in the history of religion.

There are two crucial respects in which the humanization of the world, as exemplified by the teachings of Confucius, comes up short by the standard of its fidelity to the aspirations shared by the religious revolutions of the past. The first respect concerns its relation to the dialectic between transcendence and immanence: the most important

point of contrast between the religions and philosophies that exemplify the three orientations to life considered here and the beliefs that they replaced. The second respect in which the humanization of the world fails to do justice to the shared element in the religious revolutions of the past has to do with its attitude to social division and hierarchy.

The assertion of transcendence—of the transcendence of the divine or the sacred over nature and society as well as of our human powers to transcend the circumstances in which we find ourselves—remains insecure within this approach to existence. Nothing in its anti-metaphysical metaphysics or in its naturalistic moral psychology provides an adequate basis on which to affirm our power to resist and overcome the social and conceptual regimes in which we find ourselves enmeshed.

For the Semitic monotheisms, the chief instance of the struggle with the world before the rise of the modern secular projects of political or personal emancipation, transcendence takes the unmistakable form of the separation of God from the world. The problem then becomes how this chasm, once opened up, is to be bridged: through some countervailing embodiment of the divine in humanity and in history. For Buddhism or its precursors in the metaphysics of the Vedas, transcendence lies in the superior reality of hidden and unified being, viewed in relation to the phenomenal and temporal world.

For Confucianism, as the most influential example of humanizing the world, our power of transcendence over circumstance and presupposition, if it has any meaning or force, has as its seat the experience of the personal and of personal encounter, viewed in relation to everything else. What is most real and valuable about this experience lies in a web of relations to others; the personal to be nurtured and revered is the interpersonal.

The sacrosanct experience of the personal stands in contrast primarily to dark nature, which we must master and turn to our purposes but cannot hope to fathom. Secondarily, it remains opposed to the regime of society, which deserves our allegiance only insofar as it respects and sustains this sacred core of existence. The spirit of the interpersonal has, for Confucianism, its consummate expression in *jen*: the quality of self-expression and self-formation that is expressed in both sympathy and detachment.

The premise of this devotion is our ability to understand the experience of others. Imagination—the imagination of their inner life and aspirations—informs our efforts to minister to their needs. It does so on the basis of the social roles that each of us performs.

The affirmation of the sanctity of the personal (or, more precisely, of the interpersonal) is not peculiar to Confucianism; it is a trait of all the many versions of the humanization of the world that have appeared in the course of the religious history of humanity. Even in our partly Christianized culture, it is captured by a conception that exerts a wide influence today: the view of intimate encounter as a domain of the private sublime, in which we can accept the instrumental calculus of interests and efficiencies only insofar as such calculation serves an experience beyond instrumental concerns.

To form part of a naturalistic account of our powers of transcendence, the idea of the sanctity of personality and of personal encounter must be combined with an iconoclastic attitude to the institutional and ideological settings in which personal experience takes place. However, it cannot be so combined without accommodating a conception of the self that is foreign to it and that takes our moral and political imagination in a completely different direction. This conception is the idea of a human being as embodied spirit, an idea that has been central (as I later argue) to the tradition of the struggle with the world, in its profane as well as its sacred registers.

According to this idea, there is more in us, in each of us individually as well as in all of us collectively, than there is or ever can be in the social and conceptual regimes that we inhabit. Although they shape us, we exceed them. Our transcendence over context is expressed in the idea, central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, that we already share in the attributes of God. We can increase our share in these attributes thanks to the partnership between divine redemption and human striving.

Belief in our transcendence over context may take—and in much of the world does take—a purely secular form, presupposing no faith in a narrative of dealings between God and humanity. Such secular creeds may speak to the self and the mind, or to society and its transformation. However, even when they deal with the personal, they also address the political. When they neglect to connect ideas about the self and the

mind with ideas about society and its reconstruction, they do justice to neither. They then fail fully to vindicate the idea of embodied spirit. They leave the claim of our powers of transcendence undeveloped, ungrounded, and, above all, lacking in a vision of what to do.

Consider, as an example, a view of the mind that, in a contemporary vocabulary, exemplifies the idea of the person as embodied spirit. The mind has a dual character. In some respects, it is like a machine, made up of modular parts and operating according to formula. In other respects, it is an anti-machine, equipped with the power to overstep its own settled methods and presuppositions.

The relative power of this anti-machine, which we call the imagination, is not shaped solely by physical features of the brain, such as its plasticity. It depends, also and even chiefly, on the organization of society and culture. This organization may widen or narrow the space for the workings of the imagination, and afford it or deny it equipment. For this reason, the history of politics is internal to the history of the mind.

Any such vision of our radical transcendence, with or without belief in the encounter between God and mankind, is alien to the humanization of the world. It relies on ideas about us and our place in the world that contradict the assumptions of this tradition of thought and recommend rejecting the moral and political attitudes it favors.

Without the support of some such vision, the idea of the sacred character of personal connection remains a weak basis for an ideal of transcendence. We do not experience personality and personal encounter in a social and historical vacuum. We experience them in a setting prepared for us by the history of a particular society. Will it be our purpose to reinvent this template or merely to improve it; to make it serve our ascent to a higher form of life or to content ourselves with a modicum of success in diminishing its cruelties? Will we nurture the hope of at last making ourselves at home in a social world transformed by our enhanced ability to imagine the experience of other people and to attend to their needs, according to the social stations of each person, or will we come to see such a desire to settle down in a humanized society as a betrayal of our nature and vocation? By the answers that the humanization of the world gives to these questions, it shows that it has only a diminished version of transcendence to offer.

If the criticism of its fidelity to the spirit of transcendence is the first objection to be made to the humanization of the world, as a response to the concerns motivating the religious revolutions of the past, the second objection is that it offers too limited a justification for the effort to devalue or to overturn the social divisions within mankind.

The chief civilizing device of the humanization of the world, already clearly stated in the Analects of Confucius, is the dialectic between the roles, rules, and rituals of society and the development of our other-oriented dispositions. Our induction into roles, rules, and rituals teaches us to abandon our primitive self-centeredness. It begins to form, in each of us, a nature turned to the experience and the aspirations of others. Slowly, this now socialized nature of ours is elevated and even transfigured by the development of our ability to imagine other people. Eventually, if we persist in this trajectory of moral ascent, that which was conditioned by ritual and rule becomes spontaneous. Our obligations begin to converge with our inclinations; or, rather, our inclinations discern, within and outside the rituals and rules, the path of service to others and of self-mastery.

“At 15, I set my heart on learning; at 30, I took a stand; at 40, I had no illusions; at 50, I knew the Mandate of Heaven; at 60, my ear was attuned to the truth; at 70, I followed my heart’s desire without overstepping the bounds of right.” It is the specifically Confucian form of an idea that two thousand years later, in the context not only of a different time but also of another vision, appears in the writings of, for example, Émile Durkheim. For the spiritual orientations that I here discuss are not simply evanescent tendencies of thought, confined to isolated moral teachers; they are lasting options in the spiritual experience of humanity, and they reappear in countless forms.

The principal setting of the dialectic between individual consciousness and social form is the system of social roles. By assuming a role and performing it according to its customary dictates, we continue our passage from self-centeredness to society and reciprocity. By infusing the performance of the role with the imagination of otherness and with the spirit of humanity, formed in reverence of the personal, we enter, by steps, into the possession of ourselves. Rules and rituals become a ladder that we can kick away.

Now the vital question that any such view must face is in what spirit it will address the established social regime. A system of roles exhibits a division of labor in society. It forms part of a scheme of social division and hierarchy, including the class structure of society. Is this scheme to be accepted and rendered more humane? Or is it to be defied and reshaped?

In every real historical version of this orientation to existence, the limit of reformist ambition has been to restrain class selfishness and to reshape class in the light of merit. Even the mixture of power, exchange, and allegiance, characteristic of the agrarian-bureaucratic societies in which the humanization of the world first arose, has been ordinarily accepted as the realistic alternative to endless struggle. There is no vision or energy here to inspire a program of radical reconstruction. Where would such a vision and energy come from if not from view of the transcending self, combined with an idea about our power to change the character as well as the content of the established structures of life and thought?

The abstract idea of society has no natural and necessary translation into any particular way of organizing social life. Are we then to accept the structure that history presents us with in a given society, with all the hierarchies and divisions that it supports and the role of the dead over the living that it embodies? Are the conformity of advantage to merit (as assessed by some collective or governmental authority) and the restraint of power by regard for others to serve as our sole reprieves from these forces?

If there is no definitive structure, whether of society or of thought, capable of accommodating all the experience that we have reason to value, there can at least be a structure that strengthens the hand by which we resist and revise the established structure in the light of experience. And there can be a path of cumulative structural change calculated to lighten the burden of the entrenched scheme of social division and hierarchy weighing on the possibilities of cooperation. For such an advance to occur, however, we need both another account of the self and another conception of the structures and of their history. Under such views, no role can be fully adequate to a human being. No set of institutions and practices supplies an acceptable resting place for society.

The absence of any natural ordering of society reveals the link between the political and the metaphysical limits to the humanization of the world. Because there is no such natural ordering of our relations to one another—or no ordering that we have reason definitively to accept as the framework for our efforts to come to terms with one another—the struggle over the organization of society must and will go on. It may be temporarily contained and interrupted. However, it will not long be suppressed.

The advancement of all our interests and ideals, as we understand them at any given time, requires that we criticize and change pieces of the structural background of social life. There is, however, always more than one defensible understanding of the direction of change that our ideals and interests require. As we progress in the work of reconstruction, the disharmonies in the content of the interests and ideals that guided us in the first place become apparent, and provide further occasions for conflict.

The perennial nature of this struggle over the terms of social life exposes the limitations of this approach to life. It also casts doubt on the metaphysical conception informing the humanization of the world. The assumptions of the humanizing campaign become patent in the effort to establish a meaningful order, within a meaningless cosmos: a clearing that bears the imprint of our concerns within a dark and inhospitable universe.

Ongoing struggle over the terms of social life, made possible by the indefeasible contestability of every social order, ends up tearing down some of the barriers of social division within humanity even as it erects others. Whether it undermines or creates such divisions, it reveals, by its continuance, their contingency, and thus invites further practical and visionary strife.

It is not just the walls within society that end up, in this way, coming down or being moved around. It is also the walls around society: the clarity of the distinction between the social order, constructed on our scale and to the specification of our concerns, and the great stage of nature, vastly disproportionate and indifferent to our desires. Any regime of social life remains forever contestable. Its contestability is made manifest by persistent conflict over the terms of social life. As a result, we cannot expect any such regime to bear the full weight of our desire

to establish a social order that remains untainted by the alienness of nature and casts back to us our own reflection.

Something of that alien quality will enter into our experience of society. If we contrive to drive it out, the price will be our surrender to the established regime. This surrender will be qualified only by the improving humanistic initiatives, and the consequent denial of what matters most about our humanity.

The relativity of the contrast between the meaningful order of civilization and its meaningless natural setting is, however, not simply a problem; it is also a solution of sorts. It provides a minimal basis on which to rebel against the established regime and its claim to represent, or to prefigure, the definitive context of social life. The anti-metaphysical metaphysic of the humanization of the world is incapable of grasping this truth. To do so would be fundamentally to change its view of the human condition and its message about both politics and morals.

Criticism: the school of experience

A second set of criticisms of the humanization of the world has to do with the realism of its moral psychology: its prospect of enticing men and women to conform to its assumptions and proposals. There are again two key respects in which this tradition of thought fails to do justice to what we are really like, or can become. Its failures of insight into human nature compromise the authority of its political and moral recommendations. Each of these failures has to do with a major aspect of existence: our relation to the established arrangements of society and the prevailing dogmas of culture as well as our dealings with our fellow human beings.

In making these complaints, I do not proceed neutrally in the dispute among the major spiritual orientations explored in this book. I appeal to ideas that have been historically associated with the struggle with the world. It is not this association that gives those ideas their authority; it is the testimony of what we have learned about self, society, and history. For the ideas are also intimately connected with what imaginative literature and social and historical study have taught us about ourselves over the last few centuries. No one schooled in the

novels and poetry produced almost anywhere in the world—including the parts of the world in which the tradition now in question has exercised its greatest influence—could accept the view of history and human nature on which the humanizers of the world have relied.

The first such defect is the unjustified hope of achieving a perfect marriage between the reformed social and cultural order and the dispositions of the self. This marriage may be fully realized, according to this approach to existence, only in the lives and minds of the most virtuous, the exemplars of humanity, and even then only at the end of their lives, when each of them is able “to follow his heart’s desire without overstepping the bounds of right.” It is nevertheless also the ideal guiding the reformation of society and culture sought by the humanizers. Harmony in society, as in the soul, represents its byword.

From this perspective, everything in our experience that remains recalcitrant to such a domestication—to what, in a later vocabulary, we sometimes called sublimation—is to be feared and, so far as possible, stamped out. The persistence of any such residue of recalcitrance shows that the civilizing work has not yet been brought to a conclusion and portends anarchy, in morals as in politics. A spontaneous order is better than an imposed order: one required by an alien will. An imposed order is better than no order at all.

However, no order, no matter how much it adorns itself with the illusions of false necessity and specious authority and entrenches itself against defiance and resistance, can contain our experience. Even a regime that allows people the least space to deviate from the scripts of behavior and discourse that it forces on them will be the unwilling host to an endless stream of contrary experience. Much of such experience will appear merely incongruous or uncanny. Only some of it will seem dangerous. Yet all of it will reveal the truth about us, which is that we immeasurably exceed the organized settings of society and of thought.

This element of resistance in experience then becomes the source of political and moral prophecy: the brute material on which the prophets cast the form of their design. New institutional arrangements and new images of human association—views of how people can and should relate to one another in different domains of social life—draw energy and inspiration from what had seemed only a shapeless residue of wasteful or perilous insubordination to the work of the civilizers.

Just as this approach to life fails to reckon with the subtleties of our relation to the established regime of society and of culture, so too it fails to offer an adequate account of the fluidity and ambivalence of our dealings with one another. The ideal of a detached selflessness attentive to the needs of others, respectful of the roles that each performs, and untroubled in its would-be clarity of vision is its characteristic posture. A premise of this posture is that a disinterested benevolence has a clear direction, that it can readily be distinguished from the emotions that it opposes and replaces, and that it can provide a stable source of guidance amid the uncertainties of life.

This view contradicts the reality of our relations to other people. In the first place, love passes readily into hatred, and hatred into love. Ambivalence trails even our closest attachments.

This radical dynamism of the life of passion does not result simply from occasional or peripheral features of our conscious life. It arises from a deep-seated conflict between the enabling conditions of our self-construction. Each of us makes a self through encounter and connection with others. Every connection, however, brings with it the risk of the entanglement of the self in a scheme that robs us of our self-possession and self-direction. Ambivalence toward other people is the psychological expression of this moral truth.

A remote magnanimity—the characteristic moral ideal of the humanization of the world—may contain this ambivalence. It does so at a cost. The cost is the acceptance of the low-level equilibrium, the middle distance neither near to other people nor far from them, that is associated with the attitude of detached benevolence: doing good without vulnerability or self-transformation. The assurance of superiority on the part of the benevolent giver comes with no shaking of his existence. It offers him serenity and self-possession only by denying him something more precious: the fuller possession of life.

There is a second reason for which the account of humanity lying at the center of this approach to existence fails the test of moral realism. In all our relations to one another and in the way in which we represent them, two connected but distinct hopes are at stake. There is the hope of reconciliation: that we may enter into a relationship with others that enables us to connect more while paying for such connections less of a price of subjugation and depersonalization. There is also the hope of

obtaining, through such reconciliation, an assurance that there is a place for us in the world, and that we are recognized and accepted as the context-transcending originals that we all know ourselves to be, despite our groundlessness and our homelessness in the world.

It is this second hope that experiences of despair and of lust place in jeopardy. The disinterested benevolence so dear to the humanizers—and to the moral philosophers in our tradition—then appears as a fallback, a putatively safe second best.

On this axis—the axis of the second-best hope—the issue is not simply more or less reconciliation with other people. It is whether we can invest our relations to one another with a larger meaning: to assist us in our effort to increase our share in the attributes that we ascribe to the divine, to become more human by becoming more godlike. When this hope invites an attempt to turn the beloved into a substitute for God, and love itself into the antidote to our groundlessness in the world, as it sometimes did in romanticism, it becomes an illusion and a perversion. It denies one of the incorrigible deficiencies in the human condition.

When, however, the lesser hope remains unblemished by this corrupting illusion, yet undiminished in its force, it highlights a distinction in our attitudes to others that is more fundamental than the move between love and hatred. It is the swing between passion and indifference, between hot and cold. In this respect, love and hatred are not opposites; they stand on the same side.

The attitude of benevolent detachment, or serene generosity, may seem natural in the idea realm of the humanization of the world. However, it bears the same relation to love and hatred that agnosticism has to theism and atheism. For that reason alone, it would contradict the aim of entering more fully into the possession of life.

It is only when each of us abandons the perspective of detachment and regards the relation to the other person as fateful for the self that he then confronts the full force of his ambivalence to the others whom he so desperately seeks. The posture of distant benevolence had protected against that force. Thus, the two sides of personal experience—the movement between love and hatred and between intense need and disinterested benevolence—are connected.

Any moral psychology that remains blind to these facts will appear to us as childish and obtuse. It hardly matters whether we read Confu-

cius or Hume about human beings. The representation of humanity will seem to be about some other being, not about us. It will lack the complications and contradictions that foretell our higher calling and make possible our ascent.

Criticism: betrayal of the future

The humanization of the world offers no useable point of departure for the changes that deserve to be central to any future religious revolution. Two of its limitations render it incapable of serving this purpose. One has to do with its response to the flaws in existence; the other, with its inadequacy as an antidote to the risks of belittlement.

A feature of the humanization of the world is its acknowledgement of the facts of mortality and of groundlessness. However, it acknowledges them only to turn decisively away from them to the construction of a human order designed on our scale and according to our concerns. Such is the strategy of the anti-metaphysical metaphysics: finding ourselves in a cosmos that we can understand and master only minimally, facing the certainty of annihilation, and denied insight into the ground of being, we can nevertheless develop, within this inhuman world, a world of our own.

The construction of such a humanized reality, devoted to the nurturing of role-based reciprocities, is also the only cure for our insatiability. Our roving, unquenchable desires will be given form and direction by the rules and rituals of society. Unlimited desire will begin to respect limits. Each of us will assume his station in the world and attend, according to its dictates, to the needs of others, guided by growing insight into their experience. By serving others, we will be liberated from ourselves, or rather from the insatiability that tormented us so long as our self-centeredness remained uncorrected. Later, as we become more virtuous, we will no longer need the crutch of rule and ritual to be both at peace with ourselves and attentive to other people.

No approach to existence seems more modest or realistic in its attitude to the failings in life. The consequence, however, of this movement of aversion—the turning away from our unmanageable terrors to our feasible tasks—is to deny us some of the means with which to awaken

from a half-conscious life, of convention, compromise, and routine, to a refusal of death by installments. It is not enough, in this view, the view of the religion of the future, to recognize the incurable defects in the human condition, only then to contrive to forget them as quickly and as completely as possible. It is necessary to use our confrontation with them as a step in our rise.

Our mortality, unrelieved by any prospect of discerning the ground of existence, will make life, in every moment, all the more precious. Our groundlessness, lived under the shadow of our mortality, will discredit and undermine any attempt to ground a regime of society or of thought in a story about the nature of things. Our insatiability will teach us that the finite ends for which we grasp are never enough to content us, but only so many stopping points along the way.

All the idols of the world will shrink in the presence of such an arousal. We will be ready to ask ourselves how we should live and think once we remember the truth about our existence rather than contriving to forget it. Lived wide awake, if we experience it as it in fact is, human life is placed at the edge of the precipice of death and absurdity, and transfigured by our desire for more than any finite reality can offer.

In turning away from what is irreparable in our circumstance, the humanization of the world also fails to show the way to the fixing of what we can repair: our susceptibility to belittlement. As a result, it fails to do justice to the idea that has come to exert a revolutionary influence throughout the world: the notion that every man and woman shares in attributes that we ascribe to God (whether or not such a God exists) and that we can increase our share in those attributes by changing the organization of society and by reorienting the conduct of life.

Disseminated by the Near Eastern salvation religions, this belief then acquired a life independent of them in the secular programs of political and personal liberation that have set the whole world on fire. It is the central tenet of democracy, if democracy is viewed as more than a project for the organization of politics. It is a major theme of romanticism in both the high and the popular culture, if romanticism is seen as a continuing presence in the consciousness of recent societies, not just as an ephemeral moment in the history of moral sensibility.

The conception of the self as embodied spirit, always able to transcend the social and conceptual regimes that it engages and always

containing more power and possibility than such regimes can ever accommodate, is the most important premise of this idea. It ceases to be a philosophical or theological dogma and becomes an actionable conjecture when it informs views of what to do next in politics and in morals. It is because its votaries, spread throughout the world, no longer know what to do next, in the pursuit of this vision, that it appears to us as both strong and weak. It is strong on account of its unrivaled authority. It is weak because the path to its political and moral realization has ceased to be clear.

The humanization of the world does not share this pursuit. Its ruling ambition is to achieve harmony in society and in the self. It wants to foster the development of a life in society that puts responsibility to others, informed by imagination and self-possession, in command. Its program is to combine the enhancement of our collective powers with the diminishment of our cruelty to one another. Its prescription for the attainment of this goal is for each of us to do his part, in the station that fate and merit have allotted to him, even as he cultivates his powers of imaginative empathy.

For the institutionally conservative or skeptical social democrats who now pass for progressives in much of the world, such a program may seem to be the best for which we can reasonably hope. For the theoreticians of a rationalizing altruism who have long prevailed in moral philosophy (whether under the form of Benthamite, Kantian, or social-contract doctrines), the practical perfectionism of the humanizers of the world can readily be translated into their preferred philosophical vocabulary. For the educated classes of contemporary societies, who understand moral life largely in the language of roles and of role-based obligations, there is nothing in the teachings of the humanization of the world, other than its context-specific expression in the writings of an ancient thinker, that appears foreign, novel, or even controversial. In many ways, the humanization of the world may seem to be the unofficial teaching of a culture that has grown impatient and distrustful of all large transformative endeavors, and that is happy to settle for the improvement and softening of what it judges, in the proximate future, to be inevitable.

However, the very facts that bring this approach to existence closer to present consciousness and practice make it unsuited to serve as an

instrument of spiritual revolution. At least it will be ill equipped to serve a spiritual revolution that rebels against our belittlement by the same movement through which it acknowledges our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability. Life, not harmony, is the watchword of such a reorientation of our experience. It knows that we can make selves only by defying—and changing—structures of society and of thought. It holds that we become more human only by becoming more godlike. More than a humanization of society, it seeks a divinization of humanity.

4

Struggling with the World

Central idea, spoken in sacred and profane voice

A third major option in the spiritual history of humanity, for more than twenty-five hundred years, has been the struggle with the world. Its central idea is that there is a path of ascent, requiring and enabling us to undergo a transformation of both society and the self, and rewarding us with an incomparable good. The incomparable good is a greater share in the attributes of the divine, or eternal life, or a greater life, with higher powers, making us more godlike.

By treading this path, we triumph over evil. Evil is death and, beyond death, the diminishment of being. It is our failure to be rescued from what seems to be our condition: hapless and dying organisms, unable to discern the reason for our existence and desiring, especially from one another, more than we can ever receive. Separation from the divine and from one another presages death: it closes the route of escape from this condition. It is itself a beginning of death because it leaves us blocked and diminished, face to face with our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability, and bled of vitality even before we perish.

If we cannot enjoy the eternal life promised by some versions of the struggle with the world, and be brought into the presence and favor of God, then we can at least possess the greater life offered by other versions, and become more godlike. Whether or not our lifting up takes the form of victory over death, it calls us to pass through an itinerary of change in our selves and societies, and makes it impossible for us to

accept any established social order or way of life as our definitive and adequate home.

According to the struggle with the world, the roots of a human being lie in the future. We live for the future, whether the future is a salvation that begins in human history but is consummated beyond it or a way of ordering social life that does justice to our humanity.

The struggle with the world has spoken in two voices. One voice is sacred: that of the Semitic salvation religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The other voice is profane: that of the secular projects of liberation. These projects have included the political programs of liberalism, socialism, and democracy as well as the romantic movement, especially the global popular romantic culture, with its message of the godlike dignity of ordinary men and women and the unfathomable depth and reach of their experience.

For the sacred form of the struggle with the world, our effort to respond to our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability is contained within a larger story of transactions between God and mankind. Only because of God's saving work in history can we hope to escape evil and attain a higher and eternal life. History is a significant but incomplete scene of salvation rather than an epiphenomenal backdrop to our ascent or to our fall. What begins in history continues beyond history. A change in the character of our relations to one another forms a crucial part of our rescue. Through such a change, we confirm our reception of divine grace and lift ourselves over death, groundlessness, and insatiability. The true meaning and potential of our relations to one another, however, become manifest only in the interactions between God and mankind.

God himself is to be represented in the category of personality rather than as being or as non-person and non-being (although the negative theology of the mystical tendencies within each of these religions has forever flirted with this heretical understanding of his nature). We can understand our relations to God by analogy to our relations to one another, because both these sets of relations share in the nature of personal experience.

The Semitic religions of revelation and salvation are not three faces of the same faith. They are different religions. Unlike the other two,

Christianity is in no sense a religion of the law. Moreover, its influence on the secular projects of political and personal liberation and its affinity with them have been far greater than those enjoyed by Judaism and Islam. Nevertheless, the commonalities among the three religions with respect to the core tenets of this approach to the world are broad and far reaching. These shared elements become unmistakable by contrast to the humanization of the world and to the overcoming of the world.

For the profane form of the struggle with the world, there is no one here but us. The sacred and the profane forms of the struggle with the world convey distinct but analogous messages. It forms no part of my account of the struggle with the world to present its profane version of this approach as a simple translation of the message of these religions into a secular discourse.

Christianity has helped shape the secular endeavors of emancipation, both political and personal. These efforts at liberation have also, however, suffered many other influences. They bear the imprint of ideas alien to Christianity and exhibit the effects of social and economic changes that cannot be reduced to ideas. None of the most characteristic achievements of Western civilization can be understood without taking into account their often ambivalent relation to Christianity. The programs of personal and social liberation that have occupied so important a place in the history of the last few centuries form no exception to this rule.

The sacred and the profane versions of the struggle with the world stand on their own feet. The differences between them matter. They matter first to the content of the message. It matters whether we should or should not see our efforts at social and self-transformation as incidents in a history of dealings between God and humanity. In the eyes of the believer, the unbeliever may stand under suspicion of Pelagianism, the heresy according to which we may hope to achieve salvation by our own efforts, in historical time. For the unbeliever, the believer places the source of salvation beyond history, the better to surrender to established powers. The messages of the sacred and profane versions of the struggle with the world differ, and have different implications for the conduct of life as well as for the organization of society.

We should resist the attempt—characteristic of contemporary culture—to split the difference between believing and not believing in

the truth of the narratives of God's saving work that are central to the sacred version of the struggle with the world. This halfway house between belief and disbelief most often takes the form of an effort to interpret those narratives as allegories of truths that can be stated in secular moral and political terms. The stories about God's saving intervention in the world that he created and about his encounters with humanity in the course of these interventions are to be "demythologized." If the outcome of demythologizing is a representation that could just as well be stated without benefit of faith in a transcendent God or in his salvific intervention, the demythologizing exercise has gone well beyond the halfway mark between belief and disbelief. So it ordinarily does: the allegorical translation stands in place of an atheism or an agnosticism that refuses to acknowledge the measure of its disbelief.

The first and most fundamental objection to the halfway house is that it elides a consequential difference. It does so under the influence of a will to believe. Each of the three approaches to existence that I here consider requires a commitment of existence in a particular direction. The grounds for such a commitment are always inadequate to the significance of the commitment. This disproportion is one of the characteristics of what we commonly call, and have reason to call, religion. This imbalance between the choice of a direction and our ability to justify this choice has, in each such orientation to life, a distinct character. It differs, as well, in the sacred and the profane varieties of the struggle with the world.

In the Semitic monotheisms, the disproportion between the commitment and its grounds takes its most extreme form. There we double, and then double again, our bets by placing our faith in the hope of rescue from above: in the interaction between human striving and divine grace. The imbalance between the commitment that is exacted from us and the apparent grounds for making the commitment is less extreme, if nevertheless daunting, in the overcoming and the humanization of the world as well as in the profane form of the struggle with the world.

The halfway house between belief and disbelief—the allegorical or metaphorical shrinking of faith in the narrative of divine intervention—may seem to diminish the disproportion by demanding of us nothing that we cannot justify by the standards of secular reason. However, it does so only by emptying faith of its distinctive force and content, and

thus by reducing the radical commitment that faith may inform and inspire. It is a species of self-deception, animated by a sentimental desire to believe that is bereft of the experience of a living faith. It hedges the bet about committing existence in a particular direction rather than doubling the bet, and limits the risk only by forgoing the prize. What begins as self-deception ends as confusion or cowardice.

A second objection to the halfway house between belief and disbelief is that it can invariably be found to stand in the service of the conventional moral and political pieties of the day. The same self-deception and cowardice informing the “demythologizing” of religion help account for unwillingness to defy those pieties. Their ruling principle is the accommodation of the message to the established structure of society and of life. Thus, the religious faith, diminished in the halfway house, and the conventional secular humanism stand in the service of the same moral conventions. Reduced to an allegorical restatement of such commonplaces, religious faith becomes an idle ornament.

After we have rejected all attempts to split the difference between belief and disbelief in the narrative of divine revelation and redemption, there nevertheless remains common ground between the sacred and the profane versions of the struggle with the world. It is to this common ground that I now turn.

Metaphysical vision

The struggle with the world develops against the background of a vision of reality and of our place in it. This vision often remains implicit in ideas about the path of our ascent, through transformation and self-transformation, to triumph over death and to a greater share in the attributes of divinity. In this sense, it is presupposed by this spiritual orientation. A denial of any part of these assumptions robs the teaching about our rise of part of its meaning and authority.

The vision does not amount to a metaphysical system. It is compatible with a broad range of philosophical ideas about the self and the world. There is nevertheless much that it excludes. The historical limitation of available philosophical vocabularies and traditions creates a permanent temptation to state these presuppositions too narrowly.

The best-known example of succumbing to this temptation in the history of the West is the attempt to formulate Christian doctrine in the categories of Greek philosophy.

Nevertheless, the requirements of this vision of the world are far from trivial. They do more than exclude a wide array of beliefs about nature and humanity that have held a prominent place in the history of speculative thought. They contradict many of the beliefs prevailing even where and when one or another version of the struggle with the world has been the predominant orthodoxy. Thus, if the struggle with the world conflicts (as I later argue) with the way contemporary societies are organized, it also contradicts, through its presuppositions, many of our entrenched ways of thinking. To this day, after centuries of unrivaled influence, it has not fully penetrated the consciousness of many of those who claim to be unconditionally loyal to it.

1. There is one real world.* The most important fact about the world is its scandalous particularity: that it is what it is and not something else. The idea of the one real world stands in opposition to the view that our world is one of many worlds, existing in parallel, or passing from possibility to actuality. Under such a view, incompatible with the vision informing the struggle with the world, the one real world thus cedes some of its reality to the many other actual ones: it appears as simply a precarious and evanescent variation on the workings of nature.

The characterization of the one real universe as one of many, even of infinitely many, universes has had a prominent career in contemporary cosmology and physics. It has been used to redescribe as an explanatory success the failure of certain theories—such as string theories in particle physics—uniquely to explain the characteristics of the universe in which we find ourselves. To each version of such theories, there

*See Roberto Mangabeira Unger and Lee Smolin, *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time*, 2014 for a development of many of the theses of this metaphysical vision informing the struggle with the world. In that work, the conception stands on its own as a position within cosmology and natural philosophy. Its pertinence to the argument of the present book is to suggest how we can not only radicalize this metaphysical vision but also, by radicalizing it, reconcile it with what science has discovered about the workings of nature.

would correspond a different universe, in which its representation of the workings of nature holds. The one real universe would be only one of these imagined universes.

Of all the elements of the vision of reality here described, this element is the one that may seem to be least closely and necessarily presupposed by the struggle with the world. Yet the singular existence of the universe stands intimately connected with the reality of time, and acknowledgement of the reality of time in turn supports views of history and of novelty that prove indispensable to this approach to life. Conversely, the denial of the unique existence of the universe robs the events that take place in our world of some of their fateful force, for they now begin to seem to be no more than the enactment of a script that might take, or has taken, many very different forms.

If the thesis of a plurality of universes, not causally connected to one another and bereft of any shared or global time, fits poorly with the struggle with the world, the idea of a succession of universes, of states of the universe, succeeding one another, as the result of inflection points of contraction and expansion, fits easily. The one real world has a history. For all we know (that is for natural science to establish), this history may have started before the fiery beginnings of the present universe.

2. Time is inclusively real. Time is not an illusion, as the more radical versions of the metaphysic of the overcoming of the world represent it to be, nor, as many of our established ideas about causation and the laws of nature imply, does it touch only certain aspects of reality. It holds sway over everything; nothing is exempt from its influence.

The idea of the inclusive reality of time may at first seem to be a generally accepted notion, contested only by metaphysical doctrines that have remained marginal to the main currents of philosophy and science in the West. In fact, it is a revolutionary proposition, contradicting many of our conventional beliefs, especially about causality, as well as much of our established understanding of what science has taught us about nature.

The physics of the twentieth century reaffirmed belief in an unchanging framework of laws of nature even as it overthrew the distinction between natural phenomena and their background in space and time. Yet the idea of immutable laws of nature supposes that the laws, symmetries,

and constants of nature represent an exception to the principle that time rules all. It fails to take to its ultimate consequences the thesis that the universe has a history.

In this history, there was, according to one interpretation of what we now know about the history of the universe, a moment when temperature and energy had extreme although not infinite values, when the phenomena were excited to higher degrees of freedom than they came to exhibit in the later, cooled-down universe, when the structural distinctions among the components of nature had not yet emerged (or, if they had existed earlier in different form, and had ceased to exist), and when the distinction between states of affairs and the laws governing them failed to hold. The laws may then have evolved more rapidly, together with the phenomena.

Our approach to the most general tasks of explanation in natural science improperly extends to the whole history of the universe the forms of explanation that we have developed to understand the workings of the cooled-down universe, the universe at the moment of its history in which humanity lives. Similarly, it mistakenly enlists in the work of cosmological explanation—that is to say, the explanation of the universe as a whole and of its history—styles of explanation that we have developed to deal with parts of nature. Only in that local study can we successfully distinguish between a configuration space of phenomena governed by unchanging laws and the stipulated initial conditions of that configuration space. These two misguided projects—going from the explanation of the cooled-down universe to the explanation of the whole history of the universe and from a region of the universe to the universe as a whole—jointly contribute to a failure to recognize the inclusive reality of time.

Our conventional beliefs about causality equivocate, in a similar way, about the reality of time. They imply that time is real but not too real. If time were not real, causation, as we conventionally understand it, would not exist. Effects must come after causes. Without time, causation can be reduced to logical implication: effects become as simultaneous with their causes as the conclusions of a syllogism are with its premises. If, however, time is inclusively real, and the laws of nature can at least in principle evolve, discontinuously, together with the phenomena that they govern, our causal explanations no longer have immutable warrants.

They are adrift on changing laws of nature. Causation would then mean something different from what our conventional beliefs take it to mean, or it would be prior to the laws of nature rather than derivative from them. Causality is better regarded as a primitive feature of nature, which may or may not assume recurrent, law-like form.

Everything changes thanks to time. Time itself, however, does not emerge or disappear.

Inclusive time is continuous. It is not, as the arithmetical interpretation of the concept of the continuum suggests, to be grasped as a series of still shots, of slices, as a conception of time bewitched by the supremacy of time over space supposes.

In such a view, time is not emergent. It is, in fact, the only aspect of reality that cannot emerge from a more fundamental background. We register its reality, always and everywhere, by recognizing the differential character of change: some things change relative to other things. However, the kinds of things that there are also change, and so do the ways in which they change. That is what time is: the unevenness of change in a world in which everything, including change itself, changes sooner or later.

3. The new can happen. In the vision that is required by the struggle with the world, new, really new events can take place in the world. The really new is not countenanced by the preexisting structures of reality and by the laws of nature prevailing at the time. It violates them, not just our understanding of what they are. It evolves together with them.

The new is not just a ghost stalking the world waiting for its cue to come onto the stage of actuality: a possible state of affairs, within the perimeter of all the possible states of affairs, that can be identified, once and for all, by speculative thought or empirical science. The outer horizon of the possible cannot be fixed beforehand by either the former or the latter. What counts is the close possible: what we can do next, what the present state of affairs can become under certain interventions, the there that we, or nature, can get to from here.

The really new implies surprise: surprise not just by the light of our present understanding of the world but of any understanding, even a godlike mastery of the concatenation of causes and effects from the beginning to the end of time.

The availability of surprise in the world and the human capacity to cause surprise—even to ourselves—are integral to the struggle with the world in all its forms, sacred and profane. The saving work of God is, for the believer, the decisive surprise: no matter how much prefigured by prophecy, it represents a radical turn when it comes, persisting in the endless surprise that the interaction of divine grace and human striving makes possible. For the unbeliever, the ascent of mankind manifests itself, among other marks, in the enhancement of vitality. The ability to surprise, in the sense of acting outside the script of both the social order and the individual character, forms part of what vitality means.

The same principle continues in the internal organization of the mind: the anti-modular and anti-formulaic aspect of the mind, that is to say the mind as imagination, can prevail over the mind as modular and formulaic machine. It does not prevail as the result of any change in the physical constitution and function of the brain. It prevails as a result of cumulative change in the organization of society and culture as well as in the orientation of the person to his own character and his own life. To the extent that society and culture are organized to diminish the distance between our context-preserving and our context-transforming moves and the school exercises its prophetic mission of being the voice of the future rather than the instrument of either the family or the state, the mind as imagination wins power over the mind as machine.

This view of surprise as an attribute constitutive of our humanity is foreign to the styles of causal and statistical determinism that inform much of the established understanding of what science has discovered. It is also alien to the spirit and practice of much of positive social science. To its adversaries, this idea appears to be a form of irrationalism when it is in fact a claim about our powers of imaginative insight and of transformative action.

4. History is open. The openness of history means that the course of history does not conform to a script, not at least to a script that we are powerless to reject or to rewrite.

The invocation of such a script is, however, more than a simple illusion. It is the misunderstanding of a fact: the influence exerted by the entrenched arrangements of society and culture. They may be estab-

lished in such a way that they deny to their participants ready access to the means and occasions by which to challenge and change them. They may lengthen the distance between the ordinary moves we make within an institutional or ideological order that we take for granted and the extraordinary moves by which, typically at the provocation of crisis, we come to challenge and change pieces of this order. In such a setting, belief in the sanctity, the authority, or the necessity of the established order may represent a self-fulfilling prophecy. Thanks to this prophecy, the present arrangements begin to seem the only way to enact the interests recognized, and the ideals professed, by those who live under its rules.

The more an institutional and ideological regime in society, or a conceptual regime in thought, exhibits such traits, the more it appears to be a thing, or an alien and irresistible fate, rather than the contingent and revisable collective construction that it is. Even, however, at the extreme limit of this tendency, the entrenched order will never be so entrenched that it can ensure itself against the power of those who inhabit it to resist and to change it. It will never be able completely to reduce them to the condition of hapless puppets. As soon as unforeseen circumstances shake the stability of the order, the ambivalence of people's attitude to it becomes manifest: those who seemed to be unresisting instruments of the regime of life or of thought now show the face of apostasy and subversion.

We can, however, so reorganize the arrangements of society and culture that they supply the instruments, and multiply the occasions, for their own remaking. We can diminish the distance between our context-preserving and our context-changing moves so that transformation arises more continuously out of the normal business of everyday life and change becomes less dependent on crisis as its enabling condition.

Thanks to such shifts in the organization of society and of culture, history becomes, in actuality, not just in principle, more open to our transformative action. The result adds substance and luster to our ascent. It makes us freer and bigger. It increases our share in some of the attributes that believers in the salvation religions ascribe to God.

We can carry the same campaign over to the realm of ideas and discursive practices. In that realm, it results in the loosening of the restraints

that the predominance of method over vision and the hardening of distinctions among disciplines impose upon our ability to think and speak about what matters most. It can hasten, in each discipline, the pace of intellectual innovation. Change in ideas and attitudes combines with change in institutions to enable the mind as imagination (non-modular, non-formulaic, and possessed of the powers of recursive infinity and of negative capability) to prevail over the mind as modular and formulaic machine.

The idea of the openness of history is thus both a claim of fact and a goal of action. As a claim of fact, it seizes on a defining trait of our humanity—our transcendence over all context—and interprets every aspect of our constitution and experience in the light of the dialectic between circumstance and transcendence. As a goal of action, it requires a progressive change not just in the content of social and cultural arrangements but also in their quality, that is to say in the character of their relation to our structure-resisting and structure-transcending powers.

For the believer, our success in making history more open, as well as in recognizing the fundamental openness that, by virtue of being human history, it can never lose, is the complement and continuation of an earlier change. God guaranteed that our history would be open when he created us as embodied spirit. He allowed us to make good on this openness by intervening in history. In the vocabulary of Christian theology (with counterparts in each of the other Semitic religions of salvation), his redemptive work, manifest as grace, enables us to win freedom from sin, which is separation from him, from others, and thus from ourselves.

For the unbeliever, the openness of history, both as a claim of fact and as a goal of action, gives us a chance to change the quality as well as the content of the social and cultural contexts that we build and inhabit. It ensures, as well, a vast space for the exercise of our imaginative powers: our ability to understand the actual, in society and in history, from the vantage point of the accessible alternatives.

The dominant approaches to the understanding of society and history, however, deny the openness of history to one degree or another. Classical European social theory, as most fully exemplified by the work of Karl Marx, affirmed the idea that the structures of society are human

artifacts, which we can reimagine and remake. However, it compromised this revolutionary insight by embracing a series of necessitarian superstitions: the ideas that there is a closed list of indivisible institutional systems, realized successively in the course of history (with the result that the horizon of the possible in the alternative ways of organizing society has been forever set); that each of these institutional orders amounts to an indivisible system (with the result that all politics must represent either the ameliorative reform of one of these systems or its revolutionary substitution); and that inexorable laws of historical change drive forward the succession of systems (with the result that history makes the programmatic imagination superfluous).

These superstitions of false necessity prevented the thesis of the artifact-like character of social order from ever being carried to its radical and true conclusion: the awareness that the whole order of society is frozen politics—a temporary containment of struggle over the terms of social life.

The positive social sciences have rejected these strong claims of false necessity only because they have also abandoned the contrast—central to classical social theory—between the surface and the depth of social life, between the formative structures and the formed routines. They have consequently renounced as well the attempt to understand structural discontinuity in the history of society and culture. Argument about alternative orderings of social life is thus left without a basis in the explanation of experience; the vital link between insight into the actual and imagination of the adjacent possible is severed. A patina of naturalness and necessity descends upon social life. The would-be science of society becomes complicit in helping uphold the dictatorship of no alternatives.

The normative discourses of political philosophy and legal theory do nothing to correct this abasement of the intellect. They supply theoretical props for practices designed to humanize or to improve the last major institutional and ideological settlement in the rich North Atlantic societies: compensatory redistribution by tax and transfer and idealization of law in the vocabulary of impersonal policy and principle. The humanities become the terrain for adventures in subjective experience disconnected from the reorganization and the reimagining of society. They teach us to sing in our chains.

In all these ways, our ruling ideas about society and history prevent us from making sense of the openness of history and deny us guidance about how to make it more open.

5. The self has unfathomable depth. We can best approach the meaning of this part of the vision that informs the struggle with the world by considering to what it stands opposed. In the first instance, it opposes the reduction of the self to its social station. Such a station places us as protagonists within an established plan of social division and hierarchy. The individual becomes the embodiment of his caste, his community, or his role. He acts out the plan that his station lays in his hands.

In this respect, the idea of the depth of the self exemplifies a theme shared by the breakthroughs that resulted in the three orientations: the shallowness of the divisions within mankind. No form of these divisions lasts forever. No script that they assign to an individual, instructing him what to do and how to feel, deserves more than conditional and temporary obedience or cuts to the core of his humanity.

This conception of the self opposes as well, albeit less obviously, the reduction of the individual to his own character, the rigidified form of the self. The dialectic between formula and surprise has pertinence to every aspect of our experience. Routine and repetition create a structure within which the unexpected can occur and have meaning. However, the rigidity of a whole orientation to our tasks and engagements represents, in the light of this view, a denial of our inexhaustibility by finite circumstance.

In this respect, the idea of the depth of the self goes beyond the beliefs that are common to the religious revolutions that produced the higher religions, or the religions of transcendence: the ways of thinking that expressed and developed the three approaches to existence that I here consider. The depth that this idea affirms is just the reverse side of our transcendence. At its center lies the confrontation with the disparity between all the finite conditions of existence and the longing for the infinite. From this disparity arise the temptations of false transcendence and idolatry. Sanctification of any one social order represents a special case of these temptations: the inclination to project our longing for the infinite onto an unsuitable finite vehicle. From it there results as well our susceptibility to belittlement amid the constraints and compromises that put the lie to our transcendence over context.

The depth of the self, grasped in this more radical way, accounts for our obscurity to one another and to ourselves. It helps make us objects of desire for one another, of an unlimited desire that we are forever unable to satisfy. We demand more from the other person than she can ever give: that his self-bestowal assure each of us an unconditional place in the world and make up, through love, for our groundlessness.

It is the depth of the other self that turns it into an object of wild longing. However, this same depth prevents that thirst from ever being fully quenched. We cannot possess her even if we hold her. As embodied spirit, she eludes us. In so doing, she seems to refer us to God or to nothing.

6. The ordinary has more promise than the high-flown. “I shall pour out my spirit onto all flesh.” So speaks God in the Hebrew Bible. For the struggle with the world, ordinary men and women have the spark of the divine. They are embodied spirit, unresigned to belittling circumstance. They can ascend, whether or not with the help of divine grace.

Their power to rise—to increase their share in the attributes of divinity, or to come closer to God, or to the godlike within themselves—presupposes and produces a subversion of the hierarchies of the noble and the base in which all the historical civilizations have traded.

It is not just that the lowly are equal to the lordly and that the vulgar forms of sensibility are as revealing as the hieratic or canonical ones. It is that the lowly and the vulgar are higher. They are higher because they are freer from the posturing and the vigilance—over himself and others—that prevent each of us from coming closer to what Shakespeare called the thing itself: unaccommodated man. The more orphaned ordinary men and women are by the established powers of the world, the more reason they have to find the divine within themselves and to struggle against the constraints that established arrangements impose on their rise to a larger life and a higher state of being. They have “nothing to lose but their chains,” if by chains we understand not only the most overt forms of economic subjugation but also the means by which a human being may be humiliated and denied his birthright of accession to a greater existence.

We know all the reasons that may entice us to resignation. Nevertheless, the principle introduced by the struggle with the world, whether or

not it can count on the saving work of a transcendent God, is one with the potential to corrode and to dissolve all established hierarchies—social, moral, and aesthetic—that make our most valuable powers and experiences seem the prerogative of a few rather than the possession of all.

Thus comes the tremendous inversion of values that leads in the narratives of salvation to the preference for the prostitutes over the Pharisees, in our social ideas to the conviction that the mass of propertyless and powerless workers are the most credible bearers of the universal interests of humanity, and in our attitudes to art to the confusion of genres and to the conviction that comedy is higher than tragedy: that it is truer because more suggestive of transformative opportunity.

The resulting form of moral consciousness teaches us that it is better to look for trouble than to stay out of trouble; that our raising up begins in a willed acceptance of heightened vulnerability to disappointment, disillusionment, and defeat; that in throwing down our shields, we regain the first condition of vitality; and that no standard of moral or aesthetic judgment that accepts the hierarchies of the social order deserves anything other than suspicion and resistance.

We have only to survey the fossilized forms of organized religion and the conventional secular humanism to see how little this reversal of values has been able to disturb the conventional moral beliefs that continue to provide societies with much of their cement. No philosophical doctrine has elucidated and developed the meaning of this theme in the metaphysical background of the struggle with the world. The only modern philosopher to have made the idea of the inversion of values a central concern of his thought—Friedrich Nietzsche—was the one most determined to resist the raising of the base over the noble. He denounced it as *ressentiment*, mistaking its shadows, ambivalences, and contradictions for its commanding impulse.

Conception of the self

This vision of the world and of our place in it creates the context of belief that gives meaning to our ascent. It is not, however, the centerpiece of what the sacred and the profane versions of the struggle with the world have in common. This shared core is a conception of the self and

of its relation to its circumstances. By appropriating a term from the vocabulary of Christian theology, we can call it the conception of embodied spirit. Here, however, I use this term wiped clean of all sectarian theological content and made neutral between the sacred and the profane versions of the struggle with the world.

Incarnate in dying organisms that are inseparable from the self, we are shaped by the social and cultural contexts that we inhabit. Together with our genetic endowment, these contexts make us who we are. We cannot pretend to float above them. They nevertheless fail to exhaust us.

There is always more in us, in each of us individually and in all of us collectively—the human race—than there is or ever can be in them. There is more than is or can be not just in a particular institutional regime or system of belief; there is also more than is or can be in all regimes and systems put together. This point is not specific to any aspect of our social and mental experience; it applies to every aspect.

This abstract proposition may seem inoffensive only so long as we fail to acknowledge its radical implications for our self-understanding. Here are three examples taken from widely different realms of experience and presented at a level of detail sufficient to suggest what is at stake in the conception of embodied spirit.

The institutional arrangements of the market economy, expressed in the details of the law, set limits to how we can cooperate with one another and combine people and resources in the production of goods and services. They determine the ways in which we can reconcile our stake in the decentralization of economic initiative with our interest in taking advantage of economies of scale. They establish the terms on which we can command or use one another's labor: through free cooperation or through the wage relation, which continues to bear, to a greater or lesser extent, the taints of slavery or serfdom. They arrange the forms and requirements of our access to decentralized claims of capital, and consequently draw as well the boundary between private action and the regulatory or redistributive power of the state.

Any such repertory of arrangements, defined in the rules and doctrines of law, may prove more or less elastic. We may even come to organize the market economy so that it ceases to remain fastened to a single version of itself: a single, exclusive regime of contract and property. It is much better to provide for the experimental coexistence of

alternative regimes of private and social property within the same market economy. Then we can experiment more freely with ways of reconciling the contrasting aims of a market order—such as the diversification of independent sources of economic initiative and the greater or lesser measure of control that each economic agent enjoys over the resources at his disposal—according to the character of each sector of the economy. We can innovate more constantly and remorselessly in our practices of cooperation as well as in what we use them to produce.

However, no set of legal arrangements for the organization of the market economy, or of anything else, is infinitely accommodating. None approaches the ideal limit of a natural language in which we can speak any thought. We retain the power to imagine and introduce ways of organizing production that the established arrangements, and the ideas underlying them, fail to allow. We may innovate first in the institutional arrangements of the market system, and promulgate only retrospectively the rules and the ideas rendering such innovations secure.

So it happened, for example, in the United States and in other bellicose powers, in the organization of the market economy. Under pressure of a life-and-death danger, the governments of these countries cast aside arrangements to which they had seemed indissolubly wedded and organized production on a new basis. In particular, they went beyond the boundaries of the unified property right, which vests all the component powers of property in a single right-holder, the owner, and thus lays the basis for a crystalline distinction between private enterprise and governmental initiative. They did so, implicitly, when they organized production on the ground of freewheeling coordination between government and private firms as well as of cooperative competition among the firms themselves. They made new law and new ideas along the way.

Now consider an instance from the opposite extreme of human experience: our ability to overcome the constraints of our established methods and presuppositions in even the most rigorous, systematic, and ambitious enterprises of the mind, among which physics and mathematics.

If we could make only those discoveries about nature that our assumptions and methods authorize, no revolution in our scientific ideas would ever have taken place. Consider an example from the unsolved

problems of physics rather than from its revolutionary past. Suppose that in the attempt to make better sense of its discovery that the universe has a history than it has made so far, physics in its cosmological applications were to cast off four intimately related sets of assumptions that have thus far shaped its course.*

The first set of assumptions is the form of explanation that became canonical in physics ever since the time of Galileo and Newton. It is what I earlier called the Newtonian paradigm: we distinguish a configuration space—a part of the universe—in which immutable laws govern the movement or change of certain phenomena from the stipulated, unexplained initial conditions shaping that configuration space. What is merely stipulated for the purpose of one set of explanations can, however, become the subject matter to be explained in another set. Physicists and cosmologists have regularly extrapolated the Newtonian paradigm to the explanation of some aspect of the history of the universe. Such an extrapolation amounts to a cosmological fallacy: the distinction between a configuration space and initial conditions breaks down when the subject matter is the universe and its history rather than some part of nature.

A second set of assumptions is the generalization in physics and cosmology of the features of the cooled-down, mature universe: moderate degrees of temperature and energy; limited susceptibility to change in the succession to present states of affairs; the organization of nature into a differentiated structure, defined by distinct components; and stable laws of nature, clearly distinct from the states of affairs that they govern. Yet, given what we now know about the early history of the universe, there may have been a time when nature showed a radically different face, free of all these traits. Our conception of the workings of nature, and our explanatory procedures, must be able to encompass both faces of nature.

A third set of assumptions clings to the idea of unchanging laws of nature. These effective laws, and the yet more general principles exemplified in their operation, serve, according to the reigning orthodoxy in natural

*For a full account of the reasons to reject them, as well as of the consequences of doing so, see again *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time*.

science, as the indispensable warrants of our causal judgments. When the physics of the twentieth century cast aside the idea of an invariant space-time background to physical events, it reasserted the idea of an immutable framework of natural laws. This idea, however, may turn out to be incompatible with the implications of the fact that the universe has a history. The laws may evolve coevally, although discontinuously, with the phenomena. Causation may be a primitive feature of nature, and laws, symmetries, and constants the form that causation assumes in the cooled-down universe rather than the timeless foundation of our causal judgments.

A fourth set of assumptions is that time is not fundamental. It begins and ends, if indeed it is not more or less illusory. Yet the overthrow of the other three sets of assumptions may drive us to the view that time is fundamental rather than emergent; in fact, that it is the only aspect of reality that is not emergent (contrary to the contemporary impulse to conceive of time in spatial terms).

Consider what it would mean for cosmology to reject these four connected sets of assumptions. Their combined rejection would amount to a radical reorientation, within the inner sanctum of natural science, of our most general beliefs not only about nature but also about science itself. Such a reorientation may or may not turn out to be justified, or it may be justified in some qualified form. It is, however, wholly within the prerogative of the human mind.

If undertaken, it would represent a striking and extreme instance of transformations that have happened before, in the course of the history of science, including the changes that resulted in the physics of Galileo and Newton. The transformative impulse arises from the need to make sense of our fragmentary but developing insight into how nature works. The view of scientific explanation implied by the overturning of these four series of assumptions would take form only after the fact. We would understand fundamental aspects of nature differently before we had fully grasped the implications of our new understanding for the practices and assumptions of science.

This power of the mind to transgress—its ability to defy its own methods and presuppositions and to see more and differently than they allow—expresses its second, anti-formulaic aspect. For it is the mind as imagination that delights in its negative capability and acts always by a succession of two moves. The first move is distancing from the phe-

nomenon (as an image is the memory of a perception). The second move is transformative variation: by making this move we grasp the phenomenon from the perspective of proximate change: we progress in understanding a state of affairs by envisaging what it might become, in different circumstance or as a result of certain interventions. Imagination lifts the burden of a sullen and obscure facticity from the actual world, the better to grasp it and to guide the transformative will.

A third example comes from the enigmas of experience rather than from the organization of society or the practice of inquiry. It is an example that later plays a central role in the criticism of the struggle with the world but that here serves to illustrate the dialectic of engagement and transcendence.

Look at the many societies in which the leading religious, moral, and political beliefs are inspired by the sacred or the profane sides of the struggle with the world. Almost all contemporary societies fall into this group; even those that remain alien to the message of the Semitic monotheisms have been shaken by the promises and pretenses of democracy and romanticism. The forms of ascent to a higher life that these religious and secular projects describe place our hope in the future, whether it is salvation through communion with God and eternal life, or the overcoming of social oppression, or the discovery and development by the ordinary man and woman of a full and complicated subjective life. We are to become more godlike, if not be brought closer to God.

This message would fail to convert and convince if the future blessing did not in some way transform our experience and strengthen right now our spiritual or practical powers. Otherwise we would be forever left grasping at a good that eludes us because it is placed in the future—the historical or trans-historical future of humanity—rather than in the sole reality that we possess: the present. So the orthodoxy of all these beliefs must claim that we begin to be changed right now, and can receive in the present a foretaste of future salvation or empowerment if only we direct our conduct and consciousness correctly.

The translation of future into present good, however, works only imperfectly. Moreover, the circumstances of life under democracy further excite our restless striving and make us dissatisfied with our present condition. Neither the promises of eternal life, which even the most faithful may doubt in their deathbeds, nor the prospect of a future

society that we shall never encounter, nor the evocation, in high and popular culture, of a greater existence, ecstatically separated from the tenor of our daily affairs, suffices to quiet our anguish. We suffer a distance, an estrangement, from our present experience, although this experience continues to be the sole good that we can hope to possess with certainty. The value of the present is discredited by contrast to the good that remains beyond our reach because it is projected into the future—into a future beyond the boundaries of the time allotted to us. So we face death, aroused and disappointed, the only sure good having been stolen from us by our faith in a good that eludes our grasp.

From this inner estrangement we attempt to escape by means of Prometheanism: that is to say, by seeking power and invulnerability and by denying that we are the mortal, groundless, and insatiable beings that we seem to be. It is a false escape, beginning in self-deception and ending in the entanglement and paralysis of the self in an anxious quest for dominion over others.

Everything in the canonical beliefs of the struggle with the world would make this experience of estrangement and homelessness unnecessary, misguided, and even evil. It amounts to an apostasy from the message of ascent to a greater life. The experience nevertheless persists, revealing a truth that the established beliefs would suppress. This sense of exile from the present precedes the ideas that could explain its sources and explore its significance for what we could and should do next. Here is the dialectic of engagement and transcendence, manifest in the realm of inner and partly wordless and thoughtless life.

Not even in our most intimate experience are we ever entirely hostage to the social and conceptual worlds that have helped shape us. They may direct us over much of our lives, but they do not own us. The spell that they cast on our experience is never complete. At any moment, we can break it.

The arrangements of society and of thought can be so organized as to either tighten or loosen the noose in which they hold us. They can either lengthen or shorten the distance between our ordinary context-preserving activities and our extraordinary context-revising moves, and make change more or less dependent on crisis. They can make it either easier or harder for us to combine the characters of the insider and the outsider and engage a structure of life or of thought without

surrendering to it. There will soon be occasion to pursue, as an undeveloped implication of the struggle with the world, the idea that we have a fundamental interest in the change of our relation to the formative institutional and conceptual contexts of our experience.

Our power to transform the nature of our contexts—or of our relation to them, rather than simply to substitute one set of arrangements and assumptions for another, is, however, predicated on the truth of the conception of the self lying at the center of this approach to the world. Our enslavement to the structure is never so complete as to deny us, in any domain of our experience, all the way from the institutions of society and the procedures of thought to the vacillations of unspoken experience, the power to resist and to transcend the established arrangements of thought and society.

Later in this chapter, I explore the implications of this view of self for the conduct of life in two directions: the relation of self to structure and the relation of the individual to other people. Before doing so, however, I pause to consider how the metaphysical vision and the conception of the self that I have just outlined relate to a momentous issue in the history of thought: whether there is more than one order of reality in the world.

Only one regime

Two calamities have befallen the struggle with the world in its encounter with philosophy.

The first was the marriage of Christian (and, to a lesser extent of Muslim and Jewish) theology to the Greek philosophy of being. The consequences of this marriage for the understanding and development of this approach to existence have been far-reaching. They have set their mark on its secular as well as on its sacred variants.

By the Greek philosophy of being I mean the part of the philosophical tradition of the ancient Greeks identifying the apprehension of a permanent structure of being, complete with a permanent repertory of natural kinds, as the central concern of metaphysics and thus as well as the conceptual background to practical philosophy. We might call this view of the program of metaphysics the project of classical ontology.

Much in the history of Greek thought contradicted the assumptions of this agenda, both before and after the time of Plato and Aristotle: the metaphysics of becoming inaugurated by Heraclitus; the proto-scientific speculations of Anaximander about the turning of everything into everything else; the explanation, in the naturalism of Democritus, of distinctions in the macroscopic world as transient expressions of a ceaseless reordering of the fundamental constituents of matter; and the view in Plotinus of visible natural kinds as the momentary last stops in a series of continuous emanations from the one, undivided, and ultimate reality. Nevertheless, the idea of a permanent repertory of natural kinds, developed by Plato and by Aristotle in such different ways, was to have a decisive effect on the main line of thinking in the theologies and philosophies of the Semitic religions of transcendence (whether on an Aquinas, a Maimonides, or an Averroes) and, more generally, on the role that speculative thought played in the development of the orientation to life that I call the struggle with the world.

If the thinkers of these religions had not taken such an ontological agenda from the ancient Greeks, they might have received it from someone else. It is an endeavor pursued many times, with independent origins but similar motives and strategies, in the world history of philosophy, no less systematically, for example, in the Vaisesika school of classical Indian thought and in the related logic of Navya-Niyaya than in the metaphysics of Aristotle.

The project of classical ontology imposed a two-sided insult on the vision of world, self, and salvation that was central to the Near Eastern monotheisms and that survived, reshaped, in the secular projects of political and personal liberation.

One side of the insult was the impossibility of making sense, within the limits of this way of thinking, of the primacy of the personal over the impersonal: a primacy of both reality and value. For the mode of thought that is informed by the project of classical ontology, everything that has to do with the personal—the merely personal, one is always tempted to say in this tradition—falls under a cloud of suspicion. The experience of personality and of interpersonal encounter poses an at least potential threat to the recognition of what is deemed to be most real and most valuable: the impersonal structure of a world that is composed of a closed set of types of being or of natural kinds. Even when the personal

is valued, it is valued less on its own account than as a road to the higher reality of the impersonal, as in Plato's *Symposium*. Even when, as in Aristotle, friendship is acknowledged to be a source of value, with a moral architecture of its own, its value pales in comparison to the summit of human experience: the sharing of a superior mind in the quiet and the light of the impersonal divine.

Such a view cannot be reconciled with the uncompromising message of the salvation religions about the superior importance and reality of the personal. It is a message that they share with the approach to existence that I have called the humanization of the world. The secular voice of the struggle with the world did more than embrace this message; it began to pursue it to more radical extremes in its implications for the reshaping of our moral and political experience.

The other side of the insult delivered by the project of classical ontology against the presuppositions of the struggle with the world is its denial or diminishment of the reality of time and thus as well of the historical time in which our sacred or secular ascent, as a species and as individuals, takes place. If, as classical ontology supposes, there is an eternal repertory of natural kinds, governed by timeless laws or archetypes of being (even if, as in Aristotle, being is activity, and each being defined by characteristic powers and their recurrent exercise), the reach of time must be diminished and its reality compromised. Moreover, if we, human beings, are one of these permanent natural kinds, all that we can hope for is to establish a moral and political order making the best of our situation. We cannot hope for a fundamental change in ourselves and our circumstance, only for a containment of the evils that beset us from outside us and from within us.

It is astonishing that Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers could ever have looked for guidance to such an understanding of the world. Yet they did. The troubled marriage of Christian theology with Greek philosophy has continued for a thousand years. Those who have urged divorce have been, in every epoch, save only for the present one, minority voices, whether, to take only the example of the Lutheran Reformed Church, they spoke as outsiders like Kierkegaard or as insiders like Harnack. (In Judaism and in Islam the advocates of such divorce have long carried greater weight.) Many have contrasted, with Pascal, the God of Abraham to the God of the philosophers, by which they have usually

meant Aristotle and his successors, but few have pursued the radical implications of this contrast for the way of thinking about the faith. The influence of the project of classical ontology has served as the backdrop to traditions of natural science and of social theory persisting in the search for laws beyond time and history.

If the first philosophical misfortune suffered by the struggle with the world was the marriage of theology to ontology, the second was the acceptance of a metaphysical view affirming the existence of two separate regimes in the world: one governing human experience (or, for the believers, the relation of humanity to God); the other, controlling non-human nature. The distinction between the two regimes has often been held, by those who accept it, to reach within each individual human being. Non-human nature is present, as the body, within each of us. Or rather, according to this view, it is the human self that is present, as a stranger, in its own mortal body.

The core idea of the two regimes stands out by contrast to the conception that it negates: the thesis that, as Spinoza argued, there can be only one regime in the world. If there is a single regime, it matters all the more how that regime is to be characterized.

The program of classical ontology is in manifest tension with the presuppositions and claims of the struggle with the world in any of its forms. The idea of the two regimes displays no such obvious contradiction with the premises of this approach. Moreover, the more familiar statements of the notion of the one regime (including Spinoza's own) have contradicted those premises, both by affirming the existence of an eternal structure of the world (in much the same spirit as classical ontology) and by proclaiming the rule of a universal necessity. Yet if we look more closely, we see that the doctrine of the two regimes does cause endless trouble for the teachings of any form of the struggle with the world. The opposing view, of the one regime, can and should be developed in a manner conforming to the vision of reality that this approach to existence demands.

The teaching of the two regimes cannot be blamed on the ancient Greeks. It was as foreign to their ways of thinking as it was to the philosophies that have been dominant in the course of Indian and Chinese history. However, it has exercised so great an influence on the course of

modern European philosophy that it can be considered the most prominent and distinctive axis of this philosophical tradition if anything can be.

The doctrine of the two regimes has not come in a single, constant form. Rather it has advanced, in the course of the history of Western thought, in four great waves. In each of them, it has had a specific meaning and a characteristic motive. Despite the differences, there is enough overlap of both meaning and motive to take the four waves as movements in the same direction. Let me call these four waves the nominalist, the Cartesian, the Kantian, and the historicist.

The nominalist wave arrived with the nominalist Christian theology of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. (Given the controversies that application of the term nominalism to certain currents of late medieval thought has sparked, one might also call it the dualist wave, if the word dualism did not carry even heavier baggage.) This theology, in which we may find the original inspiration of many of the most influential ideas of later secular thought, taught, among other things, a radical divergence between the realms of nature and of grace. At least in the hands of those who were later labeled Aristotelian Averroists, it also argued an equally sharp disjunction between the truths known to reason and to faith: a self-contained naturalism and a fideism barred against rational challenge became reverse sides of each other.

The domain of grace was the one in which God's perfect freedom communicated with the flawed freedom of his human creatures, endowing them with the means by which to increase their share in his life. Nature, however, even nature within man himself, remained spiritless and incapable of participating in this ascent. Because it was spiritless, it could later become the object of natural science and of its search for immutable laws. On the other side of this divide between the orders of nature and of grace stood immaterial spirit.

Classical ontology in general and Aristotle in particular had been enlisted in the service of an attempt to render as Christian (or Jewish or Islamic) philosophy the dialectic of transcendence and of immanence. The centerpiece of this attempt was the appeal to a conception of intelligible forms, residing in the phenomena but going beyond them. Such a view

could be seen to anticipate, by the light of natural reason, the relation between divine spirit and natural reality for a believer. Within this way of thinking, nature and grace could not be sundered as distinct orders, impenetrable to each other. It was this precarious and hopeful synthesis that the first wave of the doctrine of the two regimes tore apart.

The message of nominalist theology had been prefigured early in the history of Christianity by the Nestorian heresy, which held there to be an insuperable chasm between the human and the divine natures of Christ. The foreshadowing of a supposed orthodoxy in an indisputable heresy should alert us to the larger problem at issue in this aspect of nominalist theology. The problem is the breaking of God's promise to pour out his spirit onto all flesh. Either man is embodied spirit or he is not. Either the spirit can take possession of the material world or it cannot.

The second wave broke with the philosophy of Descartes and with its revolutionary effect on the program of much modern Western philosophy. In his quest for a self-grounding of human knowledge able to withstand even the most radical doubt, Descartes equated the province of humanity with the realm of mental life. It is only to consciousness, he argued, that we have immediate and undeniable access. Everything else, including all our corporeal life, is represented to us only at a remove and subject to skeptical questioning. It is through consciousness that we resemble God. Moreover, only God, the opposite of a malevolent demon in charge of the universe, can ensure the convergence of our representations of the world with the world itself.

Although the immediate occasion, or the first step, of this philosophical revolution was epistemological, its larger significance becomes explicit in the universal distinction, and the unbridgeable divide, between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*: mindful being and stuff in space. We undertake all our pursuits, including our moral and political endeavors, as *res cogitans*. In so doing, however, we encounter *res extensa*. The most troubling instance of *res extensa* is the body as a stranger to the conscious self. For indeed the self is, in this view, simply individuated consciousness.

The particular arguments that Descartes advances for what he describes as the real distinction between mind and body may all be flawed or even fallacious. The implications of this difference for the explanation of our experience, including our experience of freedom of the will,

may lead to insoluble conundrums. What matters, however, for the development of the doctrine of the two regimes is that the world is divided into two parts, which are accessible to us in radically different ways and degrees and which conform to sharply different rules.

Kant's philosophy and its sequel represent the third coming of the idea of the two regimes. This Kantian wave was the most important of the four if we measure importance by influence on the subsequent trajectory of academic philosophy. It was, however, less important than the historicist wave that followed it if we take the hallmark of significance to be effect on the broader life of culture.

The core of this Kantian wave was the comprehensive development of the program of a self-grounding of human experience. The program was to be carried through by exploring the conditions that enable us to undertake our characteristic activities of making sense of the world and of connecting with other people. A crucial feature of this approach, and a distinction between it and the subsequent historicist wave, is that these activities and conditions were considered with regard to the experience of an individual, not located in any particular society, culture, or historical moment.

Under this account, the second regime—the regime of human experience—was circumscribed by the exigencies of a procedure that went backward from human activities to their universal enabling requirements or presuppositions: the transcendental method. What this transcendental method produced by way of a second regime was experience described from what was supposed to be our universal, unavoidable point of view: the representation of reality by the human mind; the ordering of our relations with one another; the supersession, in the practice of judgment and of art, of divisions that theory was powerless to overcome; and the reliance on a benevolent governance of the universe capable of saving us from death, natural necessity, and inescapable illusion. To the division between minds without extension and extension without mind, there succeeded the division between our experience—its conditions, its impulses, its structure—and the impenetrable non-human reality beyond our grasp.

In moral and political philosophy, this approach has resulted in an attempt to develop our moral and political ideas on the basis of a conception of freedom, disconnected from engagement with any specific

society or culture. The principles enunciated in the name of this conception are intended to have consequences for the design of institutions as well as for the solution of the problems that we face in dealing with one another. However, there is no reverse movement from our moral and political experience to the revision of the principles.

The historicist wave is the fourth and most recent of these manifestations of the idea of the two regimes. Its core idea is that the human world is collectively shaped by society and culture. The self-grounding of humanity is thus both practical and collective: it passes through the historical development of forms of life and of consciousness. Our relation to these organized and distinct forms of life is internal. We can understand them, as Vico earlier argued, because we made them. A decisive contrast exists between the inward relation that we can have to such collective constructions of ours and the relation from without that we can have to the non-human world, of which we are not the authors.

The historicist wave thus has two aspects. One aspect is social: we can find direction only in the collective work of society and culture. What we mistake for an experience or power of the individual is in fact a collective construction in historical time. The other aspect is hermeneutic: of these collective worlds of ours we can hope to attain knowledge unlike the knowledge from the outside that we have of nature. Scientific explanation differs from the interpretation of our practices and institutions. Meaning is parasitic on history.

Our self-understanding and our self-construction in history are badly misdirected when we begin to see and treat the orders of society and of culture as if they were parts of the furniture of the universe: a fate imposed on us by natural necessity rather than by human, albeit collective, agency. The power that the dead exercise over the living, through the medium of such collective forms, is not to be confused with the constraints that non-human nature imposes on human experience.

For the historicist, the frontier between the two regimes tracks the division between the social and the extra-social. Everything that we did not make through society and culture, including the natural constitution of the human body, belongs to the first regime: the one that we can see and explain only from the outside, as observers or manipula-

tors, never from the inside, as context-shaped but nevertheless world-making agents.

There are two major objections to the idea of the two regimes. To be forceful, each of these objections must have both a theological and a philosophical weight.

Insofar as each of these objections is theological, it criticizes the doctrine of the two regimes as contradictory to the struggle with the world. Because the struggle with the world can be understood in both a sacred and a secular register, the sense of theological is loose and does not presuppose belief in an interventionist God: the point is that, in this sense, regardless of any merits that the doctrine of the two regimes may have, it cannot be squared with the aims and presuppositions of this approach to existence.

Each of these objections, however, also has a philosophical force: it counts by appeal to the facts of the matter, even in the eyes of those who are uncommitted to the struggle with the world. Only if an objection has both a theological and a philosophical significance can it deliver a powerful blow against the idea of the two regimes. However, in the development of each objection, it is important to understand what in the argument is philosophical and what theological, and with regard to the theological, what applies to the sacred and what to the profane versions of the struggle with the world.

I call these two objections the argument about arbitrariness and anti-naturalism and the argument about near emptiness and false content.

The argument about arbitrariness and anti-naturalism. The Cartesian, Kantian, and historicist waves of the doctrine of the two regimes translate a view of the limitations of insight and power into an idea of the division of the world; they convert epistemology and anthropology into ontology. Their procedures are like those of a man who finding that his sight extends to a hundred meters imagines the world to be divided into two parts: the part before and after this horizon. The nominalist wave seems to represent an exception to this criterion of division. It so appears, however, only because its focus falls on the conversation between our powers and the power of God—the realm of grace—from which spiritless nature, beyond, remains excluded. It too, however,

converted a view of the focus of human and divine agency into a categorical division of reality.

The conversion of epistemology and anthropology into ontology is unjustified: we cannot read a universal division of reality off of a circumstantial view of the peculiarities of our cognitive or social experience. What the doctrine of the two regimes does in effect, reduced to its most rudimentary terms, is to say, illegitimately, that the world is divided into two parts: we and the rest. The variants of the doctrine differ in how they characterize this we as well as how they view the way in which the we is cut off from the rest.

Such differences reveal another type of arbitrariness in the teaching of the two regimes. It is illegitimate to infer a comprehensive view of discontinuities in the world from an understanding of our powers and their limits. Such an anthropocentric ontology may say something about us, but it has little or nothing to say about the world. Moreover, each view of our powers and their limits is no more than a disputed conception. One of the sources of the ongoing contest is that we can develop our powers, most notably through science and technology.

Consider again the image of the man who sees up to a hundred meters and imagines that the world is divided into two parts: the part that he can perceive and the part lying beyond his field of vision. In his self-regarding delusion, he confuses his experience with the world, and supposes that reality differs before and after the hundred-meter line. Then, however, he walks a hundred meters forward or devises a telescope and finds that he was mistaken.

Take, as an example, the issue of causation, which played an exemplary role in the development of the Kantian wave of the doctrine of the two regimes. Kant regards the idea of causality as an indispensable presupposition of the human mind. In making sense of the world, we cannot avoid relying on that concept. However, our real or supposed need of it tells us nothing about the structure of the world apart from us, only about the world in relation to humanity.

The analysis of causation in the *Critique of Pure Reason* makes clear that Kant has in mind, as many have had since his day, the tradition of physics established by Galileo and Newton. Behind our causal explanations there stand, as warrants, according to this tradition, the immutable laws of nature. Yet Kant treats this view of cause as part of our

mental constitution instead of regarding it as a distinctive and revisable approach to the workings of nature.

Causality may be a primitive feature of nature rather than just a pre-supposition of the human mind. Its relation to the laws, symmetries, and supposed constants of nature may be very different from what that tradition of physics imagines it to be. There may be states of nature, such as those prevailing at the formative moments of the present universe, in which the distinction between laws of nature and the states of affairs that they govern did not hold. In such states, causal connections may have ceased to exhibit, or not yet begun to exhibit, the recurrent, law-like form that they ordinarily display in the observed universe.

Nothing in the constitution of the human mind prevents us from thinking about causal connections in ways antagonistic to those that Kant wrongly supposed to be indispensable to thought. Moreover, the revision of our views need not be a matter of idle philosophical speculation; it may be driven by the advance of our insight into the workings of nature, and subject to the empirical challenges that discipline natural science.

What is true about our causal ideas is true as well about any of the conceptions that we may be tempted to attribute to our natural constitution. The significance of this remark outreaches its application to the Kantian form of the doctrine of the two regimes. The broader point is that we are not entitled to convert a view of our powers and limitations into a conception of the world: first, because the world exists apart from us, and we form only a minute portion of it; second, because our ideas about who we are and what we can do are forever subject to contest; and, third, because our powers, including our powers of discovery and understanding, can develop thanks to science, equipped by its child, technology.

The unwarranted projection of a local and transitory view of our powers and limits into the drawing of an imaginary frontier between two orders of reality—the non-human and the human—has, as its corollary, the view that we cannot think of ourselves in thoroughgoing naturalistic terms. However, we are natural beings who live and die in a natural world.

It is true that we know the structures of society and thought that we collectively create from within, as their creators, in a manner in which we cannot hope to know the phenomena of nature. It is also true that

these social and conceptual frameworks are not to be analogized to things in nature: they are nothing but the petrified remnants of our practical and visionary contests. Yet all our faculties, including those by virtue of which we create such structures, we possess as the outcome of our natural history as natural beings.

In the present state of our knowledge, we lack any good account of how the experience of consciousness could have emerged in a universe to which it seems alien, or of how mind relates to brain. Nothing, however, is gained and much is lost by representing our ignorance as a triumph of insight into the fundamental structure of reality and into its divisions. What is lost is, first, the consistency of our beliefs about different parts of the world and of our experience of it, and, second, the acceptance of our natural state as the terrain in which we must exercise even our highest spiritual powers, including the power to imagine the proximate possible and to create the new.

The theological aspect of the argument about arbitrariness and anti-naturalism is that the reification of a particular view of our limits and its restatement as an account of the workings of nature represent a confession of our failure to develop an integrated view of the world and of our place within it. Finding that we have two sets of ideas—one about ourselves, the other about the great world beyond us—and that they cannot be reconciled, we describe this failure as a success and praise our own confusion as a discovery of two different orders of reality. When we do so, we impose an unnecessary restraint on our faculty of transcendence: our ability to develop our powers, including our powers of discovery. We deliver ourselves to a voluntary servitude of the intellect.

For the religious versions of the struggle with the world, as conveyed by the Semitic monotheisms, the doctrine of the two regimes may at first seem to render a service: to police the distinction between the natural and the supernatural. There is no such advantage. If we say that there are two domains of reality rather than one, we simply double the bet of supernaturalism. God's saving intervention in the world then disrupts two orders of reality: the natural and the human. For even by the terms of the nominalist wave, the human order is not equivalent to the miraculous workings of grace; it is simply the field in which grace most directly operates. It continues to have its own structure and rules.

God's intervention disturbs both the workings of nature and the order of humanity.

Moreover, nothing has been gained by the dualism to render supernaturalism any less offensive to human reason. There are now three miracles instead of one: the suspension of the workings of the natural order, the suspension of the workings of the human order, and the exception that the human order represents within the natural one.

The supernaturalism of the Semitic salvation religions offers no excuse for the anti-naturalism of the two regimes: the supernatural is, for these religions, not the opposite of the natural. The conception of embodied spirit, of the incarnation of spirit, requires the believer to reject as heretical the rigid separation of flesh and spirit, of nature and mind, to which the thesis of the two regimes is wedded.

The argument about near emptiness and false content. A second objection to the doctrine of the two regimes is that when it is not almost empty as a guide to our orientation in the world, it acquires content only in a form that is false to our relation to the social and conceptual contexts in which we move. The significance of this objection becomes clear in the relation between the Kantian and the historicist forms of the doctrine of the two regimes. The juxtaposition of these two ways of stating the idea of the two regimes has been, for over a century, a characteristic feature of prevailing forms of thought.

Taken at its word, the Kantian view provides only the barest, most minimal basis for moral and political action. The constraint of universality in the categorical imperative and the formula of treating others as ends rather than as means lack definite content. The abstract idea of human freedom, lost or suspended in a natural setting constituted on principles that contradict it, yields nothing but itself. What it does is to provide one way among many of affirming an ideal of universal altruism as the organizing principle of the moral life.

However, this principle of altruism, far from being self-evident, is in fact misguided. It is false (as I later argue) to the truth about the relation between self and others as well as to the insights and aspirations driving the struggle with the world. It disregards what is in fact the central problem in our moral experience: our contradictory need for one another and our need to protect ourselves against the jeopardy in

which we place one another and our consequent radical ambivalence to one another. We master this contradiction, and attenuate this ambivalence, not by a high-handed benevolence but by love in the circle of intimacy and by cooperative activity outside this circle. In practice, the bare-bones content of this ethical formalism and universalism is complemented by its hidden subtext. This subtext is the passive acceptance of the established system of social roles and of the obligations to one another that, in any one society and culture, we are conventionally deemed to have by virtue of occupying certain social roles.

In the political philosophy conforming to the same model, a theoretical egalitarianism (the political counterpart to a theoretical altruism) is complemented by acceptance of the established institutional structure of society as the horizon within which the egalitarian ideal is to be realized. The practical residue of this combination of theoretical egalitarianism and institutional conservatism is the justification of compensatory redistribution by tax and transfer, and more generally of conservative social democracy, as the outer horizon of the progressive transformation of society. So, too, the practical residue of the combination of theoretical altruism with acquiescence in the conventional morality of established social roles is the embrace of a disinterested benignity, offered in the middle distance of social life, as the best that we can hope to give one another.

The historicist version of the doctrine of the two regimes supplies what appears at first to be a very different way of thinking about our moral and political direction. It teaches that we can find guidance solely by engagement in particular contexts and traditions. We can judge them only by their own standards, or, at the extreme, by the standards of another form of life: a different social and cultural world. Beyond these particular worlds and the modes of judgment that they support, there is emptiness.

This view, however, misrepresents the relation of the self to the social and conceptual regimes that it inhabits. These contexts make him, but they can never completely imprison or exhaust him. There is always more in him—more potential of experience, discovery, connection, and creation—than there is, or ever can be, in them. Moreover, we can change, cumulatively, their character as well as their content, diminishing the extent to which they present themselves to us as natural facts rather than as human artifacts.

The normal form of moral and political argument is indeed contextual, much as the historicists claim. We may tinker with our institutions and practices the better to realize some understanding of our interests and ideals. However, as we dissolve the forced marriage between that structure and these conceptions, we have to confront, and to resolve, ambiguities in these ideas that remained hidden to us so long as that marriage was left unchallenged.

Contrary to what the historicists suppose, this contextual style of discourse fails to exhaust the resources of normative argument, or of our relation to our contexts. We can act and think in ways defying the context. Contextual argument can be disturbed by context-resisting and context-transcending vision. Thus arises the prophetic element in our normative practices. Its characteristic content, apart from divine revelation, is the appeal to a conception of who we are and of what we can become.

Such conceptions of humanity amount to self-fulfilling prophecies: by acting at their behest, we begin to remake the world. However, they are never completely self-fulfilling: reality, especially our reality, fights back. The world resists, and we resist, being changed.

We should not regard accounts of humanity by analogy to explanations provided by science. Visions of humanity do not resemble, for example, models of the atomic structure of part of nature. They nevertheless have an empirical element. They are embedded in, or connected with, conjectures about the relative force of our longings or the limits, at any given moment, to our self-transformation, both as individuals and as collectivities.

These empirical elements remain fragmentary; they fail to prevent such guiding beliefs about who we are and can become from being contestable. Yet we must commit ourselves in one direction or another, without having for such a commitment a basis that can be adequate to the gravity of the choice. The imbalance between the weight of the choice and the fragility of its grounding confirms the religious aspect of our choice among orientations to existence.

These observations suggest a way of thinking about our relation to our contexts at odds with the combination of Kantianism and historicism that has long been the most influential form of the doctrine of the two regimes. Later in this chapter, I argue that this way of thinking about the relation of spirit to structure represents part of the undeveloped

revolutionary orthodoxy of the struggle with the world. If this claim is justified, the argument about near emptiness and false content has theological as well as philosophical force. The Kantian and historicist views cannot be reconciled with the vision informing the struggle with the world.

For the sacred versions of this approach to life, those most closely associated with Christianity and with its sister religions of salvation, the evils of the Kantian and historicist conceptions take on additional meaning. The historicist denial of our power to hold the context to account represents a form of idolatry: it betrays the vocation of context-transcending spirit. The acceptance of a theoretical altruism and universalism amounts to a Pharisaical evasion of our need—and of our fear—of others, preferring blamelessness to love.

The doctrine of the two regimes might mistakenly be thought to supply a response to the problem of our groundlessness. The supposed response is that we ground ourselves. What we have in the end are ourselves. We may ground ourselves by understanding and accepting the conditions and consequences of who we are, as revealed by what we do (the Kantian version of the two regimes). Alternatively, we may ground ourselves by recognizing and accepting our power to create social and conceptual orders bearing the mark of our concerns within a cosmos that is indifferent to them (the historicist version of the two regimes). Just as the anti-metaphysical metaphysics of the humanization of the world teaches, we create meaning in a meaningless world.

But what if our grasp of this world-making or meaning-making power of ours is corrupted, as the earlier argument about anti-naturalism and arbitrariness has suggested, by anti-naturalism and arbitrariness? What if our account of this power casts our self-grounding as a miraculous exception to the workings of nature, and leaves us unable to reconcile our understanding of ourselves as natural beings with our view of ourselves as context-revising agents?

Then the element of truth in the idea of self-grounding will have been weakened rather than strengthened by its association with the illusions of the doctrine of the two regimes. It will fall under the suspicion of being part of our self-deceived attempt to claim for ourselves an exemption from the natural order. We need no such exemption to make

sense of our capacity to resist and to remake the social and conceptual settings of our actions.

The doctrine of the one regime vindicated and reinterpreted. Spinoza was right: there can be only one regime in the world. There is no kingdom within a kingdom. The doctrine of the one regime requires no special defense; it follows the failed attempt to recast the differences between our ways of engaging the parts of reality that pertain directly to us and those that do not as a division of reality itself. It represents the position at which we arrive when we reject the anthropocentrism of the idea of the two regimes and recognize, without qualification, that the world exists apart from us. We are not entitled to convert either anthropology or epistemology into ontology. From the limitations or the variations of our understanding and our agency, with regard to different parts of our experience, there results nothing with regard to the organization of the larger world beyond us and within us.

It is true that we engage reality from our point of view, with our limited perceptual and cognitive apparatus, evolved and embodied in dying organisms. But how far this apparatus circumscribes the reach of our insight, or commits us to a set of categories from which we are unable to escape, is not something that we can definitively determine beforehand. As the example of causation shows, what at one time may seem to be embedded in the inescapable structure of our mental life may at another appear to us as a preconception from which, with the help of science and imagination, we can free ourselves.

The content of the doctrine of the one regime is not self-evident. There is one regime, but it is not the one that Spinoza described. His account of the one regime is, in some respects, a variant of the project of classical ontology: a world of timeless substances. It is, in other respects, a panentheism if not a pantheism: God is the world itself, or the world as a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. In this panentheism, the spatial metaphor prevails over the temporal one: the eternal world has no future; it has only an eternal present. In such a one regime, placed under the dominion of a timeless and universal necessity, there is no room for the new.

The history of philosophy and of theology presents us with examples of the conception of one regime associated with the acceptance of

classical ontology. It also offers instances of the idea of the two regimes connected with either the rejection or the acceptance of classical ontology. What it has rarely provided us with are cases of combination of the doctrine of the one regime with the rejection of classical ontology. In recent times, the philosophies of Bergson and Whitehead came closest to such a position.

However, this third view is the one that we have the most reason to embrace. It is also the only one of the three positions that can be reconciled with the aims and assumptions of the struggle with the world.

In this view, the whole of the cosmos has a history. In that history, time is the only reality that is not emergent. Cosmology is a historical science. The elementary constituents of the world and the laws, symmetries, and supposed constants, which now form the main object of basic science, once did not exist. The distinction between the laws of nature and the phenomena that they govern did not then apply, and may one day no longer hold. Established science mistakes the workings of nature in the cooled-down, consolidated universe for the way nature works always and everywhere. Everything in the universe changes sooner or later.

Universal nature conceived in this fashion exhibits the attributes that we are accustomed to see in natural history but are surprised to rediscover at the most basic levels of reality. There is universal path dependency: what comes before matters to what comes later, and causal sequences, sometimes forming a tight system, may at other times be only loosely connected. All the types of being, or natural kinds, are ephemeral and mutable, in contradiction to the aims of classical ontology. The laws, symmetries, and constants of nature evolve, sometimes quickly and other times slowly, together with the phenomena exhibiting them. Nothing, not even these regularities, stands outside the reach of time, which alone persists, as all else emerges, changes, and vanishes.

Such a world, in which time is inclusively real, has room for the new: the new that changes the workings of nature, the new that is not simply the enactment of a predetermined possible state of affairs, stalking the world as a ghost and waiting for its cue to come onto the stage of actuality.

For such a view, the one that most naturally suits the struggle with the world and best makes sense of its presuppositions, time is the most fundamental reality. Its central place in the understanding of nature is

related on one side to a view of what time is and on the other side to an acknowledgement of time's connection with mind. (In *The Singular Universe and the Reality of Time*, I argue that such an approach to time is not only compatible with what science has discovered about the workings of nature and the history of the universe but also required by any cosmology that can do justice to these discoveries.)

Time would not be inclusively real if everything in nature, including the ways in which change changes, failed to change sooner or later. For there would then be laws, symmetries, or constants exempt from the reach of time. The change of change is more than an ornament of the power of time; it is an expression of its character: time, which could not be detected or measured if change failed to occur unevenly and discontinuously, may be defined as the susceptibility to such change and as the transformation of transformation.

More obscure, but no less important, is the intimate bond between time and consciousness. In a universe, our singular universe, in which everything changes sooner or later, the really new—the new that is not simply an enactment of possible states of affairs defined from all eternity—can happen. Mind or consciousness, as it has evolved and been expressed in us, as well in other animals, amounts to more than an outcome or an instance of such real novelty; it represents a master tool for making the new, as was life, with less power and haste, before mind. So to conceive mind, however, is still to define it only functionally: to view it from outside the experience of consciousness.

Intrinsic to the experience of consciousness is understanding. To understand a state of affairs is to grasp what it might turn into, especially what it might next become, under different provocations or interventions. The mind shadows our transformative engagement in the world, and only gradually and fitfully gains the power to overshoot our activity. Readiness for change in the types of things that there are as well as in the ways in which they change prefigures, in not yet mindful nature, openness to the new. Life is, in this sense, a prophecy of mind. Susceptibility to transformation of everything, including of transformation itself, is a prophecy of life. The inclusive reality of time serves these prophecies as a premise.

The reinterpreted doctrine of the one regime, combined with the dismissal of classical ontology, is the only metaphysical conception that

can be readily married to the vision lying at the center of the struggle with the world. It is also the view of reality that we have most reason to credit in the light of what we have discovered (despite the metaphysical blinkers through which we continue to see the discoveries of science) about the workings of nature.

For the believer, such a thoroughgoing temporal naturalism is incomplete. The image of evolving nature that it proposes must be completed by another story about the saving work of God and the response that this work elicits, or fails to elicit, from the human will. However, supernaturalism requires then only one miracle (the envelopment of nature within a higher reality) rather than three miracles (the breaking of the natural order, the breaking of the human order, and the separation of the human order from the natural one). A temporal naturalism of this kind has, as well, for the believer the decisive advantage of offering an approach within which he can more readily make sense of the idea of the self as embodied spirit. The anti-naturalist dualism of the doctrine of the two regimes undermines this view of our humanity.

Spirit and structure

The conception of embodied spirit yields an approach to the institutions and discourses shaping us. To define this approach is further to elaborate the conception. At the same time, it is to begin to describe the practical consequences of the struggle with the world for the conduct of life and the organization of society.

This view of the relation of self to structure, however, remains so foreign to the most influential ideas about society that it can be stated only with difficulty; the very words with which to express it carry the weight of associations that work against it. It is an orthodoxy with few friends and fewer theoreticians. The doctrines that have deviated from it, in one or another direction, have spoken more loudly, even in the societies in which the struggle with the world has been the most influential approach to existence.

There are two such principal heresies. According to the custom of patristic theology, I here give them the names of individuals: the Hegelian heresy and the Sartrean heresy. Each of them, however, has repre-

sented much more than a doctrine taught by individual thinkers; each has amounted to a persistent tendency in the intellectual history of the societies in which the sacred and profane projects of the struggle with the world have commanded the greatest authority. To this day, it remains unclear what is left of the view of the relation between spirit and structure in this approach to existence when both these heresies are rejected. Much is in fact left, although not yet adequately developed in our ideas about self and society.

The doctrine of the Hegelian heresy is that there can be a definitive structure of social life and self-understanding. Such a structure will emerge, if it has not already done so. It does justice to all the experiences that we have reason to value and denies no power that we have reason to enhance. It suffers from no fatal contradiction, in particular no contradiction between the institutionalized form of the life of the people, established as law, and the prescriptive, action-oriented beliefs—the ideals and the interests—in the light of which we understand and uphold the institutional regime. Insofar as we can have a home in the world, such a definitive structure is that home. With its emergence, we lose a reason to be restless in the world.

In the version of this view developed by Hegel himself as well as by many other ideologists of the upward path, through conflict and contradiction, that humanity is supposedly treading, the definitive order represents a collective construction in historical time. The sacred versions of the struggle with the world, however, embrace a wholly different species of such an order: one shaping social life according to the dictates of sacred law. (The reconstruction of society according to the requirements of the sharia in Islam figures as a telling example.) It too amounts to an undertaking achieved in historical time, thanks to a response of human will to God's saving work.

The idea of a definitive structure of human life lays itself open to derision only when formulated in explicit and unforgiving form. It is, however, the unacknowledged premise of the now dominant expressions of social-scientific explanation, of normative political philosophy, and of the humanities. By abandoning any attempt to imagine the influence and remaking of the structures, the prevailing ideas in the whole field of social and historical study sever the link between insight into what exists in society and imagination of what we can make happen.

As a result, they trade understanding for the rationalization of the existent, and deliver themselves to what the historian of modern European philosophy describes as right-wing Hegelianism.

The counterpart to the notion of a definitive structure of social life in the self-understanding of philosophy is the view of philosophy as a superscience, Hegel's idea of absolute knowledge: thought, even if incompletely formulated, no longer confronts insuperable contradictions between its methods and the truths that there are to explore. It is not necessary for knowledge to be absolute that it be complete, only that all conflict between insight and practice be at last resolved. Although such a claim, stated as it was by Hegel in ostentatious and metaphysical form, may seem extravagant, it is in fact the pretense of the university culture, with its craven reification of the methods of each discipline and its hostility to whatever problems and ideas these methods and disciplines are powerless to grasp.

The Hegelian heresy denies a truth central to the struggle with the world in all its variants, sacred or profane: the truth of the dialectic between circumstance and transcendence. Described in the language of the sacred form of the struggle with the world, its spiritual defect is idolatry. Under its influence, we carry over to a defective and ephemeral human arrangement some part of the unconditional devotion that we owe only to God—and to his presence within ourselves. Veneration for the law, especially as developed within Judaism and Islam, can turn into an idolatrous perversion. The law may cease to be a bridge between the human and the divine. Instead it may become both a proxy for God and an incitement to a freezing of the social order.

Described in the language of the secular form of the struggle with the world, the harm done by the Hegelian heresy is the abandonment of our power, interests, and ideals to the stranglehold of an institutional formula, misrepresented as adequate but in fact flawed, ramshackle, and accidental, as all institutional formulas are. The result is to interrupt the back-and-forth between the way in which we shape and understand our interests and ideals and the way in which we form and grasp our institutions and practices. The development of our powers always depends on this dialectic.

At the time when this book was written, the whole world stood in the shadow of a restrictive set of institutional options for the organiza-

tion of different domains of social life: government and its citizens; firms and workers; finance and production; the family and the state. Each set of arrangements, enacted in a particular area of social life, translated the abstract idea of society into a prescriptive image of human association—of what relations among people can and should be like in that part of society. Each stopped history in a particular place.

The Hegelian heresy does not appear most often in the straightforward version in which it was expounded by the philosopher. It appears insidiously in countless veiled forms, all the more effective for being disguised. Today it has, as one of its expressions, the idea that economic, political, and social pluralism—a market economy, a representative democracy, and a free civil society—has an established and limited range of institutional expressions, the very ones established in the rich North Atlantic democracies.

The heresy would not be as influential as it is had it not become the premise of the dominant practices of thought across the entire field of social historical studies. The hard social sciences, beginning with economics, explain the present institutional arrangements, including the forms of the market economy, by vindicating their naturalness, necessity, or superiority. The normative disciplines of political philosophy and legal theory take as their endeavor to theorize practices, such as compensatory redistribution by tax and transfer or the improving idealization of law in the vocabulary of impersonal policy and principle, that claim to humanize the established structure rather than to reimagine or remake it. The humanities surrender to subjectivist adventurism and to the private sublime.

The opposing error to which the view of self and structure has been repeatedly subject in the history of this orientation to the world is the Sartrean heresy. The teaching of the Sartrean heresy is that we affirm our humanity only by defying and disturbing the organized arrangements of society and, more generally, the reign of routine and repetition in life and in thought. Structure, according to the view, robs spirit of life. The instances of our resistance to such robbery are the tropes of the romantic imagination: the crowd in the streets against the bureaucratic arrangements of the state, romantic love against the routines of married life, the unformed against the formed. Spirit—if by

spirit we mean humanity in the exercise of its power of resistance and transcendence—lives by shaking structure.

Structures, in this view, are unavoidable. We cannot abolish them. All we can do is to loosen, for a while, their hold. They will reassert themselves. Nevertheless, in the intervals of disturbance, we can become more fully ourselves.

In the moral history of Western culture, the most familiar form of this idea is the one presented, long before Sartre and the twentieth-century existentialists, by nineteenth-century romanticism. The spirit floats above the world, powerless to penetrate and to transform the routines and repetitions that consume much of our existence. The trials of the protagonist in struggling for the hand of his beloved command attention. His subsequent married life, however, defies appealing portrayal, marked as it must be by the repetition and routine that romanticism regards as deadly to spirit.

A crucial feature of the Sartrean heresy is its implicit denial of our ability to change the relation of spirit to structure. In the fragmentary and oblique ways in which it exercises its greatest influence, the Hegelian heresy favors an institutional fetishism: the unargued identification of abstract institutional conceptions, like the conceptions of a market economy, a representative democracy, or an independent civil society, with particular, contingent sets of institutional arrangements, defined in law.

The Sartrean heresy makes an analogous mistake at a higher level. It treats the relation of the self to the social and conceptual regimes that we inhabit as a fixed quantity. It fails to acknowledge what is a fact of the matter: that every organized form of social life or of inquiry and discourse can be arranged so as to either lengthen or shorten the distance between our context-preserving and our context-changing moves. Each such form can be established in ways that either affirm or renounce the pretense to be a natural fact, part of the furniture of the universe, or at least of all history, rather than a revisable human invention. Our most fundamental material, moral, and spiritual interests, however, are engaged in precisely such a change in the character of our relation to the established framework of society or of thought.

In the sacred language of the struggle with the world, the Sartrean heresy commits a sin of despair that is the reverse side of a sin of idola-

try. Despair and idolatry speak through the illusions of false necessity, applied to the relation of self to context, of spirit to structure. The harm done to the understanding is the severing of the link between insight into the actual—the established structures—and imagination of the accessible alternatives: the theres to which we can get from here. The harm inflicted on the will is the failure to transform an aspect of society and thought—the relation of our institutional or conceptual presuppositions to our experience—that, left unchanged, limits and corrupts our most ambitious endeavors.

The Sartrean heresy has taken many forms in the history of thought: in the *via negativa* of the mystical traditions within Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; in the ideal of life developed by the romantic movement of the nineteenth century; and in the vitalist and existentialist currents in the philosophy of the twentieth century, which, in some ways, combined the impulses of those two earlier stages of the heresy. These beliefs are no longer the most widespread and influential expression of the Sartrean heresy today. Now this heresy appears, more commonly and insidiously, in the form of a complete disjunction between the reconstruction of society or of thought and the reorientation of personal life. One of the results of this divide is the privatization of the sublime as religion, as art, or as wordless experience.

The orthodoxy of the struggle with the world is the doctrine that remains once we have repudiated both the Hegelian and the Sartrean heresies. In its essential elements, this orthodoxy can be embraced by the believer and unbeliever alike. It is closely related to the vision of the dialectic between circumstance and transcendence. What it adds to this vision is a series of connected ideas about the character and the transformability of the social and mental worlds in which we live and move.

There is no final and all-inclusive ordering of social life, much less a form of insight and discourse satisfying the criteria of absolute knowledge. Every regime of society or of thought remains defective and incomplete. So, as well, is the sum or sequence of all such structures.

There will always be insights, experiments, and experiences that we have reason to value but that the established arrangements and assumptions exclude. We can nevertheless reach beyond the regime to what it would deny us. We can revise the defective or incomplete order, making it less defective or less incomplete.

Our transformative power, however, is not limited to marginal revisions of social and conceptual systems that we are generally inclined to leave unchallenged and unchanged. We also possess the ability cumulatively to change their openness to our regime-resisting and regime-revising freedom. In this way, we can affirm in practice the made-up character of the social and conceptual worlds in which we act and think.

That this orthodoxy has at best been only half-articulated and that its implications for the reconstruction of thought and society have been misunderstood are characteristic of the struggle with the world. Its teaching is so revolutionary and so remote from the currents of thought that have prevailed in the world history of philosophy and theology that we grasp and develop this message only fitfully, by halting steps.

An example, in the domain of our political beliefs, illustrates the practical significance of this half-secret and largely undeveloped orthodoxy about spirit and structure. The liberals and socialists of the nineteenth century, including John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx, mistakenly believed that the institutional conditions for the development of our practical capabilities converge with the institutional conditions for the freeing of ordinary men and women from the injustices and humiliations of class society. They disagreed in their demarcation of the path of institutional advance. However, they agreed in accepting the idea of a pre-established harmony between the institutional requirements for the achievement of these two families of goods.

Our deficiency in the imagination of institutional alternatives tempts us to embrace the opposite dogma: that a contradiction exists between the requirements of economic growth—or, more generally, of the development of our practical capabilities—and the conditions for our liberation from the restraints of class society. This dogma, however, would be no more justified in its empirical assumptions, and may be even more damaging in its practical consequences, than the dogma of pre-established harmony.

The suppressed orthodoxy about self and structure gives reasons for acting upon a hope untainted by that dogma: the hope of advance in a zone of potential intersection between our material and our moral interests. The basis for this hope lies in the relation of a third set of interests to those other two: our interest in the development of institutions

and practices, including methods of inquiry and discourse, that lay themselves open to revision, diminish the dependence of change on crisis, and thereby enable us to combine the roles of insider and outsider. We can then participate in social and conceptual regimes while retaining the power to challenge and revise them. We can deny them the last word, and keep it for ourselves.

By the terms of this hope, there exists a subset of the institutional conditions favorable to the overcoming of class oppression that also favor the development of our practical, productive powers and a subset of the institutional requirements of the former that is hospitable to the latter. What makes the hope of identifying such a zone of intersection and of advancing within it reasonable is the role that a change in relation between self and structure can play in the achievement of both our material and our moral interests.

Once societies have escaped the extremes of poverty, the major constraint on economic growth ceases to be the size of the economic surplus, coercively extracted by the hierarchies of class. It becomes instead the vigor of innovation—technological, organizational, and intellectual. That was already the chief constraint at least since the time of the early industrialization of Europe: the economic surplus in Europe was no larger than in the China of the Ming-Ching dynasties or in other agrarian-bureaucratic empires that fell back into relative backwardness. Innovation requires the greatest possible freedom to recombine and transform not only the factors of production but also the ideas and arrangements that enter into the institutional setting of production and exchange. The advantages of a market economy are diminished if the market remains fastened to a single legal-institutional version of itself.

Any entrenched system of social division and hierarchy has, as a condition of its stability, that the arrangements and assumptions on which it depends not be open to incessant challenge and disturbance. They must be insulated, in the routines of discourse as well as in the realities of competition for wealth and power. It is precisely such an insulation that the inarticulate orthodoxy of self and structure wants to deny to every part of the prevailing regime of life and thought. If, however, we fail to organize an unceasing disruption of such assumptions and arrangements, we allow them to restrict the forms and benefits of cooperation and to cut the individual down to the size of his station in society.

The ideal limit of the suppressed orthodoxy is not a definitive and all-encompassing structure. It is rather a structure that renders itself, in the highest degree, contestable and corrigible, and thus helps rescue us from the reduction of our humanity to our circumstance.

Self and others

If the relation between spirit and structure is one domain in which the struggle with the world reveals its implications for the conduct of life and the organization of society, another is the relation between the individual and other people. These two aspects of the existential orientation supported by this view of the world are more intimately connected than we have understood them to be. Together, they amount to a comprehensive view of how to live.

Until relatively recently in the history of humanity, the dominant idea about what our relations to other people can and should be at their best has given pride of place to altruism: an overcoming of selfishness by disinterested benevolence. The premise of this view is that the basic problem of the moral life is the disposition to sacrifice the interests of others to our own interests. Only reluctantly and partially, on this account, does each of us give up the conviction that he is the center of the world or imagine a world in which he plays no part. Altruism gains a different meaning, and rests on a different basis, in the overcoming of the world and in the humanization of the world.

In Mahayana Buddhism, for example (as in the philosophy of Schopenhauer), altruism is universal fellow feeling. Its metaphysical foundation is the shallow or illusory character of distinctions among beings and among people. All individuals, all sentient creatures, and even all apparently distinct phenomena are united by their common participation in unified and hidden being.

If this being is also timeless, the individual is removed, albeit only in thought and in thought-laden experience, to an existence far away from the one in which time rules as the unforgiving master. The result is to place at the summit of our ideal relations to one another a view that is as remote as any view could be from our embodied longings.

In the teaching of Confucianism, we advance both through our conformity to the rules and rituals of social life and through the cumulative enhancement of our ability to imagine other people: their experience and their needs. Here the foundation of altruism is no longer our universal affinity, secured through shared kinship in the one being. It is the recognition that within a dark and meaningless cosmos the only reality of unquestionable value is the experience of personality and of personal encounter. Once again, the model of our relations to one another is that of a selfless and inclusive fellow feeling. We must perform our roles and honor the obligations that we have to others by virtue of occupying the social stations that we do.

Despite the sharp contrast between the metaphysical grounding of altruism in the overcoming of the world and its anti-metaphysical defense in the humanization of the world, the practical consequences for the conduct of life are similar. In both instances, from widely contrasting perspectives, we are taught that the highest standard to which we should aspire in our relations to one another is a detached and sacrificial benevolence. Such benevolence is marked by certain attributes that reappear, although with different connotations and justifications, in both views. These attributes take hold whether the distinctive vision is that of a Confucian, a Buddhist, or a Stoic.

First, altruism motivates generosity offered from on high by an individual who has advanced to a higher state of insight and of life. He offers it to an individual who is ordinarily less advanced. The higher being is less needy: in particular, less needy of other people. His greatness lies in part in his relative freedom from such need, achieved through the demanding cultivation of both the mind and the will. He is not benevolent because he is incomplete without the other person. He is benevolent out of a surfeit of his own goodness as well as out of insight into the truth about the cosmos or about humanity.

Second, altruism is unilateral in practice and in intention. Its value and efficacy do not depend on any particular response or counterperformance by its beneficiary. In fact, the less the altruist receives in return for his altruism, the more sacrificial his conduct becomes, and the higher it rises on the moral scale. On that scale, selflessness is the most reliable standard of ennoblement.

Third, although altruism may subject the altruist to exacting demands, and even at the limit require that he sacrifice his life, it need impose no inner torment on him. His altruism cannot be devalued by going unrecognized. It runs no risk of being rebuffed because it expects nothing in return. The beliefs and emotions supporting it associate it with self-possession and serenity. For the overcoming of the world, such serenity expresses a disengagement from the troubles of illusory distinction and time. For the humanization of the world, it results from the dialectic between self-mastery and mindfulness of others, on which both improvement of the individual and the reform of society depend.

The ideals and experiences described by such an ideal of altruism have exercised authority across a wide range of societies and cultures, at least since the time of the emergence of the religions representative of three approaches to existence considered here. They form the starting point of much of what philosophers have had to say about ethics: the philosophy of altruism. So great has been their influence that they have penetrated even communities of belief that claim allegiance to one or another version of the struggle with the world. In so doing, they have threatened to rob this approach to existence of one of the most distinctive parts of its message.

The truth about the self and others proclaimed by the struggle with the world is that love rather than altruism is the organizing principle of our moral experience and the ideal by which we should orient our effort to increase our share in the divine. But what is love if it is not altruism? It is the experience of connection with another person such that the connection enhances our freedom or self-possession rather than detracting from it. The premise of this idea of love is that we cannot form or rescue ourselves. We need other people in every aspect of our experience: practical, cognitive, and emotional. However, the ties by which we satisfy this need subject us to the dangers of loss of freedom and self-possession. So it seems that we cannot be complete alone and cannot be complete together.

Love is the imagination of the overcoming of this conflict between the conditions of selfhood: that the self be separate and that it be connected to another person. At the idealized limit of this experience, all

tension between these two requirements of selfhood vanishes. We need not pay for connection any price of subjugation and depersonalization.

However, we must pay another price for a good of unlimited value: we must cast away the shields by which we defend ourselves not only against the beloved but also against our need for her. Love may be rebuffed. In searching for it and in experiencing it, we give hostages to fortune and depend upon the grace of the beloved, whether the beloved is human or divine.

Our self-interest, our insistence on engaging the world as if everything were about us, is, according to this view, not the overriding problem in our moral experience. The decisive issue is our difficulty in escaping the prison-house of our consciousness enough to imagine the experience of another person and to see and accept her as the context-transcending and role-exceeding individual that she is.

The mindfulness of others, required by Confucian teaching in the service of altruism, is not enough. What is required is the inclusive albeit incomplete imagination of another, secret self. Imagination informs the longing and makes possible the acceptance. Such is the experience that we call love. The attributes of love are different, in every crucial respect, from those of the selfless altruism that the dominant ideas recommend as the exemplary moral experience.

In the first place, the lover, whatever his outward social circumstance, does not put himself in a superior position toward the beloved. He wants her and needs her. Regardless of social place, the experience of love is, by this very fact of unlimited longing, an equalizing one. This feature of love is so deeply marked that it must apply, in the sacred voice of the struggle with the world, even to God and to his relation to mankind. God needs man and longs for him. In Christianity, this divine yearning forms part of the perplexing message of the Incarnation.

Second, love, unlike altruism, seeks a response: that the beloved accept the love and love in return. Because it seeks a response, it may fail. Love may be rejected, at the outset or later. It may be as hard to accept love as to love. The love of the other represents a form of grace, freely given or denied. No degree of moral perfection on the part of the lover can ensure the desired result.

Third, in contrast to altruism, love may be associated with joy but not with serenity. Because it negates all distance and courts failure, it

requires a heightened vulnerability. Because it draws on the imagination of other people as the radical individuals that they are or seek to become, it looks to the person beyond the contingent and limiting social role. It is penetrated by a search for the infinite, which is both its power and its infirmity.

The teaching that puts love (understood in this fashion) rather than altruism at the center of our moral experience diverges so radically from the beliefs that have been paramount in the world history of moral thought and moral experience that it takes hold only with great difficulty, over a long historical time, and in contest with ideas that oppose it. If it is an orthodoxy, it has always been an unannounced, contested, misunderstood, and derided orthodoxy, even in those places and periods in which the sacred or profane versions of the struggle with the world have enjoyed greatest influence.

Thus, even in early Christian theology, the highest expression of the relation of self to others was taken to be *agape*, a disinterested and inclusive fellow feeling, designated by a word that was itself borrowed from the vocabulary of Hellenistic philosophy. This *agape* is just another word for altruism. Its associations are with the doctrines of the overcoming of the world, such as we might find them expounded by a Plotinus.

In the subsequent history of modern moral theory, often a transparent secularization of Christian belief, the centrality accorded to a principle of altruism in the ordering of our moral experience was regularly associated with resort to a method, such as Bentham's felicific calculus, Rousseau's social contract, or Kant's categorical imperative, with the aid of which we could assess our obligations to one another. By discharging these obligations, we render ourselves blameless, although neither loving nor beloved. We do so from the middle distance of an experience of interaction with strangers in which we view them with detached benevolence and act toward them with punctilious rectitude.

However, the reduction of love to altruism, as well as to the pietism of the middle distance with which the principle of altruism is closely associated, has an uneasy place in the religion of Jesus. If he consorted with thieves and prostitutes, how can we prefer purity to love? If he defied the law at every turn, how can we allow our moral campaigns to begin in rule mongering and to end in hand washing? If he, God incarn-

nate, cried out on the cross asking why he had been forsaken, how can we affect a high-handed benevolence? The poisonous and pharisaical teaching of the moral philosophers must be rejected by the Christian as incompatible with the message of the redeemer.

In Christian theology, the sacramental bond between man and woman, consummated in physical union, was also often invoked as an image of the tie between God and humanity. Already for the ancient Jews, in the prophetic period, the comparison of idolatry with adultery had been widely drawn. Two views of love coexisted: the one suppressing and the other affirming an ideal beyond altruism.

The result is that within Christian teaching—and even more in Judaism and in Islam—the contrast to altruism has failed clearly to be made. The idea of love, as distinct from altruism, has regularly been attributed to the influence of secular ideas deviating from the path of salvation. But how can the sovereign role of altruism be reconciled with the Christian faith?

When we turn to the secular ideas of love, we find that the most influential of these ideas disfigure the idea of love. If the doctrine of love is a suppressed orthodoxy, romanticism, in both the high and popular cultures of the societies penetrated by the struggle with the world, has been the heresy that has expressed this doctrine only by distorting it.

The romantic conception of love is a truncated and perverted expression of the view of self and others that is intrinsic to the struggle with the world.

Romanticism has been a distinctive form of consciousness, with a particular history. It has also been an impulse at work in the subjective life of all the societies that have been engulfed by the last few centuries of world revolution. As a specific historical phenomenon it began with the romantic movement of the early nineteenth century in the half-Christian and half-pagan societies of the North Atlantic region. The formulas of this way of thinking and of feeling have now been renewed and disseminated throughout the world by the global popular romantic culture of the twentieth century.

Meanwhile, high culture moved toward increasing degrees of skepticism and irony about the availability of the two experiences that the romantic consciousness has valued above all others: devotion to a true

love and pursuit of a worthy task. The impenetrability of the other person to a mind imprisoned, to a greater or lesser extent, within itself seemed to make love all but impossible. The failure to support and develop a credible understanding of how we change the character as well as the content of the social and conceptual structures that we inhabit threatened to deny us any conception of a task worthy of the devotions of a life. Thus, we seemed condemned to overcome illusion only by experiencing despair, which is another form of illusion.

As a persistent tendency in the consciousness of contemporary societies, romanticism shows how susceptible this hidden and undeveloped orthodoxy about self and others has been to a series of missteps. They are not just errors of vision; they are also mistakes of direction in the decisions we make about what to do with our lives. At stake in the contest between romanticism and this inexplicit orthodoxy is the shape of our moral experience. That orthodoxy requires us to reorient the way we live. The illusions of romanticism represent a form of despair about our ability to do so.

The mistake of early romanticism and of its afterlife in the worldwide popular romantic culture of today is its reliance on a series of formulaic expressions and behavior as ways to achieve and to support love. Reliance on these formulas is at war with two other aspects of the romantic vision in all its forms: faith in spirit or life, by opposition to structure or routine, and recognition of the inexhaustibility of the self: the impossibility of containing the self within any set repertory of forms and arrangements. In the light of such faith and recognition, formulaic romanticism proves to be self-contradictory and self-defeating.

When, however, we cast off this primitive romanticism, we come to the deeper and more enduring features of the romantic heresy. This heresy has two aspects; each of them represents the misstatement of a truth vital to the message of the struggle with the world in all its religious and secular forms.

One aspect of the romantic heresy is the war against routine and repetition. This war repeats, in the realm of views about the relation of self to others, the romantic account of the relation of self to structure. In this domain, the place of an institutional or conceptual setting is occupied by the influence of routine and repetition. Like structure, with which they are closely associated, repetition and routine freeze life and

kill spirit: that is to say, the expression of our humanity in the exercise of its power of transcendence.

The campaign against repetition extends the resistance to all structure, and threatens to turn it into a resistance to life as it must be lived in the present moment. In life, as in music, the new achieves distinction and meaning against the background of the persistent. We can no more dispense with the interplay between the novel and the established than we can renounce the dialectic between engagement and transcendence, of which the conversation between the new and the existing represents an aspect. In opposing all repetition, the romantic impulse also undermines an indispensable basis for our ties to one another. So, for example, if marriage is, as D. H. Lawrence wrote, a long conversation, and if every long conversation is nourished by its recurrences, the romantic can have no use for marriage.

The element of truth contained in the romantic opposition to routine is acknowledgement of the inadequacy of any established set of habits to the expression and development of the self. Routine is, for the romantic, habitual practice, petrified vision, or the mummified self, resigned to a single and definitive version of its being.

The illusion and failure of romanticism lie in an abandonment of the attempt to penetrate, loosen, and transfigure the repetitious element in our experience. As a result, romanticism must, once it has renounced the easy formulas of its primitive mode, take perpetual flight from the real conditions of life in any society or in any culture. In this respect, as in all others, the romantic despairs of seeing spirit penetrate the world.

The result is that every bond established under the aegis of romanticism becomes a doomed conspiracy against life such as it is, not just in a particular place or at a particular time but everywhere and always. Then love turns into an experience that can survive only at the margin of existence. The reciprocal (or unreciprocated) self-bestowal of the lovers is overshadowed by their shared plight. They can hope for no life together, except in the limiting form of their joint escape from the reality of existence.

The alternative to this aspect of the romantic illusion is not the abandonment of resistance to routine and repetition. It is the effort to change the nature of the relation between the repetitious and the novel elements in our experience, so that the hold of the repetitious in vision,

in conduct, and in character is loosened and made to serve the perpetual creation of the new.

A self that is oriented in such a direction can better understand and accept both itself and other selves as the originals that they both want themselves to become and know themselves already to be. It is better able to enter, single-mindedly and wholeheartedly, into the present moment. Without this entry into the present moment, we cannot hope to become more fully alive, or to give such greater life, in love, to one another.

We have not done justice to the suppressed orthodoxy about self and others and distinguished it from its romantic perversion until we have dealt with its relation to the longing for the absolute with which we respond to mortality and groundlessness. This longing represents the second aspect of the romantic deviation; it combines, as does the first, a truth with a falsehood. Love becomes the organizing principle of the moral life in a world of belief that sees the individual as irreducible to role and context. The self has unlimited depth. It cannot be read out of the script of a social role or of a position in the hierarchy of classes and castes. It cannot even be identified with the rigidified form of the person that is his character. For these reasons, it can never become fully transparent to other people or even to itself.

The self that has discovered its own depth longs to affirm its power of transcendence over context. It struggles with the disproportion between the infinity of its aspirations and the finitude of its circumstance. As a result, it remains forever susceptible to belittlement: the triumph of the limiting circumstance over the unbowed spirit. Our relations to one another are penetrated and transformed by an unlimited desire for the unlimited. In particular, we seek from one another an unconditional assurance that there is a place for us in the world.

This is the demand that a child makes to his parents but that, as an adult, he continues to make to those from whom he seeks love. It is a demand that is destined to be frustrated: we can never give enough to the other person, or receive enough from her, to provide such assurance. A being that has discovered his transcendence over context and role and who seeks connection with other such beings will always want more than he can receive.

The penetration of love by this reach for the infinite, for the unlimited, is a consequence of the ideas and experiences that give to love, as I have described it, an organizing role in our moral experience. That love comes to bear the imprint of this longing for the absolute is not a consequence of romanticism; it is a result of the forms of life and of thought that mark the struggle with the world in all its variations. The romantic distortion consists in mistaking personal love for a way of overcoming our groundlessness, experienced in the shadow of our mortality.

Groundlessness is the inability to understand the basis of our existence, to look into the beginning and the end of time, to reach, in the chain of our thoughts, presuppositions that are beyond questioning. It is not a romantic illusion to demand assurance from the beloved that she loves us and that through her love we will feel reaffirmed in the sentiment of being. It is a romantic illusion to take this demand, and the fragmentary responses that it may elicit from the beloved, as a solution to the problem of groundlessness.

Under the spell of this illusion, we imagine love as a release from groundlessness and as an entrance into a charmed world in which we can ground ourselves. The beliefs that trap the romantic imagination in this illusion are closely connected to the other side of romanticism: its war against routine and repetition. Liberated from the bonds of the everyday world, the romantic agent imagines himself admitted to a paradise in which he can at last be fully human. That world, unlike the real world of nature and society, works according to the logic of our deepest and most intimate concerns. It is neither indifferent nor opaque.

If we acknowledge that despite this supposed release from groundlessness we remain doomed to die, the attractions of this anti-world—erected on the basis of the denial of the workings of society and of nature—will be all the greater. Our self-grounding, through the romantic rebellion against established structure, will seem to be the sole available compensation for our mortality. In the romantic imagination, the extravagant view of love as self-grounding goes together with the fear and the intimation of death.

We deny the incurable flaws in human life, however, only at the cost of damage to our humanity. So it happens with romanticism, in both its aspects—of refusal of repetition and of understanding of love as escape from groundlessness. We will be groundless so long as we are human.

We cannot dispense with the dialectic of repetition and novelty if we are to become more human by making ourselves more godly.

The dangerous and deluded quest for self-grounding through love represents a perverted form of the unlimited desire for the unlimited, and in particular of the quest for definitive recognition and assurance that is an integral feature of love, as understood and experienced in this approach to existence. In a half-Christianized society (or more generally in societies influenced by the Semitic monotheisms), it is a perversion suggested by the blasphemous identification of the human lover with the divine one.

The view of self and others that best expresses the central ideas of the struggle with the world is thus besieged on all sides by heresies claiming to represent the sacred or the secular versions of this approach to existence. In Christianity, it is overshadowed by the mistaking of love for altruism, or by the dismissal of love, in the sense in which I earlier defined it, as an experience inferior to altruism. In the secular cultures of these same societies, the view of the relation of self to others that I have described as the secret orthodoxy about self and others is challenged by the heresy of romanticism. This heresy reveals despair about our power to change the world—the large world of society, as well as the small world of our dealings with others—so that it may become more hospitable to the incarnate and context-shaped but also context-transcending beings that we are. It is only with difficulty that the vision of our relation to other people for which I have here spoken resists these errors and delivers its astonishing message.

Twin orthodoxies suppressed

What is the relation between these two suppressed orthodoxies, the one about self and others and the one about spirit and structure?

The shared basis of both is the conception of the self as embodied spirit, engaged in context and transcendent over context. It must be also, however, the acknowledgement of the irreparable defects in human life: mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability. The sacred versions of the struggle with the world, products of the breakthroughs that produced the higher religions, resist recognizing these flaws in our

condition. So, less explicitly and more surprisingly, do the profane versions, if not with respect to our mortality, then with regard to our groundlessness or our insatiability.

At the same time, the would-be sciences of society and of the mind have failed to do justice to the dialectic of engagement and transcendence in their treatment of the relation of the self to the social and conceptual worlds that it inhabits. To this resistance and to these failures, we must attribute, in large part, the inexplicit, halting development of the views of self and structure and self and others that the struggle with the world supports and requires. The heresies of romanticism and the favor shown to a universal and disembodied altruism have regularly taken the place of these views of spirit and structure and of self and others.

The idea of the inexhaustibility of the self by its definite and limited circumstance helps shape a conception of love. In love, according to this account, we recognize and accept one another as context-transcendent originals rather than as placeholders in an organized scheme of social division and hierarchy. The experience of love is suffused and transformed by the longing for the infinite, which bears the marks of our insatiability, against the background of our groundlessness and our mortality. Nowhere is this insatiability more powerfully expressed than in our demand, in love, to receive endless tokens of assurance that there is an unconditional place for us in the world. This demand, always doomed to be frustrated, turns into a spiritual error when we expect love to abolish our groundlessness.

We honor the embodied and situated character of the self by rejecting the romantic campaign against repetition as well as by valuing the erotic expression of love. The erotically disinterested character of altruism, rather than being seen as an additional token of its superiority, appears, in this view, as a sign of its incompleteness.

The relation between the themes of the primacy of love (in the view of self and others) and of a reaching beyond the established context of life or of thought (in the account of self and structure) assigns us a task that we can never hope fully to carry out. In love, we recognize one another as the context-transcendent originals that we all know ourselves and want ourselves to be. In the real societies and cultures in which we participate, however, we are not yet these originals. We are

they only to a very limited extent; we remain weighted down by the multiple forms of belittlement that our collective history has imposed on us. We must make ourselves into such beings, step by step.

No one can hope to attain this goal within the limits of an individual human life. It is a collective project of humanity, falling back or advancing, albeit flawed and unfinished, in historical time. From this fact there results the momentous problem for the struggle with the world, and most especially for its profane versions (the secular projects of liberation), of the disparity between the historical time in which mankind rises and stumbles and the biographical time in which the individual lives and dies.

Criticism: strength and weakness of the struggle with the world

No version, sacred or profane, of the struggle with the world has ever been fully realized in society and culture. To the extent that it has come close to being realized, in the eyes of its own followers, it has first betrayed its central message. When the struggle with the world has not been reduced in practice, it has been diminished in doctrine.

The characteristic mode of this doctrinal diminishment in the sacred forms of the struggle with the world is legalism, especially in Judaism and Islam. Obedience to the sacred law (the halakhah or the sharia) substitutes for any wider attempt to reorganize society and to reorient life in ways that cannot be brought under a legal and institutional formula.

The typical manifestation of such a doctrinal diminishment in the profane and political variants of the struggle with the world is the secular equivalent to reverence for sacred law: institutional fetishism—identification of the change that we seek with a dogmatic institutional program. For the liberals and socialists of the nineteenth century, who despite their institutional formulas saw beyond the narrow goal of equality to a larger vision of human empowerment, the institutional dogma was explicit. In liberalism, it was a set of arrangements that were supposed to be the necessary and sufficient institutional requirements of a free society. In state socialism, it was an idea of the displacement of the

market economy by a state-directed economic order. In non-state socialism, it was the proposal of cooperative initiatives, credited with the potential definitively to abolish economic oppression.

If the political—liberal or socialist—branch of the struggle with the world clung to an institutional formula, the romantic branch repudiated all institutions as death to the spirit. Between the institutional fetishists and the romantic prophets, no room was left for a transformative project capable of dispensing with definitive institutional formulas without abandoning the attempt to reshape society.

The resigned social democrats of today exemplify such a reduction of the message of the struggle with the world. They reduce it by accepting the social-democratic settlement of the mid-twentieth century as the horizon within which to pursue the interests that they recognize and the ideals that they profess. Programmatic debate narrows to the attempt to reconcile American-style economic flexibility with European-style social protection.

Insofar as the message of the sacred or profane versions of the struggle with the world fails to be reduced in doctrine, it is nevertheless massively violated in practice. It coexists, unresistingly, with beliefs, institutions, and practices that contradict its central vision. Its theologians and ideologists refuse, for the most part, to recognize any such contradiction. They temporize with beliefs that muffle the contradiction between vision and practice. They accommodate to forms of thought and of life that contradict the deepest and most distinctive impulses of this approach to existence.

The result is that in its real historical life the struggle with the world has existed almost exclusively in such compromised forms. Its visible expressions are the organized varieties of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and the conventional secular humanism, with its complacent moral and political pieties. We now know no other variant of the struggle with the world. The development of an alternative, taking the message of the struggle with the world, in either sacred or profane voice, to its last consequences would, more than ever, amount to a revolutionary event. It would change, at a single stroke, both our understanding of the message and our experience of ourselves.

Consider first the range of widely accepted beliefs incompatible with the core vision informing this approach to life. In science and natural

philosophy, we fail to affirm without reservation the singular existence of the universe and the inclusive reality of time. Our conventional views about causal explanation presuppose that time is real but not too real: real enough to ensure the existence of a world in which causal connections differ from logical connections (contrary to what Leibniz and many others held) but not so real that we find ourselves forced to abandon the conception of a framework of immutable laws of nature (reaffirmed by the same physical and cosmological theories that repudiated the notion that natural phenomena occur against an absolute background of space and time).

We continue to represent the possible as a ghostly state of affairs, waiting to receive its cue to pass from the realm of the possible to the domain of the actual. We carry this denial of radical novelty into our view of human history. Social and historical study is dominated by tendencies of thought severing the connection between insight into the actual and imagination of the adjacent possible. A practice of thought, characteristic of classical social theory, that represents structural discontinuity and innovation and history as products of a predetermined historical script has been followed by one, associated with the contemporary social sciences, that remains devoid of any structural vision.

Our dominant ideas about the mind fail to recognize the conflict between the two sides of the mind—the mind as machine and the mind as anti-machine, delighting in its powers of recombination and transgression. They fail as well to appreciate the extent to which the relative presence of these two sides of the mind is influenced by the organization of society and of the culture, with the result that the history of politics is internal to the history of mind. In these as in many other respects, our beliefs about ourselves resist acknowledging the relation between our context-shaped and our context-transcending identities and powers.

Even the revaluation of the noble and the base, expressed in the literary mixture of genres and fulfilled in the core democratic idea of the constructive genius of ordinary men and women, is swept aside by the self-described adherents to one or another expression of the struggle with the world, to make way for new hierarchies of power, advantage, and value, disguised as hierarchies of merit.

Thus, the message of the struggle with the world survives supine as well as besieged. The ideas and discursive practices that would make it

intelligible and usable have never been fully developed. This fact helps explain the failure to perceive, much less to combat and overcome, the conflict between the life that we are promised by this orientation to existence and the way in which contemporary societies are in fact organized, even in the countries that are freest and most equal. Even when they rescue people from the extremes of poverty and oppression, these societies fail to establish, in at least three major ways, a form of life responsive to the promises of this spiritual orientation.

The economic institutions of these societies are organized to deny the mass of ordinary men and women the means with which to live and work as the context-transcending agents that they are. The hereditary transmission of economic and educational advantage through the family continues to reproduce the realities of a class society, inhibiting our power to form strong life projects and to enact them. Wage labor, viewed by the liberals and socialists of the nineteenth century as an inferior form of free labor and one that bears the taint of serfdom, is now regarded as the natural and even necessary form of free labor. What those liberals and socialists saw as the higher, more perfect expressions of free labor—self-employment and cooperation—remains, or has become, its peripheral form.

Most people continue to do work that in principle could be performed by machines. The value of a machine is to do for us everything that we have learned how to repeat so that all our time can be preserved for that which we have not yet learned how to repeat. In all these ways, the practical experience of work and production negates our condition as embodied spirit rather than affirming it.

Our responsibility to strangers in the societies of the present is largely reduced to money transfers organized by the state through the system of redistributive taxation and social entitlements. Money, however, supplies fragile social cement. It cannot replace direct engagement with others beyond the boundaries of the family and the barriers of family selfishness. The lack of any practical expression of the principle that every able-bodied adult should have some responsibility to care for others outside his own family, as well as a place in the system of production, deprives social solidarity of an adequate basis. The result is to sharpen the contrast between the intimate realm of personal attachment and a heartless world of dealings with strangers.

The political institutions of contemporary societies continue to make change depend upon crisis. They are not designed to increase the temperature of politics (the level of organized popular engagement in political life) or to hasten its pace (the facility for decisive experiment). Democracy consequently fails to serve as an antidote to the rule of the dead over the living and as a device by which to subordinate structure to will and imagination.

In even the freest and most equal contemporary societies, humanity remains shackled and diminished. The greater life promised by the struggle with the world is postponed, indefinitely, to a future in historical or providential time. The humanization of society—the improvement of an order that we feel powerless to reimagine or to remake—takes the place of the divinization of humanity, the increase of our share in attributes that we ascribe to divinity. The sacred and profane versions of the struggle with the world are then converted into a formula for patience and resignation.

The organized religions and the secular projects of social and personal liberation appear in the world under the restraints of all these compromises. Sometimes the theologians and the ideologists do the work of the world themselves, shrinking, in religion, the message until it is reduced to obedience to the sacred law or, in politics, to conformity to a restrictive legal and institutional formula. At other times, they remain silent accomplices to the association of the message with beliefs that contradict its presuppositions and with institutional arrangements that defeat its promises.

To the extent that the sacred or secular teachings of the struggle with the world are not diminished in doctrine, they are contradicted in practice. They come to coexist, unresistingly, with beliefs that belie their assumptions. The widespread acceptance of such beliefs in turn helps explain how the theologians and ideologists of the struggle with the world can accept a social order that stands in such stark conflict with the promise of a greater life. The fulfillment of the promise may be delayed to the historical or providential future. However, it ceases to live in the mind or to convert the will if it cannot be foreshadowed in the present.

From these successive accommodations there result the fossilized forms of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, preserved as ways to kill time and to deny death; the evisceration of the ideological programs of

the last two centuries; the consequent confinement of would-be leftists and progressives to the work of humanizing a regime that they find themselves unable to reshape; and the pieties of the conventional secular humanism, succeeding the dangerous illusions of romanticism. The real form of this orientation to existence, the character of its presence in history, is the one defined by these many and cumulative surrenders. In this way, its votaries have tried to adapt the message to the world rather than to adapt the world to the message.

The adepts of these disoriented and submissive versions of the struggle with the world may protest that the failure of the message to be realized more fully, through the replacement of the beliefs and arrangements that contradict it, represents no objection to the doctrine. Given the disparity between the message and the reality of social life, the solution is simply to sweep aside, one by one, all the restraints and compromises that prevent the uncompromising translation of these secular and sacred doctrines into a way of thinking and of living as well as into a form of social organization. According to this response, the complaint of disparity between doctrine and reality, rather than presenting an objection, has the validity of the doctrine as its premise.

This response fails to take into account the two connected senses in which the peaceful coexistence of the teachings of the struggle with the world with ways of thinking and forms of life that contradict it reveals a defect in this approach to life.

The radicalization of the message of the struggle with the world, in opposition to the beliefs that negate its assumptions, as well as to the arrangements that frustrate its promise, would result in a reinterpreted orthodoxy that few or none of the would-be orthodox now recognize as their own. The suppressed twin orthodoxies of spirit and structure and of self and others conflict with the prevailing beliefs of believers and disbelievers alike.

The sacred or secular versions of the struggle with the world can be rescued from their compromises and surrenders only by being interpreted in ways shocking to their adherents. The difference between radical interpretation and radical reconstruction of the doctrine hardly matters in this context. Christianity, viewed by some and even by Jesus himself as the consummation and fulfillment of Judaism,

was rejected by most Jews as blasphemous. So would any such far-reaching reformation of these religions and ideologies be likely to be denounced by their followers as apostasy from their religious, political, or moral faith.

Moreover, the radical reconstruction of this approach to the world along the lines that I have proposed would change the experience and self-consciousness of its agents. At each step of their advance, they would go further in discovering their own powers. The familiar forms of the struggle with the world place the supreme good in a future of divine providence or historical change beyond the lifespan of the living individual. They accept a present from which this good remains largely absent. This circumstance would no longer be tolerable to the followers of this orientation. Their newfound orthodoxy would attract them to greatness now, not just to greatness later. It would require them to rebel against the arrangements and assumptions that belittle them.

Criticism: estrangement from life in the present

The struggle with the world remains the most promising point of departure for our self-understanding as well as for our attempts to change society and ourselves. Nevertheless, in all its contemporary forms, both secular and sacred, it is radically defective. It must be remade or replaced. As always in our efforts at self-reinvention, no clear distinction can be made between reconstruction and replacement. We can possess only what we renounce.

Under the aegis of the struggle with the world, our supreme good—that which brings us closer to the divine, to the largest life, to the fullest reality, to the greatest value—always lies in the future. The future in which the highest good lies may be our salvation in a life beyond death. Or it may be a future social order that restores us to ourselves and empowers us.

Either way, the future is the future. It is not our future: that is to say, not the future of our mortal lives, lived in biographical time, and not the only experience to which we can ever have full and immediate access: the present moment. Every version of the struggle with the world claims that our orientation to this future good changes immediately

our present situation. Our present experience participates, according to such claims, in the future good.

Each variant of the struggle with the world represents this participation in a distinct way. In Christianity, for example, it is the grace resulting from God's redemptive intervention in history, especially through his incarnation, as well as from his presence, renewed by the sacramental life of the Church. Such a doctrine is, however, an abstraction; its translation into personal experience remains obscure. Even if taken at its word, it never promises more than a foretaste of the good that beckons to us from beyond the confines of our earthly existence.

If the good is a future organization of society, resulting from a series of political contests and institutional innovations, we have little reason to hope that we can share in it in the course of our lives. Struggle against the established structure may engage us in ways of thinking and of acting that already defy the present order and anticipate the future one. The practice of transformative politics and of critical thought may become in some measure (but in what measure?) the prophecy of the better order and make us freer and greater right now. More generally, living for the future may be understood and experienced as a way of living in the present, as a being not wholly determined by the present circumstances of his existence.

The gap between doctrine and experience, as well as between the prefiguring and the consummation, persists. If the struggle with the world has any theme that is universal to all of its expressions, this theme is the reign of the future. The passion of futurity is directly connected with the core conception of the dialectic between circumstance and transcendence.

Descartes deployed the resources of speculative thought to discover an idea secure against doubt. No argument, however, can be as unquestionable as a feature of our situation in the world: the fact that all we ever possess for sure is the present moment and our experience in time as a continuous succession of present moments. Everything else that is not the present moment we possess in an at best derivative and diminished sense. The past, held in memory, and the future, of which we hope to have a foretaste, arise for us only by extension or modulation of the present.

The experience of the succession of present moments is the experience of life. Any force—whether it is a fact of nature, a constraint of

society, or an idea in the mind—that weakens or discredits our engagement in the present limits our access to life in the only form in which we can in fact live it: in the present. If we come to live life in part, as a series of memories and of prophecies, of recurrences and expectations, our experience of life will to that extent be made oblique.

Living for the future, in any of the sacred or secular forms advocated by the struggle with the world, threatens to estrange us from the present moment and therefore from life itself as it is lived, in the succession of present moments, rather than as it may be evoked, at a remove, by memory or anticipation. To the extent that this threat is realized, as a result of the absence of some counteracting force or belief that would remove it, we consume the time of our lives in grasping and longing for something that by definition is not real, or much less real than life right now. Thus, we squander by our own folly, as if smitten by desire for an absolute that we project forward in time, the most important good, indeed the only good. By fleeing in the mind from the real present to the unreal future and ceasing to enter fully into life on the only terms in which we could ever possess it, we give our lives away piecemeal even before nature delivers us to death.

To the present world and to our experience within it, we say, “You are not our home.” Instead, we claim citizenship in a future world that will never be realized in our experience and to which we can have no access except in the daydreams of our future-oriented discourse. It hardly matters whether our inner distance from the present moment takes the form of a cold indifference (as if all charms had passed from the manifest world to an incorporeal simulacrum of it) or of an active revulsion (provoked by the awareness of its inferiority to our true but distant home). The result is the same: to entice us into trading the real now for the fantastic later. Because such a trade cannot be executed, we perform our part of the bargain only to die before receiving the counter-performance.

The most important objection to the struggle with the world is that it seduces us into war against the matchless good of life, lived in the present, and gives us in exchange a counterfeit good: the future. There are two bad but commonplace ways to reckon with this failure of consideration.

The first response, a belated paganism, is to repudiate the dialectic of presence and transcendence that lies at the center of all the higher religions, including those that represent the struggle with the world. It is to sacrifice transcendence to presence. That is the path of a celebration of the manifest world. It is ordinarily disguised in one of the philosophical vocabularies developed by the other two orientations: the overcoming of the world or the humanization of the world. The second response, Prometheanism, is to escape from our estrangement and homelessness into an attempt at empowerment and self-deification. It denies our frailty. It refuses to recognize or to accept the irreparable flaws in the human condition. It replaces estrangement with power worship.

Belated paganism denies the most fundamental fact about our humanity. It lacks the naive force of the religious life preceding the upheavals of the thousand years that saw the emergence of the higher religions and the three approaches to existence that I here consider. Prometheanism perverts transcendence by interpreting it as power over other people. Once we reject both these responses, we are left with the task of either repairing or replacing the struggle with the world, the overriding spiritual work that our historical circumstance has assigned us.

A seemingly easy escape from the burden of transcendence and from the consequent threat of homelessness is to rid ourselves of our distance from the present moment and to exult in the radiance of the manifest world. An explicit example in contemporary thought is the late philosophy of Heidegger. It is as if the terrifying exercise of *Being and Time*—the relentless confrontation with death, groundlessness, and insatiability—and the arousal from our sleepwalking, our diminished life, that such a confrontation may make possible, had been designed only to seal our subsequent surrender to the existing world.

Once disillusionment with politics is complete, nothing seems to be left other than to worship the cosmos in its splendor: to worship it not as the varied, factitious, and evolving structure that it is but rather as Being, hidden behind the metamorphoses of nature. The surrender to the world is no less complete for being described in the terms of a speculative panentheism or monism, falsely presented as the overcoming of pagan metaphysics rather than as its continuation.

This crypto-metaphysical project is the limiting rather than the normal form of belated paganism. The normal form is the euphoric or desperate retreat into the small delights of private experiences: small enough not to remind us of who we are.

Either of these escapes from the experience of estrangement rests on a lie about us. Our transcendence over circumstance in a natural and social world that has a definite structure, although a changing one, is not an option; it is a fact about nature, society, and humanity. In denying it, we deny ourselves and give up our birthright of radical freedom.

The practical consequence of this self-diminishment is to overcome our ambivalence to the present moment only by undermining a tension that is central to our experience of the present as well as to a truth about who we are. To be wide awake and alive in the present moment, and fully attentive to the present experience, we must be able to participate in an established form of life without surrendering to it, to see it from the vantage of its accessible transformations, to compare it to analogous circumstances, and above all to defy it in thought and in practice, to resist it and revise it. It is only by this coming and going that we make it ours.

The work of the imagination reveals the significance of the dialectic between engagement in context and resistance to context for our ability to overcome estrangement from the present moment. The two recurrent moves of the imagination—distancing from the object (recollecting perception as image) and transformative variation (grasping a state of affairs by reference to what it might next become)—represent requirements of insight into any part of the manifest world. They prevent vision from degenerating into staring, and break the spell that the phenomenon can cast over the mind.

The paradox of imaginative insight is to expand our access to the present moment by removing us from it. By its two-step work, the imagination holds the phenomenon away the better to come close to it, and puts it through a ring of actual or hypothetical changes the better to grasp its hidden workings. Aroused by the two-stage struggle, consciousness rises and sharpens. To the extent that we become fully aware, we are more fully alive.

What the example of the imagination shows is that the source of estrangement from the present moment is not the dialectic of transcen-

dence and engagement. It is rather the projection of our greatest good into the future and the inadequate connection of that future to what we in fact possess: the present.

Belated paganism fails to deal with the problem at its source. Instead, it attacks something more basic and general: the dialectic of engagement and transcendence, embraced as the chief device of our ascent to a greater life. In abandoning this device, at the instigation of belated paganism, we cease to be oriented to the future. However, we fail to overcome our estrangement from the present. The reason why we fail is that belated paganism undermines, more than the orientation to the future ever could, the conditions of presence and vitality. These conditions depend on the dialectic between engagement and transcendence, which the higher religions placed at the center of our experience and consciousness when they rebelled against the identification of the divine with the cosmos.

The second commonplace and misguided response to the experience of estrangement from the present moment is Prometheanism. (See the discussion of Prometheanism in Chapter 1.) By Prometheanism, I mean the denial of our frailty, or the attempt to compensate for it, by gaining power. If Prometheanism is to count as a response to an estrangement resulting from the projection of our supreme good into the future, the power that it seeks cannot be simply the collective empowerment of humanity, achieved in historical time. It cannot, for example, be the power that humanity acquires, according to Karl Marx, through the development of the forces of production and ultimately through the overcoming of class society. It must be a power that the individual can hope to wield in his own lifetime. It must therefore be his power, and he must be able to enjoy it over other people as well as over nature.

The Promethean offers no sacred or profane narrative of our collective accession in providential time to life eternal or in historical time to a larger earthly existence. What he offers is power now. Through power now, he hopes to overcome the estrangement from the present moment that is the sickness of the struggle with the world.

Prometheanism amounts to a false solution to the problem of estrangement from life in the present. In the first place, it is a false solution because it begins in the impulse to bridge the impassable rifts in human life. If it does not deny them literally, it seeks to overshadow

them by a cult of sheer force, from the preservation and strengthening of the body to the steeling of the will against outward circumstance.

This search for invulnerability—or for less vulnerability—to our weakness deprives us of the chief instrument by which we can overthrow the shell of routine and compromise that begins to form around us (the mummy within which we die many small deaths): unflinching confrontation with the truth of our circumstance as the death-bound, groundless, and insatiable beings that we are. It thus prevents us from exercising the prerogative of life and from overcoming, through its exercise, our estrangement from the present moment. The power worship of the Promethean amounts to a travesty of the enhancement of life.

The Promethean may answer that his search for empowerment is nothing other than the dialectic of engagement and transcendence, which we must reaffirm to become more godlike and more human, even as we attempt to overcome our estrangement from the present. It amounts, however, to an empty impersonation of that dialectic. The focus of transcendence falls on the revision and reconstruction of an established structure of life or of thought. The emphasis of Prometheanism lies in winning power within that structure. What counts for the Promethean is not that the structure be changed in content or character but rather that it not grind him down. His hope, whether disclosed or disguised, is to claim an exemption from its force rather than to serve as the agent of its remaking.

Such power expresses itself in lording over other people as well as in triumph over the infirmities of the body. What chiefly concerns the would-be Prometheus is that he become strong. He may have allies and companions in this effort to overcome weakness and vulnerability. However, he measures his success by comparing it to the relative failure of others.

The Prometheus of Greek mythology stole fire from the gods to give it to humanity. The Prometheus of our modern history has as his first ambition to slow, if he cannot escape, the fall to decline and death, the fate of being annihilated and forgotten, and its foreshadowing in the daily humiliations to which an ordinary human life is subject. By becoming strong and powerful, he hopes to possess a life greater than that which others live, if he cannot have life eternal. In this respect and on its surface, his effort may seem to offer a parallel to the revolution

that we now need in the spiritual life of humanity. The Promethean's endeavor, however, is corrupted by the contest for power over others, by the denial of the truth about our situation in the world, and, above all, by the failure to challenge and change, to the benefit of the others, the organized settings of our life and thought.

The quest for power over others draws the power seeker into the endless stratagems and anxieties of emulation, rivalry, vigilance, combat, and self-disguise. The discipline of fighting—not to change the structure but to secure a special place within it—enslaves and poisons his experience of the present moment. Vitality, rather than being enhanced, is mistaken for dominion.

These two vices of the Promethean mistake—the forgetting of the truth about human existence and the reduction of vitality to power—work together to aggravate the experience of estrangement from life in the present rather than to overcome it.

Belated paganism and Prometheanism fail as responses to the problem presented, in the struggle with the world, by estrangement from life in the present. There is no solution to this problem that fails to require a change of vision and of conduct. To bring about such a change is the work of the religion of the future.

5

Religious Revolution Now

Its Occasions and Instruments

Reasons for religious revolution

The previous chapters of this book have discussed and criticized the three major orientations to existence to have emerged from the religious revolutions of the past. These three approaches to the human condition—religions in the encompassing but nevertheless historically anchored sense in which I have used the term—fail to account for the whole history of religion. They correspond to a period, although a long period in that history. There was once a time when we did not view the world in their light. There is every reason to suppose that there will be a time in which their light, if not extinguished, will not be the sole or even the predominant influence on our most comprehensive beliefs about the human situation.

The gates of prophecy are never closed. It is contrary to all sense, and above all to the historical sense that represents one of the greatest achievements of the last few centuries, to suppose that religious revolution, combining in some form visionary teaching and exemplary action, will happen only once in human history. Men and women have shown themselves capable of it in the past. Not even our faithlessness has destroyed this capability, or at least our prospect of once again acquiring it.

The overriding force that drives the development of religion is the need to commit our lives in one direction or another, on the basis of a view of the world and of our place in it, and in response to the manifest

facts of our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability. The weight of such a commitment is only increased by the insufficiency of the grounds that we can ever hope to have for making it.

The concerns that lead us to take such a stand are lasting, and even irresistible. They form part of our circumstance. However, no way of expressing this impulse can claim to be definitive. Our most comprehensive answers to existence remain perpetually open to contest and revolution.

The contest and revolution have to do in the first instance with the content of the religion. Sooner or later, however, they also touch its form: the character of the practices as well as of the beliefs that supply a religion with its distinctive identity, the methods of innovation, evolution, and revolution in spiritual life, and the relation of religion to other domains of experience.

The definition of religion early in the argument of this book did not take as its premise the idea that there is a permanent part of our human experience, with a stable essence, that we can label religion and separate in certain ways from other aspects of existence. Instead, it recognized the changing character, scope, and basis of religion. The point was to conceive religion in a way that is inclusive enough to accommodate forms of belief and practice, like Buddhism and Confucianism, that emerged in the long period from the rise of prophetic Judaism to the foundation of Islam, but that are distant, in form as well as in substance, from the Semitic monotheisms.

In this way, we resist the temptation to reduce religion to the model most familiar to contemporary Westerners while continuing to understand it in ways that distinguish it from philosophy, science, art, and practical morality. Yet even this ample view of religion is in the end shaped by a historical reference: the major spiritual orientations that resulted over the last twenty-five hundred years from past religious revolution.

Despite the immense differences between them, the three orientations to existence that have been the subject of my argument represent a moment in the spiritual history of humanity. They emerged under similar provocations. They have remained enduring influences on the societies and cultures that received them. They share elements of a common vision and program. The depth of the differences among them only increases the significance of what they share.

Recall what it is that these three orientations, as well as the higher religions representing them, have in common. First, they rob nature of its sanctity and place at the forefront of consciousness a dialectic between the immanence of the divine in the world and its transcendence over the world. Even Confucianism does so by locating the transcendent divine in the sacrosanct experience of personality and of interpersonal encounter. Second, they deny the ultimate reality and authority of the divisions within mankind. Third, they reject the predominant ethic of the ruling and fighting classes, chiefly in favor of an ethic of universal fellow-feeling and sacrificial solidarity (which, however, the struggle with the world incompletely and inexplicitly subordinates to the primacy of love). Fourth, they promise a reprieve from mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability. Fifth, all three orientations present us with a license to escape the world or an invitation to change it, or both a license to change it and an invitation to escape it at the same time.

Once again, Confucianism may seem immune to any temptation to escape the social world that it seeks to humanize. However, such a view misinterprets the psychological ambivalence of the Confucian (in his quest to humanize the world) as of the Buddhist or Stoic (in his effort to overcome the world). The superior agent, transformed by his insight and his benevolence, performs his role without surrendering unconditionally to the social order in which he finds himself. He is the citizen of another world, whether it is the universal spiritual reality to which the Buddhist or the Stoic trusts or the sanctity of the personal in which the Confucian locates the divine. For the Buddhist as for the Confucian, this double citizenship forbids any unconditional submission to the established social regime. It also inspires the believer to seek a place of refuge against the defects of an order that he may occasionally be able to serve and to improve and yet remains powerless fundamentally to change.

For over two millenniums, the spiritual experience of humanity has largely moved within the limits set by the overcoming of the world, the humanization of the world, and the struggle with the world, and by these five points of overlap among them. This range of spiritual alternatives no longer suffices to contain the spiritual ambitions of humanity. It fails to do so for the reasons that I explore later in this chapter. These reasons supply the incitement for a future religious revolution and suggest its direction.

Among them, two are preeminent. One reason is that through its revolutionary action, in both its sacred and its profane voice, one of these three approaches to existence has aroused in humanity the idea of its own greatness—the greatness of mankind but also of every individual man and woman. This arousal has led us to pursue, in countless veiled and imperfect forms, the aim of increasing our share in some of the attributes that we ascribe to divinity. We cannot implement this goal within the constraints of the established sacred or profane variants of the struggle with the world or of its spiritual rivals: the overcoming of the world and the humanization of the world.

A second reason for religious revolution is that we cannot become free and ascend to a greater life if we continue to deny the ineradicable defects in human existence. To deny them, however, sometimes altogether and at other times in qualified or partial form, has been thus far the commanding impulse in the history of religion. The religion of the future must have as its premise to acknowledge them without reservation. It must recognize them because we cannot ascend through self-deception. It must do so as well because uncompromising recognition of the truth about death, groundlessness, and insatiability is our sole reliable guarantee against conformity as well as against our fall into self-deification and power worship.

In the rest of this chapter, I discuss these and other reasons for religious revolution today, the occasions and sources of such revolution, and the forms and methods of the needed revolutionary practice. In what sense are the shifts that I defend religious at all? In what sense do they amount to a revolution? If such a revolution is to succeed, it must be brought about with full understanding of a tragic contradiction in the history of religion. Moreover, the revolutionaries should ask themselves whether their program can or cannot be achieved within the confines of one of the existing religions.

The unique position of the struggle with the world

Of the three approaches to the world that have been the subject of my argument in this book, one, the struggle with the world, stands in a unique position. From the beginning, it has taken the most combative

position. Each of the Semitic monotheisms denied sanctity to nature and affirmed the oneness of the transcendent God. Each combined this affirmation with a radical defense of the impulses that are common to the religions representative of the three orientations. Each took to baffling extremes the contrast between the universality of its message and the particularity of the plot through which this message was revealed to a few, in a particular place and time, to be later conveyed to all humanity. Each described this plot in a closed canon of sacred scriptures, the better to make clear, by narrative, precept, and parable, the path of salvation. Each drew with disconcerting clarity, again and again, the line between saving orthodoxy and damning heresy. In this spirit, each entered into ardent and sometimes violent conflict with all other religions, including their sister religions of salvation. These creeds have repeatedly conceived the astonishing project of reforming all of social life in conformity to their vision and, in the instances of Judaism and Islam, to their sacred law, notwithstanding the spiritual dangers of legalism.

The profane versions of the struggle with the world have been no less intransigent and subversive, in both their political (democracy, liberalism, socialism) and their personal or romantic expressions. Penetrating almost every country in the world over the last two and a half centuries, they have helped inspire world revolution and delivered a mortal blow to the forms of consciousness and of life established on foundations antagonistic to their message. When their attitude has been explicitly revolutionary, they have put a formula of institutional reconstruction, of defiance to the routines of society and culture, in the place of a scriptural faith. When they have judged themselves bereft of a clear view of the path of social reconstruction, they have been content to improve life, especially for the most disadvantaged, under the established institutional settlement. At these times they have sought inspiration in the private sublime: in an adventurism of the imagination without tangible consequence for the arrangements of society.

It is to the activity of these organized religions and secular faiths that we must chiefly credit one of the main bases for the religion of the future: the aim of expanding our share in the divine attribute of transcendence and of ascending to a greater life, without allowing this ascent to be corrupted by the denial of our frailties and the seductions of

self-idolization. Yet it turns out that we cannot advance in the pursuit of this purpose without overstepping the limits of these projects of salvation and liberation, and indeed of all past religions.

What are the next steps in the progress of this unfinished spiritual revolution? The contemporary followers of the sacred and profane versions of the struggle with the world have been unable to answer this question. That is why this orientation to existence now appears in the paradoxical position of being both ascendant and lost, both strong and weak. It is strong because in one or another of its forms it exercises unmatched influence in the world. It is weak because its adherents no longer know how to revive and continue it.

Insofar as it is lost as well as ascendant, weak as well as strong, it renews, in the absence of another religious revolution, the opportunity for the other two spiritual orientations—the overcoming of the world and the humanization of the world—to reassert themselves as permanent and attractive spiritual options. So they do, not only as explicit doctrines but also as inexplicit forms of experience and of vision.

We must reinvent the struggle with the world to keep it alive. The reinvention would begin by elucidating the metaphysical assumptions of this approach to the problems of life: its view of the singular existence of the world, of the inclusive reality of time, of the possibility of the new, of the openness of history, of the depth of the self, and of the reversal of values. The reinvention would persist in the development of the truncated or suppressed orthodoxies regarding the relation of self to structure and of self to others. It would inform a vision of change of both self and society. At some point, such a remaking of the sacred or secular teachings of the struggle with the world might begin to look like another moment in the history of our spiritual experience. It would do so most clearly to the extent that the ideas informing it began to move beyond the common ground of the religious revolutions of the past: the ground marked out by the five shared themes that I earlier listed.

Will what seemed to be a rescue and reinvention then begin to appear as a revolutionary replacement of what the would-be reformers set out to preserve? Will it in effect be a new religion, not just a religion with a different content but also a religion in a different sense? The insistence on viewing our susceptibility to belittlement as a corrigible

feature of human life while regarding our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability as irreparable defects of the human condition would itself be enough to suggest that what is required is more than revision. If such an insistence were to be accompanied by settling the ambivalence of the religions of the past in favor of changing the world rather than escaping it, by the light of a message about the reconstruction of both self and society, the revolutionary character of the task would become unmistakable.

Yet what is revision and what replacement, what revival and what overturning, becomes clear, in the history of consciousness even more than in the history of institutions, only in retrospect. With their consuming interest in the distinction between orthodoxy and heresy, and their reliance on authoritative revelation, expressed in a scriptural canon, the salvation religions may seem to be, of all world religions of the ancient Near East, the least prone to such a hesitation between revising and overcoming. Nevertheless, before being established as a distinct religion, Christianity may have been seen by many of its earliest converts, and even by its founder, as a continuation and fulfillment of Judaism.

Any change in our orientation to the world that draws on our most fundamental experiences and aspirations is bound to resonate within the established religions at the same time that it develops outside their confines. However, those who, like me, are without faith in a narrative of the saving intervention accomplished by a transcendent God in history have no alternative but to work beyond the boundaries of these religions. As more men and women come to recognize the evils and deceptions of the halfway house between belief and disbelief, the decoding of religious doctrine as secular humanism, they will find themselves forced in the same direction. If having abandoned the halfway house they also repudiate the conventional secular humanism and recognize the need for a reorientation that cannot be contained within the limits of what is common to the religious revolutions of the past, they will arrive at the position from which the argument of this book begins.

The struggle with the world deserves the revolutionary influence that it has won. It deserves this influence because its view of who we are and

of what we can become draws closer to the truth about ourselves than do the beliefs characteristic of the overcoming of the world and of the humanization of the world.

Even when it gives up faith in the narratives of divine intervention that have been central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the struggle with the world, as it is exemplified by democracy and romanticism, remains radically defective. It provides inadequate guidance for the change of self and of society. It is also deficient in its articulation and defense of the case for such a change.

This embrace and this criticism of the struggle with the world define the standpoint from which this book is written. Ideas that include these moves do not offer simply an argument about religion; they represent an argument within religion. They outline the rudiments of theology: a strange theology, devoted to a particular religion, as every theology must be, but a religion that does not yet exist.

When he makes such claims, a man takes his life into his hands, pressing to the limits, and beyond them, of what we can hope to know. An argument signifying an intervention within religion as well as a discourse about it must itself bear the traits of religious thinking and experience. One of these traits is the unbridgeable gap between the weight of the existential commitment—the engagement of life in a particular direction—and the insufficiency, or incompleteness, of the grounds for such a commitment. To insist on the prerogative of the mind to address what matters most, even when we must do so beyond the boundaries of all established disciplines and methods, is an expression, in speculative thought, of our humanity-defining power of transcendence.

However, even the theology of a religion that does not exist cannot hope to overcome the implications of our groundlessness. Its arguments remain fragmentary in their scope and inconclusive in their force. They may clarify, inform, and persuade. They cannot demonstrate. They are powerless to exempt us from the imperative of faith, in its double meaning of going beyond the evidence of reason and of placing ourselves in the hands of others when we act out a faith the rational grounds of which are never enough.

When it fails to acknowledge these facts, speculative thought, whether presenting itself as philosophy or as anti-theological theology, is

corrupted by its pretense to succeed religion. It is tempted by the illusion that if only we think more clearly and more deeply, we can solve the enigma of existence. We cannot solve it. To affirm that we cannot is the beginning rather than the end of the religion of the future.

Resolving the ambivalence of the higher religions to the transformation of the world

A license to escape the existing social world or an invitation to change it: such has been the two-sided ticket that each of the three major approaches to existence that I earlier addressed has offered to mankind. When these orientations devalue the authority and deny the ultimate reality of the divisions within humanity, it is never clear whether this devaluation and denial imply another way of representing society or another way of organizing it. A first point of departure for the religion of the future is to resolve this ambiguity in favor of changing the world: a particular direction of change of the self and of society supporting our ascent to a greater life.

Confucianism may seem exempt from the desire to escape the world by virtue of its commitment to reshape society on the model of our role-based and ritual-supported obligations to one another. Yet it establishes an inner sanctum of our experience of personality and of personal encounter, enhanced by awareness of the needs of others. This experience is meant to serve as its own reward and to offer to the best an asylum against the degradations of society. The ability to imagine the experience of other people and to fulfill, in the light of this understanding, our responsibilities to them can then seem more important than any particular institutional reshaping of society, other than the respect for socially acknowledged merit that is closely connected to a morality of roles.

Our modern projects of social reconstruction and personal liberation—the secular versions of the struggle with the world—appear to resolve the ambivalence between escape and transformation in favor of the latter. However, they abandon their effort to change the world when they despair, as they repeatedly have, of the attempt to reconstruct society and to reorient the self and make peace with an established order of society and culture.

The hesitation between escaping the world and changing it that marks the higher religions has two distinct sources. One source reaches beyond religion: compromise with the real social forces prevailing in the societies in which these religions have taken hold. The other source remains within religion: the dialectic between the immanence and the transcendence of the divine, the most important common feature of the approaches to existence taken by the religious revolutions of the past.

As they have become worldly influences, the religions of transcendence have had to reckon with established regimes and dominant interests. The result has been a marriage of spiritual vision and temporal power enabling the former to modify the latter only because the latter holds the former hostage. The forms of consciousness in a European feudal society, for example, resulted from a marriage between the social, political, and economic realities of European feudalism and a Christian vision of life. The formula for such a marriage has been endlessly repeated, by each of these religions, always and everywhere.

Legalism—faith as obedience to sacred law—may then appear to serve as an antidote to such an accommodation. However, this antidote is administered at a terrible price: the worldly cost of the suppression of plasticity and the spiritual cost of denial of the incompleteness and the defectiveness of every institutional structure. The relation between the spiritual charge and the worldly one lies in the abandonment by legalism of the commitment to create an institutional regime that has the attribute of corrigibility. We cannot establish an order free from defect by making it conform to the pre-established formulas of sacred law. We can, however, develop over time a regime that facilitates the recognition and the correction of its flaws. The effort to create such a regime offers an alternative to the twin evils of legalism (the idolatry of a particular structure) and romanticism (the war against all structure).

If the pressure to compromise with the real social forces of the day is one source of the hesitation of the world religions between changing the world and escaping it, a second source has been failure to recognize the true home of the dialectic between transcendence and immanence. We are its home. To the believer in the theologies or the philosophies of these religions, transcendence and immanence have to do with the relation of a personal or impersonal divine to the world.

The world as nature, however, is indifferent to our concerns. Its ultimate enigmas are impenetrable. The dialectic of transcendence and immanence is a reliable truth only when interpreted as part of an account of our own constitution. It is we who, in every domain of existence, are both shaped by social and conceptual contexts and incapable of being definitively contained by them. It is we who exceed all the finite circumstances of our existence. It is we who therefore face the problem of depending upon structures, whether of society or of thought, that can never make room for all the forms of experience, of association, or of insight that we have reason to value and power to achieve.

The denial of sanctity to nature was followed in the religions of transcendence by the projection onto the cosmos of a dialectic that properly regards our own nature. In Buddhism as well as in the other philosophies of the overcoming of the world, this dialectic took the form of a contrast between a phenomenal reality that was to be devalued or dismissed and the one, true, and hidden being. For such a view, transcendence implies world renunciation, compatible, as in Mahayana Buddhism, with an inclusive compassion toward all who are caught in the travails of illusion and of suffering.

In the religions of salvation, the dialectic of the transcendence and immanence took the form of the conversation between the saving work of a transcendent deity and the flawed response of his humanity to his grace. The individual was recognized to be embodied spirit and to share, by analogy, in the transcendence of God over nature. However, the view of the dialectic between context dependence and context transcendence as central to our humanity could never be fully developed so long as our attempt to become more godlike remained in the shadow of a divine plan, or a plan of history, in the execution of which we remained mere accomplices.

Only in the early teachings of Confucius (before the development of neo-Confucian metaphysics) and in our secular campaigns of political and personal emancipation was there occasion to give the dialectic of transcendence and immanence an uncompromisingly human form. However, in Confucian teaching this effort was circumscribed by the failure to develop a view of the mind and of society that would acknowledge the implications of our powers of transcendence and relate our respect for persons, as structure-transcending and role-resisting agents, to the need to deny definitive authority to all established roles.

and structures. The sanctity of the personal never became, in this tradition, the boundless depth of the individual.

It is the secular voice of the struggle with the world, in the form of the revolutionary projects of democracy and romanticism, that came closest to acknowledging that the home of the dialectic of transcendence and immanence lies not in the cosmos but in us, in each of us individually as well as in all of us collectively, the human race. In the development of this view, however, the secular version of the struggle with the world was disoriented by its failure to develop what I have here called the suppressed orthodoxies about self and structure or self and others. The heresies to which it fell prey—the Hegelian and Sartrean heresies with respect to the relation between self and structure and the legalist and romantic heresies with regard to the relation between self and others—have prevented us from fully expressing the truth about transcendence and immanence as a truth about us. The failure to develop the presuppositions of the struggle with the world into a coherent and comprehensive view of time, history, and self has contributed further to this result.

The religion of the future requires a decisive resolution of this ambivalence. We should not mistake redescribing the world for changing it. The confusion of redescribing with changing is half of what turns religion into a lullaby and a deception. The other half is the impulse to deny the irreparable flaws in human life. Together, the confusion and the denial have made of religion what it has been, and prevented it from better guiding our ascent to a greater life.

The task is correctly to draw the line between the ineradicable defects in the human condition and the alterable circumstances of society. Religion fails us twice when it refuses to accept the facts of our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability and then fails to show the way to the overcoming of what we can indeed repair—our susceptibility to belittlement.

Radicalizing the significance of the struggle with the world for our ideas and institutions

Despite its immense authority, first in the register of the salvation religions and then in the register of democracy and romanticism, the

struggle with the world continues to be understood and practiced within the setting of ideas and institutions that contradict its teachings. To acknowledge these contradictions, to confront them, and to overcome them, through different metaphysical ideas as well as through proposals for the reconstruction of society, may at first seem to be to fulfill the sacred or profane religion rather than to overturn it. However, the implications for our beliefs and for our experience, including our experience of ourselves, are so far-reaching that they create the basis for a religious revolution. What we set out to fulfill, we may end up by replacing.

In the history of Christianity, and to a lesser extent of Islam and Judaism, the faith has been stated in terms borrowed from Greek philosophy. However, the categories of Greek metaphysics, centered as they are on the project of classical ontology, have never seemed adequate to the religion of the incarnate and crucified God. The chasm between the God of the philosophers and the God of Abraham became a commonplace of philosophical commentary. That the gap was never bridged, must be credited not only to discomfort in the use of the sole apparent alternative—an anthropomorphic conception of God, represented as a person—but also to the absence of a comprehensive philosophical view in which the experience of personality would be central rather than peripheral.

The troubled and inappropriate marriage of Christian faith to classical ontology has been followed, in the history of modern thought, by the preeminent influence of what I earlier described and criticized as the conception of the two regimes: the idea that reality is riven by a divide between two orders of being—one, human; the other, non-human. This doctrine may at first seem to cause less trouble for the assumptions of the struggle with the world than the view that there is only one regime of reality. It is, however, subversive of the vision at the center of this approach to existence as well as false to the facts of our situation in the world.

The antagonism of these two sets of ideas—the program of classical ontology and the doctrine of the two regimes—to the message of the Semitic monotheisms represents the most salient instance of a more general problem. The problem is the failure to develop ideas that would make sense of the concerns and commitments shared by the sacred and profane versions of the struggle with the world. Foremost

among these beliefs is the understanding, in this approach to existence, of the relation between spirit and structure as well as between self and others: the primacy of love, rather than of altruism, in the development of moral experience, and the idea of the person as embodied spirit, transcendent over all context or structure. These views have implications for both the conduct of life and the organization of society. Moreover, they are informed by a partly inexplicit vision of reality and of our place in the world. I enumerated the most important elements of this vision: the singular existence of the world, the inclusive reality of time, the possibility of the new, the openness of history, the transgressing powers of the mind, the depth of the self, and the superiority of the commonplace. In describing the main parts of this vision, I also suggested the force of the resistance that to this day they continue to encounter from prevailing beliefs about nature, society, history, and mind.

This resistance comes not only from dominant traditions of thinking about society and history (in classical social theory and contemporary social science) but also from the most accepted interpretations of what contemporary science has discovered about the workings of nature. The ideas that there is only one world and within this world only one regime, that time is real and that nothing, not even the laws of nature, is exempt from it, and that novelty is not simply the exemplification of possible states of affairs waiting to happen, in the course of the relentless enactment of deterministic and statistical causality, are all propositions that continue to contradict widely held beliefs.

The other elements of the metaphysical background to the struggle with the world, regarding society and the self, are even more central to the message of the teachings of the struggle with the world, but they receive even less support from prevailing ideas. There is no established understanding of society that teaches us how to think about the institutional and ideological frameworks of our society and that recognizes our power to change their content and character. There is no settled view of the mind that accounts for the work of the imagination. Therefore, as well, there is no comprehensive understanding of humanity and history that enables us to place the dialectic of transcendence and immanence squarely in our own constitution rather than to project it onto the cosmos.

The development of the missing ideas along the lines suggested in the earlier parts of this argument does much more than provide a secure basis for what we now accept as sacred or secular versions of this approach to the world. By enabling us to take ourselves as the true seat of the dialectic between transcendence and immanence, it produces a view of humanity, its powers, and its endeavors that believers in the present sacred or secular teachings of the struggle with the world are unlikely to recognize as the doctrine that they embrace. They will say, “This is not our religion; it is another religion.” Although to us this other religion may seem to have done nothing but draw out the implications of the religion that they profess, with the help of insights that they lacked, who is to say that it has not become, by virtue of such changes, a different religion?

Consider the example of the suppressed orthodoxy about self and structure, discussed in Chapter 4, as it applies to the secular, revolutionary forms of the struggle with the world. Once we reject the Hegelian and the Sartrean heresies, recognize the decisive importance of our institutional and conceptual structures, and conceive the project of changing not only their particular content but also the way in which they impose themselves upon us and inhibit our power to change them, we have begun to revolutionize our view of ourselves. One of the implications of this change may be to see our susceptibility to belittlement, by contrast to our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability, as something that we can repair or overcome. We can begin to entertain the thought that the acknowledgement and acceptance of those other flaws in our existence, rather than representing a threat to our ascent to a great life, can serve as its condition.

It is not only our ruling ideas about self, society, and history that inhibit the advance of our secular projects of liberation and empowerment. It is, above all, the ways in which contemporary societies are actually organized. Lack of structural vision, and therefore as well of the imagination of institutional alternatives, reinforces our resignation to the established arrangements. The recalcitrance of these arrangements to challenge and revision in turn lends plausibility to ideas that discount our transformative capabilities.

In an earlier section in this chapter, I enumerated four ways in which the institutions of contemporary societies fail to give practical conse-

quence to the conception of humanity lying at the center of the struggle with the world: the denial to the majority of men and women of economic opportunity and equipment; the failure to universalize a way of teaching and learning enabling the mind as imagination to become ascendant over the mind as modular and formulaic machine; the absence of a practical basis of social solidarity stronger than money, as well as more hospitable to the exercise of our creative powers, than social and cultural homogeneity; and the lack of a way of organizing democratic politics that diminishes the dependence of change on crisis and supports the permanent creation of the new.

Suppose a practice of institutional innovation that breaks through these constraints, step by step and part by part. The method would be experimental and gradualist. The cumulative outcome might nevertheless be radical. With each step along the way, we would become stronger. Our unwillingness patiently to work toward a greater life that we could never ourselves experience, because it would occur in the providential time of divine salvation or the historical time of a future social order, would consequently diminish.

Such beings as we would then become would no longer rest content with the postponement of our rise to a greater life—a postponement that all established sacred and secular forms of the struggle with the world accept. They would say, “We want it now.” Would they not have changed their sacred or secular religion in the course of fulfilling it?

Consider the example of the combined effects of a change in the institutions of production and in the character of education. Economic reconstruction might begin with the development of decentralized and experimental forms of collaboration between the state and private firms, designed to widen access to the advanced sectors, in which productive activity increasingly becomes a practice of collective learning and permanent innovation. We would, by steps, move toward a future in which no person would be condemned to do the work that machines can carry out. All of our time would be saved for what we had not yet learned how to repeat. Through a related series of changes, self-employment and cooperation, combined, would assume their rightful place as the predominant forms of free labor, displacing economically dependent wage work.

Such changes could not survive and persist without successive innovations in the institutional arrangements of the market economy. The market itself could not remain fastened to a single, entrenched version of itself. Alternative regimes of private and social property—as well as the contract systems that they demand—would begin to coexist experimentally within the same economic order.

A renewal of the methods of education would need to accompany these economic innovations. Such a renewal would be required to make the new economic institutions work. Moreover, it would be informed by the same impulse to achieve a greater life that would inspire and inform those institutions. The imagination would be equipped by an approach to learning that is directed to capabilities of verbal and mathematical analysis, that prefers selective depth to encyclopedic coverage, that is cooperative rather than individualist or authoritarian in its social setting, and that approaches all subjects from contrasting points of view. Such an education enables the school to become the voice of the future within the present and to subordinate the mimicry of the family and the service of the state to the acquisition of future-making capabilities.

We could not advance very far in the trajectory defined by such economic and educational innovations (themselves only fragments of a more inclusive program of reconstruction) without changing ourselves. Human nature, understood simply as what we are like now—the stock of our established predispositions—would remain much as it is. It would shift only slowly and at the margin, as new arrangements and revised beliefs began to encourage some forms of experience and to discourage others. Nevertheless, we would have already become too big, in our field of vision and in our experience of empowerment, to embrace a sacred or secular religion that places the highest good in a providential or historical future beyond our reach. If the living person formed in the circumstance that I have described were to cling to the outward form of these future-looking faiths, he would nevertheless insist on opening the channel back from the future to the present. For all his protestations of fidelity to the inherited sacred or secular religion, he would have become, against his will, a religious revolutionary.

Achieving a greater life, without Prometheanism

In both the sacred and the secular versions of the struggle with the world, acknowledgment of our transcendence over the social and conceptual contexts that we develop and inhabit is overshadowed by our estrangement from the sole good that we possess for sure: the present. As our sacred or secular salvation resides, according to these beliefs, in the future, the present becomes, to our eyes, incomplete and unsatisfactory because it is deficient in the provision of our highest good. That which is highest always remains beyond our grasp. That which we can touch is fatally incomplete: the meaning and value of the part that we possess compromised and left uncertain by its failure to be combined with the part that is missing.

Prometheanism—the campaign for a power to be achieved by the individual through denial of his frailties and triumph over the weak—represents a misstep in the effort to rid ourselves of the burden of estrangement. It denies the truth about the unbridgeable rifts in human life. It makes the exercise of our power to go beyond the immediate context hostage to the contest for relative advantage. (The philosophy of Nietzsche offers the uncompromising expression of this view.)

The worship of being, or of the radiance of the world, responds to the experience of estrangement only by denying or by misrepresenting the imperative—our imperative—of resistance to the context. At the limit, it wants to reverse the premises of the series of religious revolutions that produced the three spiritual orientations I have earlier discussed. (The philosophy of the later Heidegger provides the best example of such a response to the sorrows of estrangement.)

What we need and should want instead is to reaffirm the dialectic of transcendence and of immanence as an attribute of our humanity, but to wipe it clean of the taint of estrangement from the present.

The starting point for the accomplishment of this task is not a revision of philosophical ideas, as if we could cease to be estranged from the present if only we marshaled a different set of abstractions. The point of departure is a determination radically to deepen—beyond the limits of our present beliefs and arrangements—the transformative

effect that the struggle with the world has already had. It has established in almost every country the idea of the divinity or of the greatness of the common man and woman. Where it has failed to bring about this arousal through the influence of the salvation religions, it has done so, more effectively and universally, through its service to social reconstruction (under the labels of democracy, liberalism, and socialism) as well as through its commitment to the romantic ideals of self-expression and self-construction. Here is a real fire in the world, not just a doctrine written up in books.

The revolutionary force remains, however, far from being spent. The most important effect of the global spread of these political doctrines has been to establish throughout the world, and even in countries in which the salvation religions have enjoyed little influence, the idea that political arrangements should be judged by their contribution to the empowerment of ordinary men and women: the enhancement of their capabilities, the heightening of their experience, the broadening of the scope of the life plans that people are able to make.

The influence of this political idea, inhibited or suppressed so long as it lacks an institutional program adequate to its ambition, has been strengthened by its association with the romantic conception of life as a moral adventure. The premise of this conception is the infinity of the self. Its aim is the creation of a higher form of human life, with greater scope, intensity, and capability. At the prompting of the worldwide popular romantic culture and under the shadow of late-romantic skepticism about the possibility of love and the availability of a worthy task, this ideal of personal experience has now become the common possession of humanity.

It makes a claim that has been neither refuted nor vindicated: unlike our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability, our susceptibility to belittlement is not an ineradicable defect of human existence. The readiness with which this claim is made and received, in every country, in every class, and in every culture, is all the more remarkable in light of its conflict with the tenor of ordinary life. The experience of ordinary men and women continues overwhelmingly to be one of drudgery and humiliation, from which only the family and the community offer refuge and only the fantasies of empowerment in the popular culture provide escape.

The Semitic salvation religions have been, together with the secular projects of social reconstruction and of personal liberation, a third torch setting this fire in the world. In all of them, the human person participates in the nature of the personal God. In all of them, the idea of an impersonal divine is rejected as pagan. In all of them, the impulse to represent God in the category of personality conflicts with the impulse to represent him as pure negation: non-person and non-being, yet, even in this negativity, as akin to us. In all of them, the history of redemption shows the path by which our sharing in the life of God may be made manifest and increased. In all of them, the sense of this participation is immediately manifest in the subversion of the hierarchies of value that would enthrone the noble above the vulgar and deny us all prospect of finding light amid the shadows of the commonplace. In all of them, the human face is understood to be our most reliable look into the face of God, and the whole human body, even in death, touched by an indelible sanctity. In all of them, there is hope of an ascent for the individual as well as for the community of the faithful. In all of them, the acts of social change and of transformation of the self required for this ascent may be forestalled by the idolatrous shortcut of legalism: salvation achieved cheaply and falsely by obedience to divine law. In all of them, the definitive work of salvation, with its promise to bring us into the presence of God, is postponed to another moment, beyond death. In all of them, the terrifying facts of death and groundlessness are denied with greater or lesser conviction.

The threat of estrangement from the present, with all the longing and sadness to which it may condemn us, falls, as a terrible burden, upon these intimations of God's search for us. Nevertheless, the Near Eastern salvation religions provide as clear a prophecy of our movement beyond ourselves to a greater life as we have yet seen.

That inspired by these several forces men and women all over the world have come to see themselves as greater and more godlike than they seem to be and nevertheless find themselves everywhere belittled and oppressed is now the strongest provocation to religious revolution. The sacred and the profane variants of the struggle with the world have inflamed the desire for this ascent. They cannot satisfy it.

They can break through the beliefs and institutions that compromise their message only by changing, and changing us as a result. They

cannot fulfill the promise of ascent in the future by keeping us alienated from the present and divided, each of us against himself. The false solutions of the Promethean cult of power and of the pagan worship of being show, by their failure, the need for a more radical revision of our beliefs and of our way of life.

Recognizing the defects in human existence

The religion of the future must begin as well in the unwavering recognition of our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability. Without such recognition, it cannot advance in its commitments. In particular, it cannot advance in the search for a greater existence.

Of all higher religions, the Semitic monotheisms are the most adamant in denying the defects in human life. They promise eternal life for the embodied self, a life beyond death. They claim to resolve the ultimate enigma of existence in the form of a narrative about God's creation of the world and of his redemptive intervention in history. They propose an object of our desire—God and the love of God—that will at last quiet our insatiable longing. The religions oriented to overcoming or humanizing the world are more equivocal in their denial of the defects in the human condition.

In early Buddhism, the most important version of the overcoming of the world, the denial of our mortality takes the form of discounting individual selfhood. Eternal life is already ours, to the extent that we can possess it, as engagement in the one and hidden being. Only our attachment to the illusions of distinct existence prevents us from seeing and living this truth. Once we acknowledge it and affirm on the basis of it, through the practice of a disinterested altruism, our universal kinship with the remainder of being, we can escape the treadmill of desire. Our success in this effort depends on a correct understanding of the world. Groundlessness gives way to a definitive grounding in a truth beyond illusions.

That this way of denying our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability has a persistent logic, intimately connected with other aspects of this spiritual orientation, is shown by its reappearance, almost two thousand years later, and with the use of the teaching of the Vedas

rather than of the Buddha, in the philosophy of Schopenhauer. Now art comes to the assistance of philosophy in helping us resist the tyranny of the will and look at our own lives from the vantage point of the stars.

Only in the teachings of Confucius and in its latter-day counterparts (including the conventional secular humanism of today) is the war against the inexpungable taints on human life partly abandoned. However, the recognition of those taints has no central significance for our elevation to a greater life; we build civilization and improve our minds and hearts despite them, not because of them. In this anti-metaphysical metaphysics, we respond to the indifference of nature and to the meaninglessness of the cosmos by building a social order responsive to our concerns.

In this way, we create meaning in a meaningless world, and ground ourselves in the only fashion in which such self-grounding is feasible: through the collective work of society and culture. We put solidarity in the place of false theology. We resign ourselves to the certainty of death by devoting ourselves to a good that will live after us, in other good people. To the extent that each of us diminishes his selfish attachment to his own interests and existence, he begins to see himself as the expression and the agent of a human community, and ceases to imagine himself as the center of the world.

The same decentering, accomplished in a cultivation of other-directed mindfulness and benevolence, transforms the life of desire, rescuing it from the stigma of insatiability. Instructed by ritual, shaped by role, and animated by our awareness of other people, our desires—so the humanizer hopes—no longer condemn us to perpetual yearning. Here is a way of dealing with the flaws in human existence that blunts their terrors and deprives them of the power to undermine society as well as the self. It does so without disregarding the reality of the threat that they pose to the work of civilization.

This response to the deficiencies in human life, by what a lawyer calls confession and avoidance, is not good enough for the religion of the future. An uncompromising acknowledgment of these flaws must be one of its starting points. Such a confrontation is required for three distinct reasons.

The first reason is that denial of the truth of the human condition corrupts all our endeavors. The conversion of religion into a form of

solace, especially solace for our greatest terror—the fear of death, against the background of our groundlessness—negates the most certain and most terrible fact about our situation in the world. By offering us what we most fiercely desire—eternal life—religion discourages all the safeguards against wishful thinking that we have established against the blandishments of self-deception. The conversion of philosophy into an effort definitively to defeat the threat of nihilism—the anxiety of groundlessness—turns the understanding against itself. If we could establish the framework of our existence by procedures similar to those that we employ in natural science, we would not be the unaccommodated beings who we are. We would not need to exercise the prerogative of thinking, at the uncertain limits between the knowable and the unknowable, about what matters most.

The perversion of religion and the corruption of philosophy go hand in hand. They reinforce each other, and put consolation and pretense in the place of insight. They are especially to be feared when they work in direct alliance, as they often have, under the disguise of the partnership of faith and reason. The most important consequence of the failure to confront the truth about our condition is the reduction of the path of ascent—of the way in which we may increase our share in attributes of divinity, including the attribute of knowledge of the whole—into a restrictive formula.

In corrupt philosophy, the formula is a method by which we flatter ourselves that we can reason our way out of the condition of groundlessness, and find by pure thought (as Schopenhauer said of his philosophy) a definitive solution to the problems of existence. If only we cling to a certain method of reasoning, and follow its steps to a certain metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) conclusion, we shall, they wrongly suppose, be able to attain clarity about the whole of our situation.

In perverted religion, the formula is a set of sacrifices, practices, or laws, which if only obeyed in the proper frame of mind open the way to salvation. The sacrificial victim was replaced, in the history of religion, by sacramental practice, formulaic prayer, and sacred law. It was the special dignity of Christianity, as well as of the mystical countercurrents within Judaism and Islam, that they affirmed from the outset, and never completely abandoned amid the evils of their social and conceptual compromises, belief in the primacy of spirit over law as well as in

the connection between the idea of love and the idea of the infinite. In this manner, they loosened the stranglehold of any formulaic road to salvation.

The first requirement of our ascent to a greater life is to accept the truth about our circumstance and to reject consolation. The truth is the antidote to any such formula, for thinking and for salvation, pressed upon us by false philosophy and false religion.

The denial of death, groundlessness, and insatiability, in which the higher religions have in different degrees been complicit, is a falsehood whose destructive consequences are not limited to the advocacy of a restrictive recipe for insight or salvation. It inhibits, as well, the full recognition and expression of our defining attribute of engagement and transcendence. A being that did not face the certainty of death, that was not plunged into insuperable ignorance over the conditions of its existence, and that did not want more than he could ever have would not be the being for whom no structure of society or of thought is ever enough.

If he could grasp the framework of existence and find an object capable of quieting his desire, he could take these two discoveries as the basis for an all-inclusive ordering of thought and of life. What Hegel named the endless labor of negation would cease to be necessary. What I have called the Hegelian heresy would turn out to be vindicated by the facts of the matter. If he could escape death, at least the death of his earthly self, his existence would lose the fateful and irreversible concentration upon which the dialectic of transcendence and engagement depends.

A second reason for which the acknowledgment and acceptance of the defects in the human condition are central to any future religion is that such awareness can awaken us to life now. The fear of death, the shadow of nihilism, and the force of insatiable desire arouse us from the sleep-walking, the state of diminished consciousness, in which our lives may otherwise be consumed. Spinoza wrote that a wise man's thoughts are directed to life rather than to death. However, by averting our attention from the ephemeral and dreamlike character of our existence, we lose the most powerful instrument with which we can hope to resist surrender to routine, repetition, and petty compromise. Death-bound, distracting ourselves with the diversions that enable us to forget or even to deny our mortality, and forgetful of the mysterious character of our

existence, we readily allow ourselves to be diminished. Life then seeps away, little by little.

By refusing to turn away from the defects in our existence, we arouse ourselves from our diminishment of existence. Our belittlement, which already weighed on us, now becomes intolerable. Every moment that goes by while we await our doom seems full and precious. The sight of death helps bring us fully to life.

However, once aroused, the sentiment of life, if we could hold it constant in the mind, might overwhelm and paralyze us with joy. Our exultation at being alive would then prevent us from living. So it is only by the coexistence of the fear of death with the sentiment of life that we are able to contain this contrasting terror and joy and to make both serve our conversion to undiminished existence and to awareness in the present moment.

We allow ourselves to be terrorized by the prospect of death in the setting of our groundlessness. Thanks to this terror that we direct against ourselves, we rise from our stumbling and stupefaction. But to what end? What comes next?

Our overthrow of ourselves has no self-evident sequel. For Pascal, the confrontation with death and the vertigo of groundlessness would open us to a remote and exacting God. Pascal was careful to suspend faith in Christianity long enough to consider how human life would appear without it, the better to revive faith by reestablishing it on the basis of our strongest anxieties and aspirations.

For the later Heidegger, the campaign of self-terrorization and arousal staged by the early Heidegger in *Being and Time* would prepare us to worship the radiance of the world. Thus, the early Heidegger wanted us to use the terror to commit more fully to a version of Christianity that had no illusions about the ability of reason to do the work of faith. He then tried politics and the political reconstruction of society as the follow-up. Having “taken the right step in the wrong direction,” he abandoned all hope of the elevation of life through politics. In the end, he proposed to take his early campaign of terror and arousal as preparation for the revival of paganism in the form of a worshipful surrender to “Being.”

These examples demonstrate the significance of the impulse to face the flaws in human life. In the hands of thinkers with contrasting

goals, it has served the same purpose of rescuing us from commonplace and compromise, from routine and repetition. It was used to combat what in the twentieth century came to be described as an inauthentic existence, an existence lived under the compulsion of collective formulas remote from the innermost concerns of the self. We are to be brought away from Pascal's *divertissement* or Heidegger's *Zerstreuung* by the apprehension of the terrifying truth about our circumstance.

Nothing in this awakening, however, determines what may follow it. Arousal from our sleepwalking may be followed by one outcome or by another. It cannot do the work of a settled faith or stand in the place of a religious program.

A third reason for the importance of an acknowledgment of the flaws in the human existence to the religion of the future is that it helps prevent the affirmation of life and the overcoming of estrangement from degenerating into Prometheanism: into self-deification and power worship. The cult of will and of lordship has as one of its premises the denial of all weakness. No weakness is more fundamental than the one that is imposed on us by the inescapable restraints of death, darkness, and unlimited longing.

To face the truth about these restraints, not just as a theoretical idea but as a permanent feature of consciousness, is to prepare a remedy against Prometheanism. By the custom of the ancient Romans, a slave stood behind the “triumphator”—the magistrate or general riding in triumphal procession—and whispered into his ear: *memento mori* (remember that you will die). In this way, the victor was brought back to the awareness of his mortality and prevented from mistaking himself for a god. So it is with us.

Occasions and sources of religious revolution

Having suggested points of departure for a religious revolution, I now consider a series of related questions about the circumstances, the sense, the scope, and the distinctive forms and practices of such a change in our spiritual life. This discussion serves as a bridge between the analysis, in the preceding pages, of the starting points of that

revolution and the statement, in the last two chapters of this book, of its program.

A revolution depends on circumstance. It is not enough for there to exist provocations to a spiritual upheaval like those that I have just reviewed. It is necessary that particular events or conditions render these provocations visible and potent and in this way help neutralize the immense inertial force of the existing world religions. Here is a summary list of such triggers. I mean the list to be illustrative rather than exhaustive.

1. *The idea of the greatness, of the divinity, of the ordinary man and woman, carried to unprecedented fervor throughout the world.* This fervor has three proximate and powerful sources. They sometimes work together. More often, they operate separately and even in tension with one another.

The first source is the core theology of the Semitic monotheisms: their idea of the analogical relation between man and God, or of the theomorphic character of a human being. It is not some special category of persons that enjoys this analogical connection to God; it is every person.

The second source is the cause of democracy, and its prosecution through the reconstructive but now disoriented or defunct programs of liberalism and socialism. The classic institutional formulas of the liberals and the socialists no longer carry conviction. The space that they have left vacant is occupied by a series of compromises designed to reconcile economic flexibility and social protection within the framework of the inherited and largely unchallenged social-democratic settlement of the mid-twentieth century. However, the central democratic idea of the constructive genius of ordinary men and women, readily related to hope for increasing their part in the divine quality of transcendence, shines all the more starkly once bereft of the conventional institutional blueprints.

The third source is the effect of the worldwide popular romantic culture, with its message of the inexhaustible potential for subjective life of the common person. That every person can share in the experience of the romantic heroes and heroines of the soap operas and cultivate the wild longings conveyed in popular music is its central premise.

In many parts of the world today, the moral and religious sensibilities of the mass of ordinary men and women are divided, in varying proportions, between the scriptural and the romantic faiths. Although they proceed on different premises, exert their influence by different devices, and make different promises of happiness, they converge in suggesting the idea of the great and godlike character of ordinary humanity. The manifest conflict of this idea with the tenor of ordinary life in a counterrevolutionary age strengthens its power of disturbance.

2. *The pervasive experience of poverty and drudgery, of oppression and belittlement, afflicting, in the face of the idea of the godlike character of the ordinary person, the vast majority of people throughout the world.* The inclusion of hundreds of millions of former peasants and disenfranchised industrial workers in a world labor market; the perpetuation of indigence and near-enslavement, on a vast scale, with children as the most numerous victims, not only in some of the poorest countries but also in some of the richest ones; the weakening of the traditional devices of state-supported social protection both in major emerging economies (beginning with China) and in the historical home ground of high social protection (Western Europe); the disruption of family life and community bonds at the very time and in the very places when and where they would be most important as antidotes to the abandonment of the ordinary person by the state; the narrowness of access to the advanced sectors of production and learning in even the freest, richest, and most equal contemporary societies; the unashamed renunciation by the latter-day progressives of any antagonism to economically dependent wage labor as an adequate and lasting expression of free labor, in contrast to the views of their nineteenth-century predecessors; the continuing consignment of most workers to forms of repetitious labor that in a free society only machines should perform; the inability or unwillingness of liberals and leftists today to translate their professed goals into projects of institutional reconstruction; the failure in all but a small number of small countries to provide the majority of young people with access to a form of education that equips the mind with analytic power and imaginative reach rather than occupying it with useless information; and the consequent confinement

of the sacred and romantic ideas of the greatness of the ordinary person to the private and formulaic sublime of the established religions or to the escapist fantasies of empowerment in the popular culture—all this provides bitter counterpoint to the message that the salvation religions, democracy, and romanticism deliver in common.

Arnold Toynbee described the “internal proletariat” of the imperial states of antiquity as the prime addressees of the world religions, by contrast to the “external proletariat,” the barbarians outside the imperial frontiers, to whom the message was later carried. Now, however, the distinction between the internal and the external proletariats has largely vanished. The mass of humanity, aroused and frustrated in its desire for ascent to a greater life, has become the chief recipient of religious innovation.

3. The difficulty that the educated classes experience in believing the narratives of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and the consequent weakening of the connection between the high and the popular cultures of religion. These two cultures of religion have ceased to speak to each other.

For reasons that are directly related to their growing distance from each other, each of these cultures proves inadequate to the work of preserving the message. The execution of this task requires that a religion sacrifice its formulas of doctrine and of practice to its core vision. It also demands that a religion confront the beliefs and arrangements that contradict its visionary impulse. Neither the high nor the popular cultures that result from the reciprocal estrangement has the means with which to do this work.

In their attitude to the salvation religions, the educated classes retreat into a posture of half-belief. They find themselves unable to believe in the literal truth of the story of salvation and in the corpus of traditional doctrine that claims to discern the implications of this story for the conduct of life as well as for the understanding of our place in the world. They therefore decode both the story and the doctrine, representing the message, embedded in the narrative, as an allegory of moral and social ideas that can be grasped and justified by reason, unaided by revelation.

This demythologized religion is expunged of anything offensive to the understanding. However, it loses, by that fact, the power to disturb.

In the contemporary setting, it almost always stands in the service of a conventional secular humanism. The simple accusation to which it has no satisfactory answer is that we have no use for it. We can say of it what Lavoisier said to Napoleon of the idea of God: we do not need this hypothesis.

The demythologized religious consciousness might be thought capable of performing a role that the secular humanism is powerless to undertake: to console us for our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability. However, it seems unable to acquit itself even of this elementary responsibility. The answer to death and nihilism, as well as the quieting of desire, remain inseparable from the history of creation and of redemption. Without the incidents of that history, the hope for eternal life ceases to be justified. There is, however, no self-evident and stable place at which the operation of decoding the narratives and doctrines of the religion as metaphors or symbols of an acceptable truth can stop.

Three distinct scandals of reason account for the difficulty of faith and explain the retreat into the untenable position of half-belief. It is customary to take only the first of these three scandals into account. The result is to misunderstand both the depth of the problem and the consequences of the false solution devised by half-belief.

The first scandal of reason is supernaturalism: suspension of belief in the workings of causality in the nature. It is the problem presented by miracles. More generally, however, all the redemptive intervention of God in history, as portrayed by the salvation religions, is miraculous. The problem presented by supernaturalism is not simply the credibility of the initial suspension of causality; it is the consequence of this suspension for our thinking of how the world, modified by the miraculous intervention of God, works. If the intervention interrupts the workings of causality or of the laws of nature underlying them, how then can we invoke these same laws to understand the effects of the intervention? This selectivity in the approach to causation is a familiar problem besetting counterfactual explanation. Once we have violated the causal continuity of nature, all bets are off. We are not entitled to go on thinking about the world, changed by redemption and grace, as if it were otherwise the same, except for a series of exceptions, with no consequence for either the world or the understanding.

The position of half-belief reckons with this first scandal of reason by denying that any such interruption of the workings of nature has ever taken place. Christ, for example, may be deemed to represent a concentrated form of spiritual energy, goodness, and hope. We are not to understand that he was actually God incarnate, except insofar as God is a way of describing the incompleteness of the world or the ultimate ground of our own concerns. The teachings related to the Incarnation, such as the doctrine of his virginal birth, are therefore to be read as metaphorical expressions of our powers of disruption and transcendence. Are we not all called to reinvent ourselves?

A second scandal of reason is the contradiction between the universality of the message delivered by the religion and the particularity of the plot: the narrative of divine intervention and redemption, marked by proper names and momentous dates. The message is a vision of the world and an imperative of existence with implications for all humanity, even if it distinguishes (as Judaism does) a special role for a part of the human race. Why should God have chosen to enter into a covenant with the Jews, or to be embodied as a recalcitrant zealot in a peripheral province of the Roman Empire, or to convey a unique message to an Arabian merchant? And why should all these claims of election be suspiciously concentrated in a corner of the globe, other than because of the indistinguishable influence of the earlier ones on the later ones? And how can the universality of the message not be jeopardized by its alleged privileged connection to events that took place in particular places and times, to the detriment of the parts of mankind that, born far away, can invoke no such close and original connection to the sacred plot? To the claim that the message must be revealed somewhere and at some time and be transmitted by particular messengers, the simple answer is that it can be revealed and conveyed in ways that are immediately designed to counteract the significance of the particular setting. That, however, is not what happened, not even in the Christianity of Paul. The stigmata of the particular were all too evident. The attempt to erase them, if carried far enough, threatens to leave nothing but an indistinct and innocuous appeal.

The position of half-belief responds to this second scandal of reason by discounting, one by one, all the particulars, as if one would improve a wilting flower by discarding its burnished petals until nothing had

been left but the seed within. From the dismissal of the Palestinian or Arabian setting to the claim of the transgendered character of God, there is no stopping point. What remains after the scandalous particularity of the plot has been dismissed as inessential is likely to be the secular piety of the present, thinly disguised as a revisionist interpretation of the long-dead prophet's teachings.

The third scandal of reason is the least remarked. However, it is the most fundamental. It is the incoherence of the idea of God, as God is represented, or can be represented, in the monotheisms of the ancient Middle East. There are alternatives. None of them is satisfactory.

The first option is to conceive God as the impersonal divine. Such is the God of Buddhism, if we resist describing Buddhism as a cosmological atheism. It is, more generally, the God of the many forms of panentheism that have been proposed in the course of the history of philosophy (for example, in the philosophies of Spinoza, Schelling, Bergson, and Whitehead). God is then something impersonal, in addition to the world. Under a spatial metaphor, he constitutes nature but exceeds it. Under a temporal metaphor, he is the horizon of the possible or of the future, and the message of panentheism becomes "You have not seen anything yet."

Such an impersonal divine stands in insoluble contradiction to the scriptural narratives of the salvation religions. It cannot be reconciled with the stories of God's creation of the world or of his redemptive activity in history. In Christianity it makes the Trinity and the Incarnation more than the mysteries that orthodox theology acknowledges them to be: conceptions without meaning, other than through radical reinterpretation of what the message of the religion has historically been taken to be.

The second option is to represent God as a person. Exploiting the resources of the analogical imagination, we then understand relations between God and mankind by analogy to relations among persons. We appeal to the idea of our participation in the life of God: the anthropomorphic conception of God may seem to be an extension of the theomorphic conception of the self.

The limits of analogy, however, are all too plain to see. What God does in creating the world and in redeeming it is not like what any human being can do. Moreover, God does not face the ordeal of mortality,

groundlessness, insatiability, and susceptibility to belittlement. There is an asymmetry or instability in the conception of both God and the self. The theomorphic conception of the self must be true in more than an allegorical or metaphorical sense for the message of the salvation religion to mean anything close to what its scriptural texts represent it to mean and to what it has in fact been understood to mean in the history of the communities of faith that adhere to it. However, the man-modeled conception of God can be true only in a relative sense, which we attempt to leave safely vague by recourse to the idea of analogy. The problem is that the theomorphic conception of the person depends on the anthropomorphic idea of God: the incoherence of the latter threatens to contaminate the former.

The anthropomorphic conception of God appears to place conceptual incoherence (God as both person and not person) in the service of idolatry: the idolatry of a version of ourselves, hypostasized as a separate being who fashioned the world to make us and who has already rescued us from death and groundlessness. Feuerbach's criticism of Christianity as the religion of our alienated powers and essence works out the implications of an idea of God expressing this paradoxical amalgam of self-deification and self-abasement on the part of the believer.

The third option is to describe God, by double negation, as non-being and non-person. Such has generally been the position preferred by the gnostics and mystics, ancient and modern, of the three religions of salvation: the *via negativa* of a theology resistant to both anthropomorphism and ontology in its approach to God. This third option, however, represents a confession of the impotence of reason. It amounts less to another conception of God than to a statement of our inability to form such a conception; the incoherence of the other two ideas of God gives way to the emptiness of this one.

The double denial—of God as being and of God as person—can nevertheless produce a positive result. It is, however, a result bordering on heresy. Notwithstanding the logic of the double negation, negative theology is not in fact neutral between the two ideas that it rejects. The denial of the personality of God has definitive consequences. The denial of the ontological status of God has only equivocal implications. If God cannot be a person, even in the relative sense allowed by analogy,

whatever he is bears no relation to the experience of personality or of distinctive selfhood. If, however, God cannot be a being, in any sense recognized by classical ontology, his non-being must nevertheless mean something entirely different from the sense of non-existence in a world of particular beings. Non-being must in effect mean a horizon of being beyond all particular beings. That is why the gnostic and mystic tendencies in the Semitic monotheisms have moved in the direction of a speculative monism whenever they have failed to take a vow of philosophical silence.

To make such an idea of God compatible with these faiths, it would be necessary radically to revise the understanding of their doctrines and narratives, turning them into moral allegories. In such a view, history would cease to be what these religions have taught us that it is: a setting in which the plot of redemption remains inseparable from decisive events and personalities, acting in particular places and times.

There is consequently no coherent idea of God or, more precisely, no idea of God that can remain coherent and yet do the work that the religion of salvation needs it to do. This reasoning amounts to an informal, inverse ontological argument. The ontological argument for the existence of God that Anselm first proposed and that many great philosophers have since reinvented, in different versions and to different ends, claims to infer the existence of God from the conception of God. The inverse of the ontological argument is that God cannot exist if he cannot even be coherently conceived.

For the consciousness of the educated classes, in the societies in which these monotheisms continue to speak with the loudest voice, there are two readily available but unsatisfactory ways of dealing with the problem presented by the untenable character of all three ideas of God.

One such way is to embrace a deflated and humanized version of the second idea: of God as person. Of the three ideas of God, this idea is, after all, the one most easily reconciled with the historical discourse of the religion. The idea of the personality of God can, however, be translated into a view of the depth of the human person—its ground of “ultimate concern” (as in the philosophy of Paul Tillich). The anthropomorphic God then becomes a way of speaking about the theomorphic man. It is a manner of speaking about the unfathomable and

inexhaustible character of our experience, under the guise of talk about God.

Another way of responding to the difficulty is to oscillate among the three untenable ideas of God, using each to make up for the incoherence of the others, as if by being juxtaposed three bad ideas could become a good one.

Intimidated by the three scandals of reason, educated opinion retreats into half-belief. The religion becomes a morality tale told in the style of a fairy tale. The high culture of such an eviscerated religion serves as a superfluous ornament to the conventional secular humanism. It has no basis and no motive to defy the nostrums of that established worldly wisdom. It distances itself from the popular faith and practice of the religion.

The popular religion, wedded to formulaic prayer and practice, and devoted to fossilized belief, whether or not claiming the authority of sacred scripture, becomes barbaric. It need not, as a result of this barbarism, lose its capacity to evolve: like everything in society and in culture, it can change, under the provocation of shifting historical circumstance and spontaneous innovation from below. However, by losing all contact with the transformative power of general ideas, it limits its sights. It becomes blinded by its inability to represent the faith as a dialectical whole, in which particular beliefs and practices can be reinterpreted and revised in the light of general conceptions, and general conceptions remade in the light of the experience of the particulars. Such a religion turns into a series of tropisms. The dead—the architects of the now closed canon of accepted practice and belief rather than the original prophet—come to rule over the living.

A religion cannot make itself new under such constraints. It cannot advance a vision of what is central to its message, as narrative and as doctrine, and overthrow the habits and compromises that have come to obscure and diminish this message. It lacks the resources needed to confront the marriage of half-belief with secular piety except by the incessant repetition of its formulas. It is powerless to resist the conventional beliefs that contradict the metaphysical presuppositions of the struggle with the world, or to develop the truncated and suppressed orthodoxies of the infinity of the spirit and of the priority of love over altruism, or to repudiate the contrasting heresies (such as legalism and

romanticism) that prevent its development, or to criticize the institutional arrangements that make the social order a prison-house of the embodied spirit.

The coexistence of educated half-belief with barbaric popular devotion prevents the salvation religions from reforming themselves, in the light of ideas as well as of experience, as they have done many times in the past. The failure of the marriage of ideas with experience prevents religious reformation. The absence of religious reformation helps set the stage for religious revolution.

4. The need to combine the criticism and reorientation of personal experience with the criticism and reconstruction of institutional arrangements, as well as with the radical changes of conception, attitude, and practice that such a combination requires.

Any revolution in human affairs must, as Tocqueville observed, be both religious and political. It must be both change in consciousness and change in institutions. In the most comprehensive projects of world transformation, no simple division exists between the religious and the political spheres of life.

Every ambitious religious change seeks to change society, even if it professes to discount the reality of time and the weight of history. It has special reason to want social reconstruction if, like the Semitic monotheisms, it sees history as a setting for the enactment of God's plan of salvation. Every large project of political transformation must be more than a program of institutional change. It attempts to influence our ideas about the possible and desirable forms of human association in each domain of social life. Such ideas, living in our practices and institutions, rather than relegated to books, are expressed in law, the institutionalized form of the life of a people. They are also independently important as an aspect of our experience. The prophet will not leave them unchallenged.

How could he? The ideas that we act out in our relations to one another must, more than the ones that we profess, be the object of his concern. They become the more powerful when bound to institutions and practices. Our ideals and interests are nailed to the cross of the institutions and practices that represent them in fact. The law is the site of this crucifixion.

Contrary to the assumptions of classical liberal doctrine, no set of institutional arrangements can be neutral among visions of the good for man. Every institutional order encourages some forms of experience and discourages others. The illusory goal of neutrality gets in the way of the pursuit of the realistic ideal of the corrigibility of a form of life: of its susceptibility to challenge and correction and of its openness to a broad range of experience. The claim that a particular institutional regime is neutral among clashing visions of the good will invariably be found to favor the entrenchment of a frozen understanding of our interests and ideals. It amounts to a species of the Hegelian heresy.

The impossibility of drawing a bright line between religion and politics when either of them raises its level of transformative ambition rightly troubles the friends of individual freedom. However, the protection of individual liberty should not be made to depend on the false idea of an absolute separation of religion from politics or on the unrealizable conception of an institutional order that is neutral among conceptions of the good. It must rely instead on institutional arrangements, established in law, that restrain governmental or private oppression even as they secure a universal minimum of endowments to everyone. The justification of such arrangements cannot rest safely on an illusion such as the illusion of the neutrality of an order of right among conflicting visions of the good.

The effort to envisage and to establish a greater life for the common man and to do so on the basis of unwavering recognition of our mortality, groundlessness, and instability delivers a challenge to the established institutional settlement in even the freest, most equal, and most prosperous contemporary societies. It also requires from us that we criticize and change our enacted beliefs about the possible and desirable forms of human association. By the very nature of its concerns, it must bridge the gap between the personal and the political.

However, the religions of salvation, as they have developed in history and as they now exist, either fail to combine the personal and the political or combine them in ways contradicting the parts of their faiths that are of greatest and most lasting value to humanity. The resulting inhibition to their reform helps create a circumstance hospitable to religious revolution.

There are two principal and contrasting ways in which religion has been related to politics in the history of the salvation religions. Call them the religion of the law and the religion of the heart. Between these two extremes stand many intermediate arrangements, composed of pieces of each of them. These hybrid solutions also fail to guide us toward a way of joining the political to the personal—a reorientation of society and of the self—responsive to the concerns motivating the religion of the future.

The religion of the law connects the personal to the political by the shortcut of legalism. The most important feature of our relation to God is that we obey him. We signify our obedience by conforming to his law. His law requires a complete reorganization of social life according to its dictates. The living God gives way to the unyielding formulas of the law. The severity of the law may be felt to be less fearsome than the need to deal with a God whose demands no law can contain. Better to be a slave of the sacred law than to be Jacob struggling with the angel. When the power of the state backs up the enforcement of the law, the religion of the law takes the form of theocratic legalism as it did, for example, at moments in the history of ancient Judaism, Hinayana Buddhism, Islam, and Mormonism.

The theologians of the religion of the law often argue that an outward conformity to the law is insufficient to salvation; that its formulas are only the setting necessary to a conversion of the soul, manifest in the way we treat other people; and that obedience to the law is the first and most decisive move by which, as communities, not just as individuals, we respond to God's saving work in history. Nevertheless, the religion of the law commits us to the Hegelian heresy in its view of the relation of self to structure: the false idea that there is a definitive form of life able to do justice to the embodied spirit. At the same time, the religion of the law carries the heresy of legalism into our relations to other people: as if we could achieve salvation by conforming to rule and ritual in our dealings with them, even if we cannot love them: that is to say, if we cannot imagine and accept them both for their own sake and as confirmation of our possession to ourselves.

An individual who has surrendered to the formulas of the religion of the law and taken them as a guarantee of salvation has ceased to realize in his own experience the dialectic of transcendence and immanence.

He has put what he imagines to be obedience to God in the place of the structure-defying and structure-transcending activities that would enable him to increase his share in the divine life or to rise to a greater existence. If willful self-exclusion from communion with God is (according to an old idea of Christian theology) hell, then the religion of the law mistakes a kind of damnation—the damnation of surrender to its formulas—for being saved.

Thus, the religion of the law unites the personal and the political, but only in a form that is antagonistic to the aims providing grounds for religious revolution today. It forms part of what such a revolution must oppose.

The religion of the heart has at its center direct engagement of the individual soul and of the community of the elect with God. Its enabling premise is the privatization of the religious sublime. Its demands upon the state and upon the institutional order of the broader society are minimal: that they not interfere with the pursuit of salvation by the individual as well as by the community of believers. If the institutional regime meets this modest standard, it may merit passive acceptance. If it actively contributes to this result, by creating the conditions for religious toleration and more generally for individual piety on the basis of self-reliance, it deserves, according to the religion of the heart, to be actively supported.

Such support for the established institutions need not be based on the premise that they form an intrinsic and necessary part of any scheme of religious, political, and economic freedom: of economic and political freedom as enhancements of religious freedom as well as goods in their own right. It can be founded, instead, on the negative principle that any known alternative to the present arrangements would undermine freedom. Such is the practical liberalism of the religious individualist.

The personal and the political are here connected only negatively. The cumulative transformation of society remains marginal to the plan of salvation. The chief part of that plan is to be implemented later, in a life after death. The individual is to win his share in eternal life (if he is not predestined to be saved or damned) by individual faith and piety, responsive to divine grace. He is to win it if possible against the background of an institutional order that sustains his quest for personal

salvation by embedding religious freedom in a denser, broader structure of political and economic freedom. If necessary, however, he can hope to win salvation despite the denial of religious, political, and economic freedom. Salvation is achieved ultimately in a relation of the soul to God that does not depend on any particular institutional settlement in society. That the individual be loved by God and love him in return, regardless of the cruelties of society and of the injustices of the world, is the chief concern of the religion of the heart.

The religion of the law deals with the relation of the personal to the political by submitting both personal and political experience to a formula—the formula of the sacred law. This formula places a stranglehold on the dialectic of transcendence and of immanence, reducing its implications for both society and the self to a submission that is intended to be a liberation.

The religion of the heart addresses the relation of the personal to the political by turning the political into a mere backdrop to the personal. However, man does not thereby cease to live in society. Most of the time of his life is consumed in engagement with a world robbed of sanctity and bearing only a tenuous connection to the work of salvation. Religion assumes an ecstatic character; it becomes the exception to an experience of life, constituted on an entirely different basis. It has no comprehensive program for the organization of society and rests content if the temporal power respects certain beliefs regarding the person and the family, such as the prohibition of abortion or the indissolubility of marriage. The religion of the heart fails to honor the requirement that spirit penetrate the world. Its world abandonment is a form of despair preventing us from becoming at once more godlike and more human in our earthly circumstance.

It may seem that the many mixed or intermediate arrangements that have emerged in the history of the salvation religions point to a way of dealing with the connection between the personal and the political that dispenses with the dogmas and shackles of theocratic legalism without accepting the privatization of the religious sublime. In fact, however, each of these compromises turns out to be an attenuated version of either the religion of the law or the religion of the heart.

For example, the main line of the Jewish religion, developed in the aftermath of the destruction of the Temple, was chiefly a religion of the

law. Unlike Hinayana Buddhism or Islam in its historical core, it lacked the power with which to make sacred law the law of the state. The national churches created in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation were, on the other hand, largely committed to the religion of the heart. The establishment of a national church, even when enshrined in the constitutional arrangements, did not serve to impose sacred law upon social life. Instead, such an establishment used the power of the state to protect and to promote the privatization of the sacred, in the spirit of the religion of the heart.

In what sense a religious revolution

In what sense is the change in our spiritual experience that these arguments prefigure religious? In what sense is it a revolution? If it fails to invoke the intervention of a transcendent personal God in history (on the model of the salvation religions), it may not seem to be religious at all; it may appear to be more accurately described as a criticism and revision of a familiar secular humanism.

The category of religion lacks any permanent core. There is no set way in which the aspects of our experience that we designate as religious relate to other aspects. That the category of religion is historical, however, does not mean that it is empty of content. Its powers of discrimination are those that the history of mankind gives it. Each major change in the content of religion inspires a change in our idea of what the term most usefully designates.

It makes no sense to define religion to include only the three Near Eastern monotheisms. Under such a definition, most of humanity, over the last two thousand years, would be without religion. I have proposed to use the term religion in a sense that is ample enough to include the three major orientations that emerged from the spiritual upheavals of a thousand years of trouble and vision: including Buddhism and Confucianism as well as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This sense is, however, not so ample that it loses its power to distinguish religious experience, however relatively, from philosophy, art, and politics.

To respond to the inconsolable hurts in human existence, to root an orientation to life in a vision of the world, thus surmounting the

distinction between the descriptive and the prescriptive, and to demand a commitment of existence for which the rational grounds must always be insufficient, and with the consequence of requiring us to place ourselves, dangerously, in the hands of others—such are the distinctive marks of religion, deployed as a historical category. What we call philosophy may share in the nature of religion, but only insofar as it bears these marks. Philosophy, however, has rarely been willing to bear all of these marks, if only out of fear of forfeiting its claim to invoke the authority of rational argument.

By this standard, the change for which I here argue is indeed a change in religious vision, not simply or mainly a shift in philosophical attitudes. However, there is another, also important sense in which the reason to call this change religious is open to challenge. The lesson of history—that is to say of the history of the two and a half thousand years in which the present world religions (including Buddhism and Confucianism) have held sway—suggests that these religions have succeeded in the world only by satisfying certain conditions: reliance on a scriptural canon, organization of a community of belief, and, often, identification of this community of belief with a people: if not a nation, a set of nations. It is by fulfilling these requirements, as well as by exemplifying the attributes previously described, that a form of experience becomes a religion, in the sense in which the faiths exemplifying the three major orientations to existence discussed here are religions. It is in this way that the message and the movement differ from philosophy and poetry.

The satisfaction of these historical requirements for the development of a religion generates, however, a tragic contradiction. It is necessary, for the practical success of a religion, to satisfy them. However, in every instance, payment of the worldly price has been made at the cost of a powerful restraint on the development of the vision animating the religion in the first place. Vision is sacrificed to compromise: compromise with the established social world and with its established powers and habits of mind.

The religion of the future cannot and should not pay this price, for reasons that I shall explore. It cannot meet those practical conditions and remain faithful to the motives and aspirations inspiring it. Indeed, the sacrifice of vision to compromise required by those conditions is part of the reason for new religious revolution. In refusing to satisfy

them, we begin to create a form of experience and of belief that, by the historical standard of the concept of religion, is neither unequivocally religion or non-religion. So much the worse for our inherited categories, which we are condemned to stretch, bend, and reinvent for the sake of what matters most. The religion of the future is, by dint of this imperative, also the non-religion of the future.

To determine what qualifies as revolution in religion, just as to settle what counts as religion, we must begin with history. The orientations that I previously examined—the dominant options in the spiritual history of civilization—have, I claim, a powerful element of shared vision, despite the real and vast differences among them: the denial of sanctity to nature with the consequent placement, at the center of religion, of a dialectic between transcendence and immanence; the dismissal or devaluation, of the divisions within humanity, accompanied by ambiguity as to whether this overturning of the walls need take place only in our way of thinking and feeling or must also happen in the actual organization of social life; the replacement of the ethic of martial valor, and of proud and vengeful self-assertion by an ethic of inclusive and disinterested altruism; the two-sided ticket to either escape the world or change society; the disposition either to deny the unsurpassable limits in the human condition—mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability—or to provide us with some antidote or consolation for them; and the consequent willingness to treat our susceptibility to belittlement as no more and no less incurable than the other three defects in the human condition.

A change in our spiritual life that breaks with any major aspect of this inheritance is revolutionary. The revolution represented by the religion of the future begins, as my argument about its points of departure has suggested, in the acceptance of the terrible truth about our condition; in the refusal to assimilate our corrigible susceptibility to belittlement to the certainty of death and the fragility of our protections against nihilism; in the determination to achieve for ourselves a greater life, increasing our share in the power of transcendence that the salvation religions attribute preeminently to God; and in the conviction that we must change the world rather than simply describe it in different words.

The practice of religious revolution

Despite the vast differences in their vision of reality as well as in their proposals for the conduct of life, the higher religions have shared a formula for historical success: a set of practices that has helped account for their continuity and diffusion. In each instance, a single individual played the decisive part of founder. (Judaism was only a partial exception, given the role of Moses.) Always a man, he appeared as a teacher or prophet, often in a peripheral region of an empire. He neither presented himself as an acolyte of imperial authority nor openly defied it. He left his relation to it ambiguous, while calling for a fundamental transformation in the ways of life that it supported or permitted, and above all in the consciousness and attitudes of its subjects. Again with the partial exception of Judaism (a religion that became a people) and of Christianity, insofar as it began as dissidence within Judaism, the founding prophet delivered a message not confined to any one nation or state. He addressed his message to all humanity. Astonishingly, it was heard by many peoples.

The teachings of the founders of the higher religions developed in the contrasting directions that I have examined in the earlier parts of this book. In each of these spiritual orientations, there was a paradigmatic experience of the sacred in which only a relatively small number—the enthusiasts among those who received the message—shared. This experience of the sacred represented a direct encounter—as direct as our earthly condition can allow—with the dialectic of transcendence and immanence resulting from the denial of sanctity to nature. Others—those who could not count themselves among the holy—shared in this experience in a diluted form, at a remove. They sustained their faith by attention to doctrine and ritual and by respect for the symbolic significance of certain practices, understood and used as gateways of access to the sacred.

Like the category of religion itself, the practice of religious revolution varies with the content of the faith. If we can single out no permanent part of our experience as religious and relate it to other parts of our existence, according to a changeless pattern, we must also expect the practice of religious revolution to change according to the program

of the revolution. It is, however, an untested conjecture: up to now there has been only one wave of religious revolutions in history: the wave that produced the major approaches to life and the religions that represent them. As a result, there is only a single case on which to build a view of the relation between program and practice in religion.

Any distinction between those aspects of religious revolution that are more lasting and those that are more ephemeral (albeit on the scale of millenniums rather than of centuries) must therefore be speculative. It must look for justification to an understanding of how change takes place in domains of social life other than those that we characterize as religious.

If we consider the matter in this light, the methods of the prophetic founders of the present world religions cease to serve as reliable models. They represent adaptations to the social and cultural conditions of the ancient agrarian-bureaucratic empires, or of their satellite states, in which these faiths emerged. They may fail to show the way to a practice of radical religious innovation now.

By the standard of how transformative action occurs anywhere, the most lasting and universal aspect of the method that those religious revolutionaries practiced lies in the combination of visionary teaching with exemplary action.

Teaching about the conduct of life is visionary when it is inspired by a view of a life greater or better than our present ideas and experience allow. The visionary teacher sees a form of insight and above all of life that established constraints deny us—an untried opportunity of existence. The vision of this opportunity conflicts with both our accustomed ways of thinking and our established ways of acting. It cannot therefore be justified prospectively by the acknowledged standards of justification, rooted as they are in settled arrangements and habits of mind. It can be defended only retrospectively; the standards that would make sense of it come after, not before, its formulation.

Schopenhauer remarked that a talented man is a marksman who hits a target that others cannot hit; a genius is a marksman who hits a target that others cannot see. Visionary teaching shares in the quality of genius. However, its aim is to change our life: our way of being in the world.

If visionary teaching is the first lasting element in the practice of the religious revolutionaries, exemplary action is the second. We must see

and make down payments on the greater life. Otherwise, the doctrine of the visionary teacher will fail to persuade or even to be understood. By a synecdoche of the religious and political imagination, we grasp the remote whole in the tangible part.

The founders of the world religions taught by example and parable. Their action was exemplary just as their discourse was parabolic. Not content to embody their doctrines in examples to which many could relate, they undertook to supply examples by action.

The examples in discourse and action had a constant characteristic: they focused on some aspect of present experience, readily accessible to any ordinary woman or man, embodying concerns and capabilities of humanity that contained in themselves the beginnings or the clues of the higher life to which they called their hearers.

What is immediately intelligible to any man or woman is some way of seeing other individuals at close hand and of dealing with them in the ordinary circumstances of life. Such a mode of vision and conduct in the microcosm of personal encounter expresses an understanding of our higher vocation and presages a change of life in every part of our experience, from the intimate aspects of personality to our life in society among strangers.

The union of visionary teaching with exemplary action is the element of past religious revolution with which the revolutionaries of the future cannot dispense. However, it must be combined with a practice unknown to the religious revolutionaries of the past. Here are some of the elements of such a practice.

In the first place, with respect to the relation between leader and led, a religious revolution faithful to the motives and aims that I have here explored cannot carry out its task if it centralizes prophetic power in a single individual and in his decisive action in history. It must decentralize the capability and the authority for continuing religious innovation. In this respect, it is closest to rabbinical Judaism, to Confucianism, and to the secular projects of political or personal liberation. Unlike the Protestant Reformation, which stopped at proclaiming the priesthood of all believers, it must recognize prophetic power in everyone. It must therefore seek an approach to education that equips the imagination with such power: for example, by addressing each subject from contrasting points of view and by stocking the mind with a

broader range of experience than present society and culture make available.

In the second place, with regard to its scope, this practice requires the combination of the personal with the political. Its concern must include the reshaping of society and its institutions as well as the re-orientation of the self and its habits. No obvious agent, however, exists to coordinate transformative action over so wide a range. Political parties arose in the history of the last few centuries to undertake the struggle for power in the name of particular convergences of interest and of opinion. More or less organized movements in civil society, including traditional churches, shape opinion about personal morality.

But who or what is the agent capable of orchestrating changes in both these realms and of directing them to a common goal? Such an agent does not exist, and if it did exist, it would enjoy a power subversive of religious as well as of political freedom. The movements of religious enthusiasm in the nineteenth-century United States, with their open-ended implications for society as well as for the self, are historical examples of such a crossing of boundaries between the personal and the political. A convergence of overlapping movements must replace the individual prophet and teacher.

Ideas are required to inform such movements. However, they are unlikely to be the ideas of any one thinker and teacher. Their development will depend on the transformation of the disciplines into which knowledge is now organized; it cannot simply float above these disciplines as speculative thought. If it is to propose a direction for the reorganization of society as well as for the reorientation of personal conduct, it must be able to rely on the instruments of the institutional imagination, in the form of a revised practice of legal analysis and of political economy.

If it is to hold up the image of a changed form of personal experience and of connection with others, it must face the hard truths about our ambivalence to others and our self-division that post-romantic literature and art have explored. It must not allow itself to oscillate, as the academic moral philosophers do, between methodological disputes empty of tangible content and moral casuistry bereft of transformative vision. It must suggest a direction for life that is in conformity to its program: faithful to its vision of the possibility of an existence greater

than the one that we now possess, yet unflinching in its recognition that we go to our deaths under the shadow of the impenetrable enigma of our existence, consumed by longings that we are able neither to satisfy nor to escape, and sustained by joys in the midst of our dreams and torments.

In the third place, with respect to its program, it demands what none of the religious revolutions of the past have had: a vision of the cumulative transformation of society that cannot be reduced to obedience to a definitive formula or blueprint and that is therefore incompatible with the religion of the law. The imperative of the marriage of visionary teaching with exemplary action is mirrored in the characteristics of such an argument for the reconstruction of society. It is not architecture: a finished scheme, such as we might profess to find in a body of sacred law. It is music: a succession of steps. Its two most important features are that it mark a direction and that it indicate the initial steps by which, in a particular circumstance, to begin moving in that direction.

It wants not only to replace one set of institutional arrangements and cultural assumptions by another but also and above all to change over time the character of the institutional and conceptual order that we inhabit so that we may engage it without surrendering to it. In this way, our life in society becomes less of an exile and of an imprisonment in a world that remains hostile to the condition of embodied spirit.

In the fourth place, it seeks to expunge from the exercise of our powers of resistance to the immediate institutional or conceptual context of our lives the burden of estrangement from the present moment. It recognizes in such estrangement the squandering of our most certain good. The practical consequence of this effort is to make it unwilling to await the arrival of this good in the historical or providential future. It insists on experiencing this enhancement of life, in however fragmentary and inchoate a form, now.

It must therefore be prodigal in the invention of personal and social experiments that translate that future into the present and convert living for the future into a way of living in the present as beings whose horizon of action and insight is not limited by their present circumstances. Some of the most important such experiments are those that connect the reorientation of life to the reorganization of society: for

example, by developing the institutional and educational basis for co-operative practices of permanent innovation in every domain of social life. Without the spread of such practices throughout society; and culture, the recognition of the prophetic powers of the ordinary person remains an empty pretense.

In the fifth place, it must defy the two taboos that inhibit religious revolution in the liberal societies of the present: the taboo against the religious criticism of religion and the taboo against taking political positions on avowedly religious grounds. These taboos are now justified, falsely, as requirements of pluralism and toleration.

The seriousness of a political project is measured by its engagement with the institutional structure of society and with a vision of what the relations among people can and should be like in the different domains of social life. To insist on giving such substance to politics is to efface any clear contrast between politics and religion.

The right to form a public voice explicitly inspired by religious conviction is a requirement of seriousness in politics. It is also the demand of any religion that, like all the religions that emerged from the religious revolutions of the past, takes seriously the dialectic of transcendence and immanence and insists on seeing its vision realized in the world. Legalism in religion represents a perversion of this demand.

Defiance of the taboo against the religious criticism of religion has the same basis and the same consequence. If politics is religious to the extent that it is serious, to prohibit the religious criticism of religion is to rule out part of the discourse on which the deepening of politics depends. If our religion requires us to change society rather than just to describe it, a religion has to be ready to confront other religions in the space of public debate.

The taboo on the religious criticism of religion makes sense only if we accept the privatization of religion: its confinement to the conscience of the individual and its renunciation of influence on life in society. However, the privatization of religion not only hollows out much of the substance of political life; it also stands opposed to impulses shared by the world religions as well as by their secular sequels and counterparts. By the same token, it is incompatible with the commitments of the religion of the future.

Religious toleration and religious pluralism must not rest on the impoverishment of politics and on the abandonment of society to the irreligious. Their practical requirements are the legal and constitutional protection of religious freedom, the refusal to involve the state in the establishment of any religion, and a civic culture that makes universal respect and self-restraint compatible with the public discussion of what matters most and touches us most deeply. These requirements fail to support the taboo against the religious inspiration of political vision, which, by diminishing both politics and religion, undermines our powers of resistance and transcendence.

A tragic contradiction in the history of religion

A conflict exists between the practical conditions for the worldly survival and success of a religion and the requirements of its fidelity to its message. This conflict is not dissolved in the course of the history of religion; it persists as the tragic element in this history. For the reorientation that I propose, it presents a problem for which there is no apparent solution. The practice of the religion of the future is powerless to solve it.

Consider again a model of the foundation of the historical religions, defined broadly enough to include Buddha and Confucius as well as the Jewish prophets, Jesus, and Muhammad. An individual teacher combines visionary teaching with exemplary action. It must be a particular vision, with decisive implications for the conduct of life, not just a speculative philosophy with indefinite practical consequences. To guide us in our way, it must respond to the fact of death, faced in the context of our apparent groundlessness and of our unlimited longing. It must demand more by way of the commitment of life in a particular direction than it can ever hope conclusively to justify.

The teacher gathers followers around him. He assumes an ambivalent attitude to the established authorities. He neither acquiesces unequivocally and unreservedly in the order over which they preside nor openly defies their hold on temporal power. His message nevertheless has implications for the organization of society. Once his followers become more numerous and organized, they may attempt to take power

for themselves. Or they may content themselves with holding the state to a standard of their design without governing themselves.

The history of religion shows that three conditions have been important, if not indispensable, to the survival and spread of a religious message in the world. The first condition is that the message be embodied in texts that achieve canonical status. The authoritative scriptural sources do not prevent later acts of religious innovation outside the canon. However, they provide a touchstone of true doctrine, which disputes about the interpretation of the teaching can never entirely erase. They also make all thinking and writing after or outside the canon subject to direct challenge by appeal to the canon.

The second condition is that the community of belief be organized. Such arrangements may or may not involve a distinction between priestly experts claiming a special closeness to the divine (or at least a special expertise in the canon) and the believer at large. It therefore may or may not take the form of an ecclesiastical organization, appearing with distinct personality in the social world. The apparent absence of a church may be misleading if the custodians of the canon colonize some other organization, notably the state. Such was, famously, the relation of the Confucian scholar-bureaucrats to government. The primary role of the organization is to uphold right doctrine. Its secondary role is to implement the message in the world.

The third condition is that the religion become the religion of at least one people, or of a group of nations, not just of a collection of individuals separated and submerged in the societies to which they belong. The bond between religion and people, even in the most universalistic world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam—creates communities of faith that keep the religion alive across generations. It anchors the faith in the matchless power of family life. It endures even in the face of a constitutional separation of church and state.

The third condition may sometimes serve as a substitute for the second condition, or the second as a substitute for the third. More commonly, the two have been combined, although in the resulting combination one element may be overt and the other covert.

An inverse relation exists between the second and third conditions. The more the religion becomes a people, the less the apparent need for

the organization of the believers. The weaker the bond between religion and people, the more important it becomes that the believers be organized. The identification of religion and people has never been so spontaneous and complete that they have required no organization of a community of belief.

The three conditions have represented, for the historical religions, the price of worldly success. When this price goes unpaid, the religion—even when it satisfies the standards distinguishing it, however relatively, from philosophy, art, and politics—remains a deliquescent artifact: a series of ideas, which, even if embodied in exemplary action, lacks staying power. To the extent that its ideas remain identified with a single teacher, they acquire no independent life. To the extent that they are taken up and reinvented by others, they loose fixed contours. The clarity of their contrast to other religions and philosophies is lost or obscured.

The philosophy of Schopenhauer resembled in many respects the teaching of the Buddha. Nevertheless, it was not, and could not become, a religion. Schopenhauer developed and presented his philosophy as an exercise of the intellect, which claimed to have solved the enigma of existence without leaving any gap between the way of living that it required or recommended and the understandings of the world that it offered. His teaching, however, satisfied none of the three conditions that have been crucial to the worldly success of a religion.

Whether the triple price of this success is too high depends on the message. The Confucian message was adopted to the social and economic as well as the political realities of an imperial order. That order could appropriate a principle of meritocracy, narrowly understood, without endangering established political, economic, or social power.

The message of Buddhism, devaluing as it did the phenomenal and the historical world, while affirming, on the basis of that devaluation, an imperative of universal altruism, lent itself to alternative ways of reckoning with worldly authority: renunciation of worldly power by those who wore the chains of an established scheme of social division and reality that they were unwilling or unable to challenge; embodiment in monastic organizations that assumed a largely passive role within an order largely controlled by other interests and beliefs; or

political as well as spiritual rule over a society that continued to be no less divided and hierarchical than many of the societies in which Buddhism had no presence.

The message of Judaism after the destruction of the Temple allowed for the preservation and renewal of the religion of the Covenant, expunged of its cultic-sacrificial element, in communities of faith and of discourse devoted to the law and resigned to powerlessness or statelessness.

The message of Islam was interpreted as an invitation to wed law to power. It took conformity to the law, manifest in the reformation of society, as the fundamental sign of obedience to the divine will and submission to that will as the first requirement of piety. In Islam as in Judaism, the mystical traditions of the Kabbalah and of Sufism gave central place to the bond between the one true God and the individual believer, alone in his defective earthly state.

The message of Christianity was married under duress, as well as by conviction, to the dominant interests and the established arrangements of each historical epoch. This forced marriage took place under the eyes of a universal or a national church determined to coexist, to reciprocal advantage, with the temporal powers of the world. Alternatively, the Christian message was rendered private, and consigned to the consciousness of an individual. Despite his fallen state, he hoped to share, thanks to the redemption, in the eternal life of God.

In each of these instances, the accommodation of the message to the world was not orchestrated according to the demands of a doctrine. The compromise was shaped by the way in which the religions of transcendence have fulfilled and combined the three conditions of worldly presence and influence that I have listed: the scriptural canon, the organization of the community of belief, and the identification of a faith with a people. For the struggle with the world, given its core idea of ascending to a higher life through transformation of the self and of society, such temporizing was inherently more questionable and dangerous than for the other spiritual orientations. For Christianity, in particular, given its rejection of legalism as a shortcut to the reconciliation of message and world, it was more troubling than for a version of Judaism or of Islam that had accepted the religion of the law as a step toward salvation, if not as a proxy for spirit.

It may at first seem that the secular versions of the struggle with the world demonstrate that these conditions are unnecessary to the worldly success of a religion. In fact, in the secular versions of the struggle with the world—the programs of political and personal liberation—all three conditions have often been satisfied to one degree or another: the veneration of foundational texts (if not of a sectarian program like Marxist socialism, then of a national project such as American democracy and its constitutional arrangements), the organization of believers (in the form of a political party), and the link between creed and nation (affirmed in the marriage of nationalism to ideology.) Whenever and wherever these conditions have failed to be fulfilled, the secular religion has lost a distinct identity and the capacity to renew itself through conflict with its real or imagined rivals.

The religion of the future prefigured in the arguments of this chapter is, however, by the character of its message, hostile to each of the three conditions. It carries to the hilt, in a naturalized and historical form, the idea of the prophetic power of all believers. It must reject the view that our capacities for religious innovation are concentrated in isolated prophets or in a single historical turning point: the moment when the teacher appeared in the world and supplied a definitive model for the combination of visionary teaching with exemplary action. Consequently, it cannot accept any textual canon, the authority of which is necessarily derivative from the teacher, his teaching, and the moment in which he speaks and acts.

By insisting on a program that includes both the political and the personal, while repudiating theocracy as well as legalism, it denies itself any ready-made institutional vehicle. A single agent empowered to orchestrate change ranging from the institutional arrangements of society to our beliefs about the possible and desirable forms of human associations would enjoy a power to which no Savonarola ever presumed. Even a distant approach to the exercise of such a power would represent a form of tyranny, at once political and spiritual, more terrible than any that we have yet experienced. It would contradict the forms of life and of thought to which a religion of the future aspires.

Its identification with a people is equally inconceivable. The people invoked as the subject and object of the religion of the future is the human race. The adoption of contrasting comprehensive approaches to

existence by different parts of humanity is not the problem; it forms part of the solution. It is our task to enhance our capacity to develop such approaches and to see them embodied not only in strong individuals but also in well-defined collective forms of life (whether or not associated with sovereign nations). Mankind can develop its powers only by developing them in different directions. It forms part of the religion of the future so to organize the world that our power to invent such differences, of life and of consciousness, is enhanced.

Defiance of the conditions that history has required for the success and survival of religions is intrinsic to the message. The conflict between the integrity of the conception and the price that the world charges for its influence—a conflict that beset every religion of the past—can therefore only increase. The choice seems unavoidable between the disempowerment of the doctrine and its perversion. Against the seeming inescapability of this choice, the only trustworthy antidote is a conception of who we are, and have reason and opportunity to become, expressed in the developing consciousness of humanity and sustained by the institutions, practices, and ideas that provide us with instruments of invention and defiance.

Philosophy and religion

No world religion has been established by its founder as a systematic philosophy. Every religion, however, has relied upon a vision of ultimate reality, even if it is a negative, self-denying vision like the anti-metaphysical metaphysics of Confucius (later replaced by the metaphysical metaphysics of the neo-Confucians). Every major religion has gone on, often long after its emergence and initial diffusion, to be the beneficiary or the victim of a conceptual elaboration of its doctrines. Speculative reasoning, pressed to the accomplishment of this task, is what we call theology. It is philosophy only in appearance.

The marks of theology, by opposition to a sociology or a philosophy of religion, are those that it shares with other disciplines and discourses that were buried in the history of modern thought: grammar by contrast to linguistics, and legal doctrine as distinguished from a sociology or anthropology of law. Today these discourses seem so anomalous by

the established standards of thought that we can barely understand them. The disciplines of doctrine or dogma combine three sets of traits setting them apart from any purely philosophical or social-scientific endeavor.

In the first place, they treat their subject matter, the words and moves of a religion, a legal order, or a natural language as expressive of a vision and an experience that such symbols fail to exhaust. The symbols are the path, but they are not the destination. In the second place, they do not operate as a higher-order discourse: a discourse about the beliefs and practices that bind together a certain community, respectful of the authority and of the revealing power of those symbols. They are a first-order discourse, and seek influence in the development of the subject matter that they profess to expound: the law, cumulatively purified by reasoned elaboration in law, in a political community; correct linguistic practice in a speech community; and orthodox belief in a community of believers. In the third place, by taking their vantage point from within rather than from outside the community of belief and discourse, they cast their lot with that community. As a result, the doctrinal disciplines override the contrast between the normative and the descriptive. Moreover, their claims have consequences for the exercise of authority, whether the authority is that of a state, a church, or a community of speech.

Because it is constitutive of religion, theology, however, possesses an attribute in which grammar and legal doctrine fail to share: it demands a commitment of life for which there can never be conclusive or adequate grounds. The core of energy and authority in religion lies in an experience, represented and evoked by the combination of visionary teaching with exemplary action. This experience is reflected, at a remove, in theology and in liturgy.

The practice of theology has never been shaped solely by its relatively remote relation to the experience of the sacred lying at the heart of each religion and by the characteristics that it shares with the other doctrinal disciplines. It has been influenced as well by the requirements for the worldly success of religion: the scriptural canon that it takes for its immediate subject matter, the collectivity of believers in which it seeks to intervene, and even the national life with which it may be closely connected.

How should we most usefully understand the vocation of philosophy? What is the relation of philosophy, so understood, to the religions of the past? What does it have to contribute to the religion of the future? What light do these conceptions of philosophy and of theology throw on the argument of this book?

For much of its history, philosophy in the West has been a super-science in the service of self-help. As a super-science, it has claimed to pass judgment on particular forms of life and particular modes of thought from the vantage point of higher insight. In this sense, it is a denial—a false denial—of our groundlessness. Its true ambition—sometimes declared but more often hidden—has been to defeat nihilism.

This would-be foundational science has been ordinarily deployed for the sake of self-help. The point has been to arm us against the defects of the human condition—not just our groundlessness (directly denied by the program of super-science) but also our mortality and our insatiability. Even at its most pessimistic (as in the work of Schopenhauer), philosophy has never ceased to provide us with reasons for hope. However, while it has habitually promised to solve the enigma of existence and offered to teach us how to escape our insatiability, its response to our greatest terror, fear of death, has been indirect. Denied the authority of revelation, it has used whatever arguments it can marshal to help us compose ourselves in the face of death.

There is, however, no such super-science. We can never definitively avert the threat of nihilism, presented by the prospect of death in the context of the enigmatic character of our existence and of the reality of the world. We can no more escape our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability through philosophy than we can do so through religion. A feel-good metaphysic is no more justified and persuasive than a feel-good theology, with the additional disadvantage that it is unattached to a community of faith and of ritual. Such a community may have less need of seducing the imagination into wishful thinking; it has other means to elicit belief and loyalty.

The idea of a super-science in the service of self-help has now been largely discredited and abandoned. One of its contemporary successors is the abasement of philosophy into the unwanted role of thought police, professing to teach us how to think and how to argue.

It falls to us, in our historical situation, to rescue the valuable and salvageable residue in the untenable idea of the marriage of super-science with self-help. Instead of super-science, philosophy can become an exercise in thought of our defining power of transcendence. It insists on our prerogative to address the issues that matter most, and that stand at the verge of what we can think and say. To this end, it crosses the boundaries among disciplines as well as among methods, and subordinates method to vision. It continues its work therefore into particular fields of knowledge, and seeks to view each of them from the standpoint of others, while professing to have no Archimedean point from which it can survey and assess all of them. It strives to develop practices of inquiry that by facilitating their own revision attenuate the contrast between routine and revolutionary science, between working within a framework and working against the framework. Its power is the power to defy limits, not to see the world with the eyes of God.

The self-help that it can hope, without illusion, to inform has no truck with the denial of our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability. It stands in the service of the enhancement of life, of the widening of our share in the most important attribute that we ascribe to divinity: not its omnipotence or omniscience but its radical transcendence. In this way, it gives practical expression, in the work of thought, to our determination not to accept belittlement as an inescapable defect in the human condition.

Understood in this fashion, philosophy cannot play the two roles that it has ordinarily performed in the history of religion. The first role has been that of servant to theology. An example is Aquinas's view of natural reason as a parallel track to revelation, taking us part of the way to the divine truth. The second role has been that of would-be successor to religion. An example is Kant's practice of moral philosophy as an unacknowledged heir to religion, accepting as postulates whatever—the immortality of the soul and the existence of God as well as the freedom of the will—seems necessary to sustain hope in the face of the certainty of death.

Philosophy must exchange these two roles for that of a practice combining a double denial: the denial of definitive authority to the established disciplines and their methods and the denial of our access to

reliable insight into the framework of existence. The predicament of philosophy then becomes an expression in thought of the human condition.

Philosophy is neither the handmaiden to theology nor the successor to religion. It is too powerful, independent, and truthful to be the former and too truthful, weak, and self-aware to be the latter.

The argument of this book combines two ways of thinking. One way of thinking is philosophy, represented in its relation to religion in just the way that I have described. This is the mode of thought exemplified in the account of the insuperable flaws in human life and in the analysis and criticism of the three major spiritual orientations.

The other way of thinking is a kind of anti-theology. In this chapter and the next two chapters of this book, dealing first with the starting points of a religious revolution today and then with the elements of a religion of the future, I develop a discourse within a religion, not just about a religion. However, it is not a religion that already exists. Were it to exist, it would not be a religion in the same sense as the world religions of the past, not even those that, like Buddhism and Confucianism, dispense with the idea of a transcendent deity intervening in history.

What makes this second discourse less or more than philosophy is that, like every religion, it proposes more than it can justify: its program exceeds the grounds that it can provide. It fails to remain “within the bounds of pure reason.” What connects it with theology is that it takes the standpoint of religion in responding to the facts of death, groundlessness, and insatiability, in anchoring an orientation to life in a vision of the world, and in defending a commitment of existence in a particular direction. If there were such a religion as the argument of this book proposes, this discourse would represent a theology of sorts of that religion: of sorts, because the meaning of theology changes together with the meaning of religion.

What distinguishes this discourse, however, from what theology has historically been, and turns it into an anti-theology, is that it makes no claims and claims no knowledge that is not thoroughly naturalistic. Moreover, the forms of belief and of practice to which it points, under the name religion of the future, would have none of the features that have helped ensure the historical success of the higher religions: a

scriptural canon, an organized community of belief, and an identification with a people or with many nations.

This discourse is not itself the religion of the future, not even part of what such a religion might be. In the absence of the life-giving marriage of visionary teaching with exemplary action and of the transformation of individual thought into collective experience, it remains dead words on the page.

Such an undertaking is dangerous. Its dangers are contained by the rigors of its truthfulness and justified by the endeavor that it is intended to support: an ascent untainted by illusion about either the flaws in our existence or the reach of our insight.

Direction and indirections of the religion of the future

The reasons for a religious revolution, explored in the preceding pages, prefigure its direction. Chapters 6 and 7 of this book explore this direction. One piece of the argument concerns the way in which we can wrench ourselves out of the sleepwalking—the abandonment to belittling routine—in which we risk consuming our greatest good: life in the present moment. A second piece has to do with our self-transformation: the way we live and the way we view our existence. A third piece regards change in the organization of society and in the character of our relations to one another. A fourth piece deals with our reward and with the disharmonies that we must face in pursuit of this prize: the countercurrents that beset it, as a result of the relation between its ambitions and our situation and natures.

In the order of presentation, I address the third part—reconstruction of society—before turning to the other three parts of this program: awakening from the diminishment of existence, affirmation of life in the way of living it, and understanding of what we are entitled to hope for.

At the center of the idea of the religion of the future lies a simple and powerful longing: the longing for a larger existence. This longing can be misdirected in a number of ways that have been the object of earlier arguments in this book. Such indirections shadow every part of the spiritual program that I am about to discuss.

One misstep is to interpret the desire for a greater life as a self-deification of humanity. Having lost faith in a God who intervenes in history to rescue us but having kept faith in the view of the self that the struggle with the world has inspired, we may be tempted to take ourselves, collectively, as proxies for God. There have been many examples of this misdirection in the history of philosophy and of politics, none more straightforward than Auguste Comte's "religion of humanity." Our task, however, is not to worship ourselves; it is to change ourselves. Collective self-worship poses a direct threat to the transformative program and conceals the evil within us and the ambivalence to life and to one another by which we are riven.

Closely connected with the self-deification of mankind is the moral impulse that I have called Prometheanism. It interprets the desire for a greater life as a quest for power. It takes its most perverse form when the power sought is power over others rather than a collective empowerment of humanity. Its strongest and most terrible motive, however, is not power; it is the use of power to deny the truth about our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability. In denying this truth, whether directly or indirectly, it is false to who we are. In committing us, for the sake of this denial, to a contest among ourselves for advantage, it corrupts both our individual and our collective efforts at ascent.

Another false path is the one that lies at the center of both the salvation religions and the secular programs of liberation: the placement of the supreme good in the future, with the result that we are estranged from life in the present. The essential logic of this deviation is mistakenly to treat such estrangement as an inevitable consequence or condition of our transcendence over context. If the religion of the future were to give in to this temptation, it would be pointless; it would reenact a decisive failing of the religions of the past.

Yet a further mistake is to confine the development of the religion of the future to the model of religious revolution exemplified by the formative periods of the religions representative of the three orientations to life that have exercised paramount influence for the last two and a half millenniums. The indispensable combination of visionary teaching and exemplary action is then falsely associated with a practice of limited relevance to our present condition: the individual teacher who

gathers around himself a group of followers and stands in ambivalent relation to the established powers of the place and time.

A final indirection is to confer on philosophy and theology, even when reinterpreted and redirected along the lines for which I earlier argued, a prerogative that they fail to enjoy. What you have in this book is both a philosophical and a non-theological theological argument. Such an argument can be no closer to the longings that would be central to the religion of the future—its vision of the sacred—than philosophy and theology have ever been to the experience of the holy in a religion. We cannot overcome the remoteness of such a discourse from the experiences central to an upheaval in our spiritual life simply by wishing to overcome it. Philosophy and theology are as powerless now as they ever were to replace religion. They can foreshadow and interpret a path of spiritual change, but they cannot travel it for us. All they have is ideas. What they lack is incandescent experience.

Christianity as the religion of the future?

The remainder of this book develops a vision responsive to the incitements to religious revolution that I have discussed in these pages. This vision does not rely on the family of beliefs that in the West has long been seen as the hallmark of all religion but that is in fact associated chiefly with the Semitic monotheisms: faith in a transcendent God who, having created man and the world, continues to intervene in history. From the perspective of those for whom religion is defined by commitment to such a narrative, the orientation to life for which I here argue is no religion at all, not even the theoretical element in a religion.

It nevertheless satisfies all the criteria that I claimed early in this book to be characteristic of religion. The principle governing these criteria is that religion be defined in a fashion that is inclusive enough to accommodate all the religions of transcendence and the three major orientations to existence for which they spoke, yet is sufficiently exclusive to mark out a distinctive part of our experience. In this view, a religion grounds an approach to existence in a vision of the world, or of ultimate reality. It responds to the irreparable flaws in the human

condition. It requires a commitment of life in a particular direction for which the grounds it can supply must always seem inadequate by the standards that we are accustomed to apply to less momentous decisions. In demanding from us more than it can justify by argument, it also requires us to put ourselves, in the course of actions motivated by faith, into the hands of others. In overstepping the bounds of reason, faith makes us vulnerable.

By all these standards, the change in thought and conduct that I here defend is religious. It is not, however, religious in the sense of the beliefs most characteristic of the Near Eastern monotheisms. In this sense, it speaks in a profane rather than in a sacred voice, which is the voice of religion understood on the model of those religions.

Before addressing, in the profane register, the religion of the future, I consider the extent to which those monotheisms—or, rather, one of them—could itself serve as the vehicle of the reorientation that I propose. An established religion, reinterpreted or reformed, would then lay claim to being the religion of the future, or at least one of its expressions. This conceptual experiment enables us to compare the sacred and the profane versions of the program of religious revolution. The differences between them will be real, but they will not be as great as the differences between either of them and the conventional secular humanism or the familiar faith and practice of the salvation religions.

To this end, I seize on the example of Christianity and ask by what set of changes Christianity might become the religion of the future. To become the religion of the future, it would need to respond to the experiences that give cause for religious revolution today. It could not do so without overcoming the estrangement from the present that has marked it ever since its emergence two thousand years ago. The result would not be a minor adjustment in belief. It would be a reformation of Christianity more radical than the one that Luther began.

The reasons to choose Christianity as the religion in which to explore a sacred voice for the religion of the future are straightforward. The struggle with the world remains the chief source of the religion of the future. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam were not only the principal school of the struggle with the world; they have also continued to be, despite the social and philosophical compromises that have tainted their message and dulled their force, a fount of prophetic resistance.

Their subversive and transformative potential is far from exhausted. Among these religions, Christianity is the one that retains the most intimate and developed ties to the modern secular projects of emancipation, both personal and political.

However, the same question, albeit with different answers, might also be asked of Judaism and Islam. If the changes of vision and experience that I call the religion of the future were indeed to engage large numbers of people in the world, speaking in a profane voice, Jews and Muslims would also be led to reconsider the promises of salvation made to them by their own faiths. I explore them now for Christianity.

I begin by considering once again an inhibition and a confusion discussed earlier in this chapter. The inhibition is the taboo against the religious criticism of religion. The confusion is the attempt to escape the difficulties of faith by settling into a supposedly intermediate position—a halfway house—between belief and unbelief. Once we have freed ourselves from the inhibition and struggled against the confusion, we can address directly the question of the grounds of faith and thus the reason to hear the message of religious revolution in a sacred as well as in a profane voice.

There has long existed, in all liberal democracies, a strong presumption against the criticism of a religion on religious grounds, that is to say: from the standpoint of another religion. Such criticism is distinguished from contest over the definition of orthodoxy within a particular religion. It is widely regarded as being at best a sign of intolerance, verging on an attack on the foundations of individual freedom. This presumption has its origin in the early modern wars of religion. As religious difference helped excite or justify violence, it began to seem vital to privatize religion and to build a wall separating religious conviction from political life.

A liberal democracy was to be one in which people of contrasting religious convictions could live together, and speak to the use of governmental power, without introducing their religious beliefs into the public discourse. The institutions and the laws were to be neutral among these views of ultimate reality. A corollary of this teaching is that the criticism of a religion, for its conception of ultimate reality and for its orientation to life, should form no legitimate part of the public

discourse. It should be banned from that discourse, whether the criticism is mounted from the standpoint of another religion or in the name of ideas claiming no religious authority or significance.

The taboo against the religious criticism of religion cannot, however, be accepted. It is unacceptable both to religion, including the religion of the future, and to democracy, especially to a democracy more real than the democracies now existing.

The taboo against the religious criticism of religion should be intolerable to anyone who speaks out of the faith in a dialectic between transcendence and immanence informing all the major spiritual orientations of the last two thousand years. If the spirit must become flesh, and change the world, if to deny such embodiment is to resist spirit, then it matters decisively how such embodiment of spirit is to be understood and achieved. To silence the religious criticism of religion is to take an unwarranted step toward leaving the world to its own devices.

The taboo against the religious criticism of religion is just as clearly, if less obviously, an offence to democracy. The cause of democracy is that of the collective creation of the terms of social life, informed by a vision of our interests and ideals. It is in religion that our vision of who we are and of what we can hope for is most powerfully represented and developed. To deny a public voice to religion is grievously to weaken the contest of visions on which the progress of democracy depends. To give a public voice to religion, however, is to admit the religious criticism of religion as part of the practice of public reason: no religion can develop its view of how we should arrange our dealings with one another in society without defending its understanding of our vocation and humanity against other views. As a result, it enters into conflict with rival religions.

The prohibition of the religious criticism of religion wins unwarranted philosophical support from the idea, characteristic of liberal political philosophy, that the institutions of society should be neutral among conflicting visions of the good and thus, as well, among opposing religious outlooks. No ordering of social life can achieve such neutrality; each one encourages certain forms of experience and discourages others. The illusory ideal of neutrality stands in the place of the related, but distinct, ideal of corrigibility: that a form of social life be

open to a broad range of experience and allow itself to be corrected in the light of experience.

When we ask ourselves whether the religion of the future can speak in a sacred voice and accomplish its aims within one of the salvation religions, we must confront a confusion as well as an inhibition. The confusion results from lack of both courage and clarity in addressing the difficulty ever-larger numbers of people experience in bringing themselves to believe in narratives of God's saving intervention in human and natural history. They want to believe, and deliver themselves to the sentimental will to believe. They believe as much as they can. They welcome whatever minimalist reinterpretation of their faith may enable them to continue to believe, with the least possible disturbance of their everyday realism.

Such a reinterpretation will pretend to represent a halfway house between belief and disbelief. It will translate the story of God's saving work and of his transactions with humanity into a series of secular ideas about our lives and our dealings with one another. Nothing offensive to reason will remain in the faith, once its narratives have been reinterpreted as an allegory of our secular commitments and aspirations. The believer nevertheless insists that the reduced or sanitized faith is more than a compendium of the secular pieties comprising the text of the reductive translation.

Jesus Christ, for example, was not literally God incarnate. Neither, however, was he just a man like you and me; he was a concentrated embodiment of divine energy. What, however, is divine energy? It is the activity of spirit that we find in our experience of transcendence and that we rediscover at work in evolving nature. It is nonsensical to suppose that we will be resurrected from the dead as the flesh and blood individuals that we are, settling once again into our organisms, once decayed but now reconstituted. However, death cannot be the end. An indescribable sequel awaits us. And so forth.

The hallmark of the halfway house between belief and disbelief is the attempt to escape the incredible without settling for an overtly secular humanism. The working assumption of this attempt is the belief that we can dispense with the fabulous without ceasing to be believers in an adjusted, less unreasonable sense. The problem is that once we begin to

translate the message of the salvation religion into naturalistic terms—terms that turn away from the scandals of reason (to which I next return)—there is no place to stop. There is no place to stop short of a view of the sacred narrative as an allegory of ideas and ideals that could just as well be stated without such a narrative.

Yet the pretense of the halfway house is that, after all the justified translation has been accomplished, something of the original story remains, something that we cannot treat as merely allegorical and to which a thoroughly naturalistic discourse fails to do justice. What is this extra something distinguishing the supposedly decoded religion from its rationalizing counterpart?

The equivocations of the halfway house could never have been rehearsed without help from theologians and philosophers. The canonical form of this help is the demythologizing pseudotheology of the twentieth century. Little separates a thoroughly demythologized Christianity from Feuerbach's account of the Christian religion as a doctrine of the self-construction of humanity that dispenses with a divine interventionist.

To appreciate why and how believers and non-believers alike should repudiate the halfhouse between belief and disbelief as a perversion of both reason and faith, it is important to distinguish it from a position with which it may easily be mistaken. If God speaks to mankind through his prophets, and even through the man-god, his son, the words of his message must be such that they can be grasped by men and women in the historical circumstances in which God speaks or appears. Other people, at other times, will need to reinterpret the message in the light of the changed circumstance and, in the manner of a classical jurist, hold the words to the spirit.

However, it is one thing to provide such a contextual interpretation and another to carry out the allegorical demythologizing of the religion in the spirit of an unequivocal naturalism. That God became incarnate in a human body is a belief that was at least as shocking and idolatrous to a Palestinian Jew two thousand years ago as it is to a sentimental half-believer today.

There are two major objections to the halfway house between belief and disbelief. Either of them is fatal. Together, they condemn the halfway house as apostasy in the eyes of a believer and as self-deception at the service of temporizing in the estimation of a non-believer.

The first objection to the halfway house is cognitive. It is dishonest and self-deluded. There is no real or legitimate halfway house. The halfway house is loss of faith disguised as faith within the bounds of reason. God's revelation is not self-interpreting because it was given and received in particular historical contexts. That which is due to the context must be separated, as best the believer can distinguish it, from what is instinct to the divine message. Nothing, however, can bridge the gulf between the world as it looks without God's revelation and his saving work and the world as it becomes and appears in the light of his creative presence and redemptive activity.

The second objection to the halfway house is practical but not, on that account, any less powerful than the first objection. Once the work of demythologizing is accomplished, its doctrinal residue will be found to be the conventional moral and political pieties of the age in which it was practiced. It is, consequently, superfluous. No one needs such a translation of the sacred voice into the profane one.

Both the sacred and the profane forms of the struggle with the world retain the potential to resist established arrangements and ideas. They could not otherwise have helped inspire the secular programs of democracy and romanticism that have aroused humanity over the last two centuries. Although the translation of the sacred voice into the profane one will seem plausible and persuasive to many, it will be embraced with relief only because it has an outcome that they already approve and await. It will attract no interest and exert no force if it claims that the redeemer simply prefigured the teaching of some contemporary moral or political reformer or anticipated the dogmas of our culture and the illusions of our age. A shared collective view must be there on the other side: the standards of good behavior embraced by the prudent and the worthy, the theoretical universalism, altruism, and egalitarianism of the political and moral philosophers, devotion to family and country, respect for the job—everything that the religion of the crucified God, received without the hemming and hawing of the halfway house between belief and disbelief, might better be thought to threaten and contradict.

Once we have set aside the confusions of the halfway house between belief and disbelief, we can face the chief objection to taking seriously the sacred voice of the struggle with the world and thus as well the

prospect of creating the religion of the future within an established religion such as Christianity. A radical reconstruction of the existing religion would be required: so radical that no one could know beforehand whether the result would continue to be seen as the same religion or as another one. The question remains, however, whether we can imagine taking the established religion as the point of departure for such a revolution in our spiritual life. Any affirmative answer to this question has to reckon with the scandals of reason.

The scandals of reason shadowing the salvation religion are, I earlier suggested, three: the scandal of supernaturalism, the scandal of particularity (a universal message attributed to a particular plot: the narrative of divine intervention and revelation in particular times and places), and the scandal of the incoherence or unintelligibility of the idea of God—at least of any version of that idea that can do the work required of it by one of the salvation religions. Consider these scandals of reason from the perspective of the argument against the halfway house between belief and disbelief and in Christian context. The point is to determine on what terms, or in what sense, someone who confronts these scandals can give them their due, without the equivocations of the halfway house, and nevertheless begin the required religious revolution within the confines of the established religion.

In the end, a gulf remains between the sacred and the profane paths to that revolution: a contrast of visions that is pregnant with consequence for the conduct of life. The persistence of such a chasm is the only sure way to know that we have not succumbed to the self-deceptive seductions of the halfway house and that we are not using an eviscerated faith to disguise a different faith or, more probably, a lack of faith.

The scandal of supernaturalism is the role that is played in the narratives of Christianity, as in those of the other salvation religions, by initiatives and events that defy the regular workings of nature: the causal connections and the laws that ordinary perception observes or that science discovers. Having created the world, God periodically intervenes in it. His interventions may suspend all regular causal connections as well as work through them. The power to interrupt or to change the normal workings of nature may occasionally be invested in partic-

ular individuals—saints—as a sign of their greater sharing in the life of God. The Incarnation, the virginal birth of Christ, and the resurrection of the body (beginning with the resurrection of the body of Christ) are all instances, within Christianity, of such supernaturalism. They are opposed to the rationalist or deist conception of a God who remains silently and passively apart from the workings of his created nature.

If we suppose that God is outside time, and that for him all moments in what we experience as time are an eternal now, there may be, from the standpoint of his higher intelligence, no such suspension of causality or of the laws of nature. For us, however, the efficacy of God's presence in the world outreaches, disturbs, or changes the relation of causes to effects in nature. This change is the distinctive feature of supernaturalism.

This lesser, more tangible supernaturalism of disturbance is enveloped within a greater supernaturalism: that which has to do with the existence of God, with the inner life of a triune God, and with the creative and salvific activity of this threefold divinity. For all these ultimate realities surpass not only our natural understanding but also the regular workings of nature such as we are able to observe them from our perspective as dying organisms, with limited sensory equipment.

We can go up to a point in giving a natural account of supernaturalism. Change changes. That the modes of change, as well as the types of being, change is a basic feature of nature, and one to which our conventional ideas about causality and the laws of nature fail to do justice. Far from being a tenet of scientific realism, the conception of a framework of immutable laws of nature underwriting our causal judgments is in fact a metaphysical superstition.

Over the expanse of the history of the universe, change changes discontinuously. New types of being emerge, and new regularities or laws develop coevally with them. In the early history of the present universe, nature may not have been manifest in the form of a differentiated structure, of distinct phenomena such as have come to be described by particle physics. It may have been impossible to distinguish between laws of nature and the states of affairs that they govern. There may even have been causality without laws: causal connection between the before

and the after as a primitive feature of nature rather than as an instance of general and recurrent regularities.

The supernaturalism that our natural understanding can accept is a super-naturalism, not an anti-naturalism. It freely recognizes the radical variability of nature and the inclusive reality of time. It affirms that there is nothing that does not change, sooner or later. It acknowledges that there is more in heaven and earth than is dreamt of in our philosophy.

However, although such a super-naturalism expands the bounds of our understanding of how nature works, it can never go far enough to accommodate the supernaturalism required to preserve the sense of the story of salvation, this side of the halfway house between belief and disbelief. An unbridgeable cleft remains between the super-naturalism that may be justified in natural philosophy and the supernaturalism that allows the creator of the universe and of its regularities to act, surprisingly, within the created world, in dereliction of its evolving regime.

No dialectic between observation and theorizing could ever reconcile us to such a supernaturalism. Only a tremendous event, possessing the power to recognize personalities and events that establish new orders of meaning and of experience, could produce such an effect. It is vision inspired by an encounter that lies at the heart of such epiphanies: coming face to face with a reality or a teaching that is felt to be irresistible.

The second scandal of reason is the scandal of particularity. It arises from the strangeness of the conveyance of a universal message by particular individuals at particular times and in particular places. Why did God assign a major role to the Jews in his plan of salvation? Why did he become incarnate as a Palestinian zealot in a minor province of the Roman Empire during the reign of Augustus? Why was the meeting of Judaism with Hellenism in the early history of this religion allowed to exert an influence out of all proportion to the confrontations among other cultures in other ages? Why did the human embodiment of God not take place earlier, to the spiritual benefit of the many dead who were denied the light, or later, at a time when the message might have been less likely to be perverted by compromise with Roman imperial power?

The plot is particular. The message is universal. The tension between the particularity of the plot and the universality of the message is com-

mon to all the salvation religions. It is aggravated in those—Christianity and Islam—that deny any special long-term part in the work of salvation to a segment of humanity by opposition to other segments.

Once again, we can go a long distance in providing a wholly secular account and defense of this attribution of a universal meaning to a singular plot. The narrative of salvation is organized around the points of inflection and rupture at which God breaks into human history and brings new tidings and new chances for experience to the human race. The personalities active at these turning points—the incarnate God and those whose lives he begins to touch in ever-wider concentric circles—are the authors of a new way of living and seeing. The events have a meaning that outreaches their immediate context.

We can understand this power of particular people and events to bear a universal message of salvation as the limiting case of a phenomenon pervasive in the historical experience of humanity. The revolutionaries, in our religious and aesthetic experience as in our political and economic life, are the ones who reimagine or remake some part of the established structure of thought or society and who offer us new conceptions of ourselves. The events have an exemplary significance; they open a path that other people, in other places and times, can follow. That they are situated and expressed in the language of that situation helps give them a force that no ungrounded string of abstractions could possess. They stand as concentrated statements of our power to reshape the institutional and conceptual presuppositions of life.

The tension between the context-bound plot and the context-transcending message has its ultimate basis in the dialectic of our natures as context-bound and context-transcending individuals. This conflict ceases to be an embarrassment, and becomes an opportunity, when it turns into an occasion for exemplary initiatives inaugurating new orders of thought or society.

The narrative of salvation, in Christianity, as in its sister religions, is not, however, simply about the creation of new regimes of thought and social life: new methods or new institutions. It does not concern simply the discontinuous character of structural change in our secular life of thought or cooperation. It speaks to the irruption of a force originating from beyond history—the inner life of the triune God—into historical time.

The founding agent was not simply an exemplary human being—a prophet or a miracle worker; he was God incarnate. The decisive events do not count chiefly as the enactment of a way of ordering our ideas or our relations to one another that we can then reproduce, by analogy, in other contexts. They are themselves the message: the offer of a sacrifice, the sacrifice of God in human form, that goes beyond all words. They are not so much exemplary as they are supposed to be, in and of themselves, world-transforming. They initiate another stage or level of God's saving presence in the world, not through the logic of example, extended by analogy, but through the direct action of God, maintained through the continuing presence of the Holy Spirit and the sacramental life of the Church. Doctrine, codified in the magisterium of the Church, is not the source and inspiration of the faith, but only its retrospective and reflected expression in belief.

There is a vast and immeasurable distance between these claims and the idea of exemplary individuals and events in history. Nothing can bridge this gap. The existence of natural and historical counterparts to the scandal of particularity fails to diminish its power to perplex and to disturb.

The third scandal of reason is the scandal of divine existence. It concerns the inadequacy and incoherence of the ideas of God that are available to the Christian as to the Jew or the Muslim. Of each of the candidates for the idea of God, we must say that either it is not intelligible or that it becomes intelligible only by losing its ability to perform the function that is assigned to it by the faith.

The idea of God as person is suggested by the narrative of salvation. In Christianity, it is made indispensable by the Incarnation. What no believer can grasp is how God can be both a person and a being radically transcendent over the world and therefore incomparable to any part of our finite existence.

The Christian theologian may respond to this dilemma by one or another variant of a doctrine of analogy. By the terms of such a doctrine, we can understand the transactions between God and humanity by analogy to the dealings among people. The reciprocal engagement of mankind and God in turn gives a deeper meaning to our experience of personality and of personal encounter and elicits a hope greater than any hope of moral and social improvement.

The power of the idea of God as person is to resonate with our insight into our most important attribute: our inexhaustibility by the conceptual and institutional orders that we inhabit. The defect of this idea, however, is to reduce the idea of God to the dimension of our experience and of our capabilities, as if God could be simply a bigger person, a Gulliver to the Lilliputians who we are. The view of God as person can never be wiped clean of the taint of an anthropomorphic projection. In this sense, it seeks to contain the infinite within the finite. It verges on idolatry.

The idea of God as being is free from this taint. It achieves this freedom, however, only at the cost of conflicting with the narrative of God's creative and saving work and of affirming the primacy of the impersonal over the personal. This narrative is not an accidental feature of the religion, a transposition of its message to the language of ordinary experience, the better to render the incomprehensible susceptible to understanding. On the contrary, it is the heart of the faith, if anything is.

Impersonal being cannot be the living God. It is the God of the philosophers, not the God of Abraham or of the New Testament. The embrace of the idea of God as impersonal being leads to one or another form of panentheism, if not of monistic pantheism. For the monist or the pantheist, God and world are one and the same. For the panentheist, God constitutes the world, or the world God, but God, as impersonal being, is the world plus something else. This something else may be imagined spatially and spiritually, as a reality that exceeds manifest nature. With greater force and plausibility, it may be represented temporally, as the yet unrealized and undetermined future of the world. All that now seems settled will be scrambled and transformed in the course of time.

Panentheism may be attractive to a mind that no longer knows in what to invest the sacred other than to invest it in the world, but that recoils from the overt reversal of the dialectic between transcendence and immanence—a dialectic informing the higher religions. Panentheism is, however, powerless to bring us to the promise of salvation that is central to the Christian faith. It cannot connect to the particular events that comprise, in this faith, the narrative of redemption: from the covenant with Israel to the advent, passion, and resurrection of the redeemer and the continuation of his work by the Church. This whole

story fades away, at the instigation of an impersonal idea of God, into a spiritual allegory that the residue of historical fact underlying it is unable to support.

There remains a third idea of God bidding for supremacy: God as non-person and as non-being: a God who is the ground of being because he is radical negation. Such is the idea of God that has always been attractive to mystics within Christianity as well as within Judaism and Islam. It is less a conception of God than it is a confession of our inability, as believers, to achieve any such conception. It borders on heresy: first, because it implies that the story of creation and of salvation, expressed as it is in the language of personal experience and encounter, must be given a meaning far from its literal significance, and, second, because the powerlessness of reason to parallel at least part of the faith in revelation leaves the message of salvation as an empty vessel that we can fill with whatever we will, as if the presentiment of our impending annihilation in a world that we are unable to comprehend could be displaced by the anticipation of a last-minute, unaccountable rescue.

The inadequacy or incoherence of each of these available ideas of God poses a fundamental threat to the faith. It places the believer's will to believe at odds with his understanding. It inverts the ontological argument for the existence of God, undermining grounds for belief in a (non) being who is not even thinkable. In natural science, we may find reason to believe in variations of reality that overstep the limits of our perceptual experience. However, we take our intellectual and spiritual lives in our hands when we fabricate an abstraction of which our own reasoning is unable to make sense.

We can nevertheless give the failings of these three ideas of God a naturalistic interpretation: one that goes some distance toward reproducing in a human-centered discourse a theocentric vision. Here as before, however, a chasm remains between this naturalistic understanding and faith in the living God. The compromises of the halfway house fail to overcome the divide. In such a naturalistic view, the idea of God represents a compressed and combined account of two distinct elements in our experience of life.

The first element informing our effort to conceive an idea of God is the recognition of our incompleteness. The irreparable defects in the human condition are such that we cannot overcome them and, by over-

coming them, make ourselves whole. Our groundlessness denies us any hope of founding our existence on a secure basis. Our insatiability condemns us forever to seek the infinite from the finite. Our mortality renders the search for the ground and for the infinite urgent and confronts us with the terrifying contrast between our unlimited fecundity of experience and the finality of our annihilation.

The second element informing the effort to invoke an idea of God is the appearance, in the midst of our distress, of the hope that our situation may not be as desperate and perplexing as it seems to be, and that, in a form that we may be unable to grasp, we will be brought to a greater life. By changing our conduct as well as our beliefs, we foreshadow that greater life in our ephemeral, defective existence.

These features of our natural experience create an opening for an idea of God. In no sense do they justify any particular version of that idea. Moreover, they admit of many other descriptions and interpretations that dispense with any notion of God. The problem for the Christian is not that they fail to select and to support a conception of God or that they do nothing to redress the inadequacy and incoherence of the three ideas of God that are available to him. The problem is that there is an infinite distance between these experiences of radical incompleteness and of radical hope and the unique claims of revelation and transformation that distinguish Christianity. A Christian must feel that he has come face to face with the living God through his confrontation with the revealed truth. He must envision, on the other side of the darkness of the world, a human face—someone who can share his concerns and participate in his life—but who is nevertheless the ground of all being.

It is hardly enough for the Christian to believe that we are not alone in the cosmos, as, by all the evidence of the senses, we in fact are. It is essential that the God who is our companion be open to sharing our life, even to the point of becoming embodied among us, so that we can more fully share in his life. This openness of his to us and of us to him must be realized through singular events, in particular times and places. These events represent an irreversible change in the human condition.

We can never attain such convictions on the strength of the twofold natural experience that I have described. We can achieve them only under the force of occurrences so overwhelming in their appeal that they command our assent and silence our doubts. They must bear

within themselves the marks of the transformative power that gives them authority.

To possess this power, such occurrences must both concern and exemplify the overstepping of the boundaries between the human and the divine: that is to say, our ability as the mortal, groundless, and insatiable beings that we are to reach beyond ourselves, under the shadow of death and absurdity, and to come into the possession of a life that if not eternal will at least be higher and greater. Such a life will give us by way of intensity what it lacks by way of eternity. It is not enough that the exemplary events of revelation and redemption provide us another way of representing these sufferings and aspirations. It is necessary that they supply a tangible token of our rise. Only then will they elicit faith in the message of salvation. Their salvific power will be manifest—to some—in their living out as well as in their effects. No subject, other than the crossing of the frontier between the human and the divine, would suffice to endow them with such power.

The mysteries of the Trinity and of the Incarnation show just how great is the leap in Christianity from those natural experiences to this improbable and burning faith. It is one thing to discern in the world, in the fashion of panentheism, a penumbra of reality and possibility to which our perceptual experience and our established ideas fail to do justice. It is another thing to subscribe to the formulas of the Nicene Creed about the triune God and the activity of each person of the Trinity. It is one thing to imagine an acceleration of the dialectic between transcendence and immanence, brought about by the action and teaching of inspired individuals and enabling us to make ourselves more godlike. It is another thing to believe that God appeared in Palestine as a Jewish holy man and heretic under Roman imperial rule. No demythologizing and allegorizing can diminish the distance between these beliefs.

The only response to the scandals of reason that has any chance of being effective is an unrefusable experience, of vision and of life. Like Luther, the believer must be able to say, “I can do no other.” That such an experience appears to overwhelm him will not protect him against the risk of staking his life on an illusion. It is part of the deal: an enduring characteristic of religion is to require a commitment of life for which the grounds always remain insufficient.

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The three scandals of reason fail to exhaust the preliminary and fundamental objections to any attempt to take Christianity (or Judaism or Islam) as a point of departure for the religion of the future. There is a further objection. It might be described as a fourth scandal of reason, except for the fact that it has an entirely different character. It is so familiar that we can easily mistake it for an inconsequential platitude. Its apparent subject matter is the psychology or sociology of belief rather than the justification of faith. Its implications for the truth of our situation, or for the incitements to hope, are oblique and obscure.

It nevertheless presents a difficulty that no one who takes one of the religions of salvation seriously can hope to escape. Engagement with this difficulty helps show the way and the sense in which Christian faith would need to be revolutionized if it were to serve as a launching point for the religion of the future.

It is a fact too obvious to be remarked, and too seemingly natural to excite curiosity, that the followers of the world religions—the religions generated by the religious revolutions of the past—usually hold their faith because their fathers and mothers held them, or because they live in a circumstance that makes the faith seem part of a person's identity and of his bond to his family, his community, or his nation.

To be sure, there are individuals who convert to another religion. There are missionary religions, especially Christianity, Islam, and their offshoots. Early enough in the history of these religions everyone was a convert. Nevertheless, in the established creeds, for almost as long as they have existed, the characteristic experience of the convert is that of joining a community of faith, the vast majority of the members of which belong to it because their parents belonged to it.

The exceptions to this fact are both few and limited. Many millions continue to move today from one branch of Christianity to another. Many other millions slide slowly from faith to half-faith and from half-faith to faithlessness. Those who move, however, move among and within religions whose membership is set by the accidents of birth, the influence of family, and the historical divisions of humanity.

No one would regard it as reasonable that our beliefs about how nature works be determined, or even influenced, by the convictions of

our parents. The psychology and the sociology of faith acquire epistemological significance; these facts demoralize any believer who is unwilling to enhance fantasy with self-deception. Insofar as a religion claims to offer a path to salvation open to all humanity, on the basis of the revelation and acceptance of fundamental and universal truth, it must not amount to a series of conventional practices and reciprocal loyalties for which a body of shared doctrines provides only secondary and accidental cement.

Yet after the earliest days of Christianity, the overwhelming majority of Christians, including the overwhelming number of Christian priests, saints, and theologians, were Christians because their parents were Christians and because they persisted in the faith of their forefathers. They were Christians in a world in which, beyond the frontiers of their countries, most men and women remained non-Christians.

The conflict between the claim to universal truth about universal salvation and the fact of hereditary influence must be acute in a religion that, like Christianity, severs all connection to national distinction and history and addresses, as the bearer of that truth, the whole of mankind. In such a religion, the subordination of faith to community and identity is sheer blasphemy: paganism and idolatry disguised as faith.

It is for this reason, before all others, that rationalists and skeptics who have lived in the civilizations on which the salvation religions set their mark have wanted to dismiss the claims of these religions to represent the only truth and the sole road to salvation. They have often tried to reinterpret the central teachings of the religion as circumstantial expressions of spiritual insights and commitments that can be given many roughly equivalent expressions in other circumstances.

Such a deflation of orthodoxy is, however, at war with the nature of the Semitic monotheisms. How can Christianity be just one way among many if God became incarnate only once and charged his followers with establishing one universal church and one sacramental life for all men and women? To accept the deflation of the faith recommended by the ecumenical rationalist is to exchange the house of faith for the half-way house between belief and disbelief.

There is, I later argue in this chapter, no solution to this problem—the problem of the actual subservience of religious conviction to the powers of family, society, and culture—other than a radical shift in the

terms of a Christian's understanding of the claims and content of his faith. Under the terms of such a shift, the problem may become part of a solution. Christianity could become a terrain for the development of the religion of the future only by turning into something other than what it is now.

Suppose that a person who has found light and guidance in Christianity has taken to heart the criticism of the struggle of the world and understood the reasons that argue for religious revolution now. He understands that the chief aim of this spiritual transformation is to enter more fully into the possession of life, or to achieve a greater life, not just later but right now, so that living for the future becomes a way of living in the present. He first wants to discover, however, whether this religious change can be accomplished if not within the bounds of his faith, at least with the materials that it provides. Anxious to free himself from error about what matters most, he has opened himself to the religious criticism of religion—of his religion—no matter how radical. He has determined to free himself from the hesitations of the halfway house; he will not be satisfied with an interpretation of his present or future religion that transposes its disturbing claims into the humanistic commonplaces of his time. He has faced, without lying to himself or seeking refuge in confusion and sloth, each of the scandals of reason committed by his faith. He has understood how his faith, once interpreted and refined, can be made less scandalous to reason. He nevertheless appreciates that it cannot cease to be scandalous without losing its grip on the vision and the experience that made it powerful in the first place. He has been sobered by reflecting on the influence of circumstance upon belief. This reflection has led him to persist in his spiritual search lest he allow his religious imagination to be ruled by the accidents of family, society, and culture and license the dead to govern the living. He will not abide such a perversion in this, the most encompassing part of his convictions: the part that connects his vision of our place in the world with his choice of a way to live.

He will then want to understand what in the past and present of Christianity serves, and what impedes, the needed religious revolution. Whether the religion that results will be seen as the old religion made new or as a new religion altogether is something that, reflecting on the

history of Christianity, of its relation to Judaism, and of its reformation, and of the faiths that it helped inspire, he knows himself powerless to tell in advance. He hopes that Christianity can itself become the religion of the future. But he hopes even more that the experience of this struggle may help men and women not just in the future, but also right now, become more human by becoming more godlike.

Such an attitude is a kind of prophecy. It is, he may have reason to think, more suitable to an experimentalist and democratic society than either the petrified religion or the formulaic secular humanism of today. It has at least the potential to change us and to help us invent a new form of life.

The believer who examines his faith in this spirit will need to cast his net widely, considering both the main line of Christian orthodoxy and the chief instances of heresy, schism, and insurgency, within the history of the religion. His aim will not be the systematic interpretation of the body of doctrine, in the manner of a theologian, an apologist, or a catechist. It will be to identify what in the traditions of orthodoxy and of heresy serves or defeats his revolutionary purpose. He dare not assume that the orthodoxy is the problem and the heresy the solution. If heresy, or reformation, in the traditional form it has taken in the history of Christianity were the solution, Christianity would already be the religion of the future.

Considered in this light, the main line of Christian orthodoxy presents two connected obstacles to the revolutionary cause. They have persisted throughout much of the history of the religion. The first obstacle is the compromise of the Christian faith, and of the Church as its agent, with the regimes prevailing in the societies in which Christianity has been believed and practiced. The second obstacle is the marriage of Christian philosophy, centered on God's dramatic intervention in history, with Greek philosophy, organized around the category of being.

As a religion of immanence and transcendence, Christianity must not leave society alone. It must have a proposal for the remaking of our earthly state and insist that the work of salvation begins in historical time. Unlike Judaism after the destruction of the Temple and unlike Islam, it cannot rely on a body of sacred law as a proxy for such a vision. The natural law-thinking of Christian theologians and jurists is no sub-

stitute for a system of sacred law: it is a philosophical speculation with no uncontroversial content and no intimate connection with the core of the faith. The commitment to particular requirements and prohibitions, such as those regarding the sanctity of life from the time of conception or the indissolubility of the sacramental bond of marriage, are far from presenting a comprehensive view of the form that our life in society should take. The social doctrine of the Church, as exemplified by the encyclicals of the Roman pontiffs or by the social gospel of the Reformed Churches, offers no reliable model of social organization. It has regularly veered between a defense of social and economic rights, bereft of the institutional machinery that would ensure their effective exercise, and an institutional blueprint, like the communitarian corporatism of the papal encyclicals of the interwar period in the twentieth century, that has been soon discredited and abandoned.

The antinomian element in Christianity, so close to the wellsprings of the faith, remains, however, a strength rather than a weakness. Antinomianism is intimately related to the conception of the person as situated and embodied spirit, transcendent over the institutional and conceptual frameworks that shape him and incapable of being wholly defined by his circumstance. For this reason, the antinomian impulse forms part of the path by which the Christian may seek to widen his share in the life of God. It safeguards the faith against the Hegelian heresy: the quest for a definitive structure of life and thought that is capable of accommodating all the experience that we have reason to value. It keeps us from using our appeal to such a structure as an excuse to avoid self-transformation. It gives practical consequence to the awareness of our radical incompleteness and of the permanent openness of historical experience to subversive insight and transformation. It helps account for the immeasurable influence of Christianity on the secular projects of liberation, political and personal, that have changed the world over the last few centuries.

Antinomianism nevertheless comes at a price. Just as the absence of a system of sacred law serving as a template for the organization of society protects the religion against the temptation to embrace a particular blueprint of social order, so too it denies the religion a ready-made foil by which to judge and challenge the existing secular institutions. The halakhah and the sharia supply a gold standard by which to assess

the merits of a social order, although they may do so at the cost of a form of idolatry—the law in the place of the spirit—suppressing the quest to find and establish structures, of society and thought, that respect and enhance our structure-defying powers.

As a community of faith and an organized religion, Christianity has struck two thousand years of compromises with a series of social regimes and forms of consciousness. These regimes and forms of consciousness, rather than the largely empty or misguided abstractions of the moral philosophers, have been the chief shapers of moral experience in all the societies and cultures in which Christianity has exercised a paramount influence. The feudal ethic of chivalry and the Victorian ethic of pious self-restraint and responsibility represent two examples, among many, of such a transaction between Christian faith and social order. In each instance, the faith enters into the order, softening its cruelties and raising its sights. In each, however, the order also enters into the faith, dulling its subversive and transformative power and committing it to arrangements that conflict with the tenets of the religion.

We have no example of the enactment of Christianity in society that has failed to take the form of such a settlement. Always and everywhere, the settlement has included the acceptance of the structures of class society. It has respected the established assignment of social roles as a basis for our obligations to one another. It has accepted the present form of the division of labor and the prevailing social order as the template for the discharge of our obligations to one another.

Nothing in such compromises, or in their consequences, can be reconciled with the core of the faith: in particular, with its view of the relation between spirit and structure and with its vision of the transcending powers by which the person shares in the life of God. The undoing of these deals—not just of one of them, but of all of them, that is to say, of the very practice of them—would amount to a momentous change in the character and presence of the faith. It would turn the antinomian impulse into a source of prophetic resistance rather than of the worldly prostration that it has too often served. Such a Christianity does not exist, and it has never existed, despite the many occasions in the history of Christian societies in which the faith has sparked collective movements of enthusiasm and insurrection and despite the counter-models

of social life and personal piety in which (thanks to monasticism and evangelism) the history of Christianity has been prodigal.

The fundamental issue at stake in this conflict between religious faith and social compromise is the extent of our hope to live in the world as who we really are and discover ourselves to be rather than as placeholders in a system of social classes and roles. If triumph over the experience of susceptibility to belittlement is, together with the overcoming of estrangement from life in the present, a major incitement to new religious revolution, then Christianity can vie to be the religion sought by that revolution only if it puts an end to this history of compromise and replaces it by another idea of politics. What such an idea might be I describe, in profane voice, in the next chapter of this book.

Just as Christianity has been compromised by society, it has also been compromised by philosophy. From very early in the transition from the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, Christianity was wedded to Greek philosophy and to the philosophical tradition that descends from the ancient Greeks. The marriage of Christian faith to Greek philosophy is not an accidental or peripheral feature of Christianity. Once Christianity had ceased to be the original teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, it took up with the Johannine and Hellenistic philosophy of the logos. Philosophy informed the orthodox view of the central mysteries of the Incarnation and the Trinity, as established by the early councils that set the path of orthodoxy. It guided the teachings of the most influential exponents of theological orthodoxy. Today we continue to have no clear purchase on what the Christian faith, purged of its translation into the categories of Greek philosophy, would be like.

The problem that this reckoning with Greek philosophy presents for Christianity is not confined to Platonism and to the Platonic demotion of the reality of time and of the significance of history. The problem lies, rather, in the more fundamental assertion of the superior reality and value of impersonal being over personality and personal encounter. What runs through the philosophical tradition that set its mark on Christianity, as it did on modern science, is the project of classical ontology: the effort to ground our understanding of the world in a basic and lasting structure. Such is the same view that we discover in the meta-scientific conception according to which the standard model of

contemporary particle physics represents a down payment on a comprehensive account of the fundamental and permanent structure of reality.

To find alternatives to the project of classical ontology, we need to go, in the history of Western philosophy, to some of the pre-Socratics or to a few of the philosophers of the modern West. We need to evoke the Anaximander who wrote: “All things originate from one another, and vanish into one another, according to necessity, . . . under the dominion of time.” Or we need to appeal to Pascal, to Kierkegaard, to Bergson, or to twentieth-century philosophers of action and personality, within or outside Christianity, like Blondel and Levinas. These have not been the philosophical tutors of Christian orthodoxy.

What is the place of the human person in the world as described by classical ontology? What room remains in such a world for the transformation of reality, from top to bottom, by means of the dramatic interactions between God and humanity? The influence of the program of classical ontology has persisted in the subsequent history of Western philosophy. It has often overshadowed and corrupted the expression of Christian faith.

For it is part of the metaphysical impulse of Christianity, as an expression of the struggle with the world, to affirm the inclusive reality of time and the ascendancy of the personal over impersonal being. No structural division of the world lasts forever. Moreover, it is not impersonal being but rather our dealings with one another as well as with those we have with God, conceived on the model of personal encounter, that represent, in this religion, the decisive events in the trajectory of mankind.

The compromise with society and the embrace of Greek philosophy—in particular, of the project of classical ontology—have overshadowed the evolution of Christian orthodoxy. They have done so to such an extent that no one can know for sure what Christianity without them would amount to.

They are nevertheless unacceptable: they work to undermine the integrity, and to suppress the efficacy, of the twin ideas that represent the most important legacy of Christianity to the religion of the future: the ideas of self and others and of spirit and structure explored earlier in this book. It is true that those ideas are also present in the kindred religions of Judaism and Islam as well as in the secular programs of personal or

political liberation. However, my topic now is the reformation of Christianity and its relation to the religion of the future. It is in the thought and art inspired by Christianity that those conceptions, although truncated and perverted, have achieved their fullest expressions.

Turn now from the main line of Christian orthodoxy to the long-lasting source of tension and movement within Christianity. We might call it the axis of heresy, except that it has been one of the sources of the religion in every period of its history, back to its very origin.

I am not speaking of the counter theology of mysticism, with its idea of God as non-being and non-person, its philosophical attachment to a speculative monism, and its attack on all structure and repetition as idolatrous death to the spirit. This element in the history of Christianity, as in the histories of Judaism and Islam, has always bordered on outright apostasy. In its conception of God, it turns the narrative of salvation into the allegory of the logos. In its antipathy to full recognition of the reality of time and of evolving structural distinction in nature, if not of the real of individual personality, it threatens to embrace the metaphysical program of the overcoming of the world. In its war against structure and repetition, it foreshadows what I called the Sartrean heresy (but might have labeled the heresy of the *via negativa*, which it shares with romanticism). What appears to be a campaign against routine is in fact, as Kierkegaard understood, a campaign against life, aggravating the estrangement from possession of the present that already taints the orthodox statements of the faith.

Rather the tendency to which I refer, as the chief source of tension and radicalization in the history of the religion, is the one that begins in Paul, continues through Augustine, receives a consummation of sorts in Luther and Calvin, and is explored comprehensively in the theologies of Schleiermacher and Barth as well as in the religious practice of latter-day evangelical Protestantism. It has accompanied the entire history of Christianity, as the shadow of orthodoxy. It would be strange to call it an axis of heresy because its founder, Paul, is regarded by many as the real author of the religion: the religion about the Son of Man, as distinguished from the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Yet if it is not heresy, it is the perennial source of schism, given that little time ever passes before the conventional Christianity of the organized churches is found

wanting by its standards. It therefore appears at the gate with the double face of orthodoxy and heresy.

Two large themes persist throughout the evolution of the religious thinking of these schismatics. The first theme is the priority of faith over reason: we cannot reason ourselves to salvation. We must be taken by storm; we must find ourselves, under the burdens of mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability, confronted with an assault of the divine on our natural experience.

The second theme is our radical dependence on the living and active God: our inability to lift ourselves up and to cure ourselves, by our own devices, of the wounds of death, darkness, and longing for the absolute. As the first theme is described by the formula of faith over reason, the second theme is represented as grace over works. Its psychological hallmark, however, is pure terror, followed by the discovery of a source of inexplicable and unjustified salvation.

The terror results from awareness of our haplessness, not simply with regard to the forces of nature, as was true of the religions that preceded the past wave of religious revolution, but with respect to the irreparable defects in the human condition, to which all the religions resulting from those revolutions respond. From this radical vulnerability, we can be rescued, if we are rescued at all, by a power external to nature and to all being. We call this power God.

The inscrutable character of his being, attested by the incoherence or inadequacy of all the available conceptions of his nature, imparts, however, to this rescue a character that remains for the believer as frightening as it may be joyful. It is gratuitous: it bears no correspondence to our merits. It is unfathomable: we have no hope of penetrating the sources of its bestowal. Who will be saved? What will it be like? What relation will our afterlife bear to the earthly life to which we are normally so attached and the approaching annihilation of which appears to us as absolute evil? Thus, the terror accompanying the experience of haplessness carries over to the expectation of the rescue, the waiting period, in which we spend our lives.

Consider what resources and impediments this running insurgency within the religion and this major influence on its development offer for the religious change discussed earlier in this chapter and the remainder of this book.

The first element of this counter tradition would need to be radically reinterpreted. The second element would require to be replaced by the extension of an idea drawn from the core of orthodox doctrine.

The part of abiding truth in the priority of faith over reason is the circumstantial character of religious conviction. That which represents the most demoralizing challenge to faith—that we ordinarily derive our beliefs from family and community, and that even when converted we are converted by the accident of an encounter with inspired teachers of a particular faith—would have to take on an altered meaning.

For the believer, the experience of revelation must bear the marks of its own authenticity and power. It must compel assent and, through action informed by assent, self-transformation. By its very nature, a religion—any religion, not just the Semitic religions of salvation—requires an engagement of existence for which the grounds must always seem insufficient. At the end of the day, a daunting disproportion remains between the weight of the commitment to live life in a particular direction and the fragility or contestability of the justifications for so momentous a choice.

Only a connection, arising out of love, could make up for the difference. Originally, at the beginning of the religion, this connection may be to the inspired founder or teacher and to the small circle gathered around him. Later it becomes to the community of the faithful, exemplified in the family, in the nation, or in part of the people. The voluntary convert, uninfluenced by the pressures of a mass option, will have heard the message manifest in the visionary teaching and exemplary action of particular individuals. The message must be embodied and become, for those who convey it as well as for those who receive it, a manner of love.

Suppose that we ask the believer, brought up from childhood to believe, or the convert, converted by dint of chance meetings to an alien faith, why he believes. If he is both candid and ardent, if his faith is no mere abasement before the idols of a tribe, he will answer as follows.

I believe because I loved and because I was shaken. I loved my family, my community, or my teacher and received from them or from him the implicit knowledge about great things as well as small ones that cannot be inferred from abstractions. It is not just that I belonged; it is rather that through belonging I came to believe. My belief found

confirmation in my experience of having come to a more vibrant state of being, not just in a promised future but right now.

If I am honest about the sources and character of my experience, I must acknowledge that I would likely have held different beliefs had I been born to different parents in a different time and place. The exclusiveness of the truth that I came to embrace matters less to me than its proximity and its power. If you ask me how it compares to the truth entertained by rival religions, I do not know. All I can do is to study them from the outside, to read about them in books, and to find out about them by hearsay, at a second remove. I cannot have of them the inner knowledge that I have of my own faith, unless another set of circumstantial influences and compelling encounters were to carry me in the direction of those other faiths.

What is sacrificed in this view of faith is its claim to exclusivity. It is not sacrificed because the believer replaces it with an ecumenical ideal based on the quest for a common religion standing behind the discrete world religions. (The sole element of truth in such a quest is the existence of a minimal shared core among the religions and philosophies representative of the three major approaches to life.) It is sacrificed because, in this account, the intensity of belief and the transformative efficacy of the faith thus embraced do nothing to validate belief in the exclusive truth of the faith. On the contrary, they cast doubt on the claim to exclusivity. For we know that a similar experience of compelling connection and transformative belief can happen, and has happened, by the countless millions, in the spiritual history of mankind, to believers in clashing faiths.

The claim to exclusive truth about God and the path to salvation is, however, intimately related to transcendent monotheism in all its versions, and, in particular, to the three Near Eastern religions of salvation. It is qualified, not abolished, only in Judaism: God's covenant with the Jews and his intervention in their history leave open the question of the status of the faiths of the gentiles, especially of those faiths—Christianity and Islam—that in addition to being themselves transcendent monotheisms are tied, by their history and their message, to the religion of the Jews.

The decisive weakening or outright relinquishing of the claim to exclusivity is thus no mere adjustment to the religion. It is a radical

change. It is only one of the radical changes that Christianity would have to undergo if it were to bid for the role of religion of the future.

The second element in the long-standing rebellion within Christianity—the idea of our unlimited dependence on God—would need more than reinterpretation and revision. It would need to be replaced. Surprisingly, the required replacement comes from the center of orthodoxy.

The idea of our limitless dependence on God is incompatible with the vision of any faith that wants men and women to become more human by becoming more godlike. It is not that it dissuades us from striving. On the contrary, as Weber and other sociologists of religion argued, the anguish of uncertainty about our own salvation can drive us into frantic action in the hope that our bustling will signal to us that we are among the elect.

Nevertheless, the view that this radical dependence on an inscrutable if loving God is the most decisive feature of the human condition diminishes the significance of our power to transcend and reshape context and, through such transcendence, to increase our share in some of the attributes of divinity. It cannot serve a religious revolution that takes as one of its points of departure the enhancement of life. It leaves us defenseless against the experience of estrangement from the present.

We must, indeed, cease to deny death, groundlessness, and insatiability. We must place uncomfortable truths in the place of lullabies, dispensing with consolation as a poor substitute for our ascent to a greater life. This reorientation arouses us from a diminished existence of routine and compromise. It opens the way to our ascent. The terror attending both the experience of unqualified dependence and the wait for our mysterious salvation undermines the ideas, and discourages the emotions, that such an undertaking requires.

At the heart of Christian orthodoxy, we can find the beginnings of beliefs that we would need to put in the place of the sense of radical dependence. We can find them not at the periphery of the faith but in the main line of the Christian theologians who from Athanasius (the chief author of the Nicene Creed) to Thomas Aquinas (the most influential arbiter of Christian theological correctness for centuries) and beyond have marked out the path of Christian orthodoxy. This idea is most often developed in the setting of the theology of Incarnation.

Whenever we find it expressed, we may be taken aback, for it seems on its face to be blasphemous.

For example, in his sermon on the Feast of Corpus Christi, Aquinas wrote: "Since it was the will of God's only-begotten Son that men should share in his divinity, he assumed our nature in order that by becoming man he might make men gods." Were it not for the worshipful language of the Christian preacher-theologian and the sense of untroubled orthodoxy in the ensuing discourse about the Incarnation and the Eucharist, we might suppose that we are reading from Feuerbach or Emerson rather than from Aquinas.

Had not Maximus the Confessor, writing six hundred years before this sermon was delivered, invoked neo-Platonism in the service of a theology of deification, which he—and many others—regarded as orthodox, and which later came to exercise a major influence in the Orthodox Christianity of the East? According to this view, there is an exchange of natures between God and man: if God becomes man by condescension, man becomes, and is called, God by grace.

What distinguishes the sacred from the profane voice in the development of this conception, expressed by Aquinas and foreshadowed by Maximus among many, is the teaching (based on revelation and experience) that our becoming gods is necessarily preceded, and made possible, by God becoming man. Becoming gods, if it is not to mean becoming like the gods of the Greeks and the Romans, untroubled by the want of the infinite, must mean sharing in the life of God. It must mean that we become present to ourselves only by becoming, and by being, more than ourselves. It must mean, to use the language of Nicholas of Cusa, that by becoming God, which is to say by partaking in his nature, we become identical to ourselves. If we remained only ourselves, we would continue to be separated from ourselves.

Now our becoming gods is not just some instantaneous and elusive transubstantiation that we undergo as the result of either grace or works. It is a struggle that begins in our arousal from a diminished existence of routine and compromise and that continues in the change of both self and society. The content of the change is presaged by the doctrines of self and others and of spirit and structure that were latent, but truncated, in the teachings of historical Christianity and of its sister religions. It would be given fuller effect through movement

in the personal and political direction that I next explore in this book.

So much the new Christian would share with the profane revolutionary. What distinguishes his position, to use the language of Aquinas's *Corpus Christi* sermon, is his conviction that men can become gods only because God first became man. It is also his belief that the transformation, which begins in historical time, continues beyond historical time, in a life whose nature is hidden to us but that we can nevertheless foreshadow in our earthly existence.

If the Christian ceases to believe in the divinity of Christ and to credit the promise of eternal life, inseparable from the self if not from the body, if he views Christ as simply a visionary teacher and exemplary agent, inspired by the closeness of his access to the divine, and if he dismisses the expectancy of resurrection as no more than a metaphor for our survival in the collective work of humanity, he has taken refuge in the halfway house between belief and disbelief. He has reduced his faith to an embroidering of beliefs that gain nothing from the allegorical surplus that he appends to it. His religion then becomes an evasion and declines into irrelevance.

If, however, he holds the line at this point, he continues to convey in a sacred voice a message irreducible to the profane version of the religion of the future. He claims to see (to use Karl Rahner's distinction) beyond the lesser hope of a change of life to the greater hope of life forever. He has renounced the claim of exclusive access to salvation without accepting the limits of a secular humanism. He has replaced the idea of our radical dependence on God with a view of our divinization, according to which we can become at once more human and more godlike without mistaking ourselves for God. This religion would be a religion distinct from the Godless version of the religion of the future that I explore in the rest of this book. But would it be Christianity?

No theoretical analysis can determine whether the religion resulting from these revisions would remain Christianity. It would, at the very least, amount to a radical reformation of Christianity, different in character, intention, and effect from the Protestant Reformation. Protestantism represented, among other things, a moment in the deepening of the Pauline and Augustinian tradition or counter tradition within

Christianity, with its affirmation of our radical dependence on revelation and grace. It maintained the intransigent claim of the faith to offer the exclusive path to salvation and affirmed that Christ is the definitive and sole incarnation of the living God. It persisted in the view, characteristic of all historical Christianity, that the overriding good lies beyond both biographical and historical time. Our earthly experience remains irretrievably broken despite the presence, in our minds and hearts, of sanctifying grace. What we undergo and accomplish on Earth can at best be a preparation and a prefiguring of a greater change, accomplished only after our lives on Earth are over. In all these respects, the religion defined by the changes discussed in the preceding pages would take another course.

Whether a religion remains the same religion or becomes another one after undergoing a radical revision is a question the answer to which has an irreducible residue of collective choice. The religious revolutionaries may choose or not to cast the changed religion as the continuation, or the re-foundation, of the religion that existed before. They may or may not succeed in gaining acceptance of their view from the community of believers. The analysis of theological propositions is powerless to prevail against the choice of that community. If the religion remains a living appeal to experience, it cannot persuasively be confined within a propositional scheme.

The religion of Jesus of Nazareth was, as best a scholar today can hope to discern, a movement led by a holy man and miracle worker within Judaism. It was directed to his fellow Jews. It held out, in the context of successive constraints and calamities suffered by the Jews under Roman rule, the expectation of a Kingdom of God, to be established in the near future. It taught, by narrative, parable, and precept, a way of life and a set of attitudes that it presented as intimately related to our hope of progress on this road to redemption.

Then, in the hands of Paul and others, the religion of Jesus was turned into a religion about Jesus. The formulas of Hellenistic philosophy were used to express the Christology of Incarnation and then, later, the mysterious dogma of the Trinity. What had been a movement within Judaism began to take the gentiles as its addressees. The moral precepts, so intimately related to an imminent eschatological future, were turned into a comprehensive vision of how to live, given the indefinite post-

ponement of such a future. The vision was adjusted to the realities of organization and consciousness in the societies in which the invented or reinvented religion exercised an influence at once powerful and relative. The codification of doctrine and the authority of an organized and established Church became the twin mainstays of the faith.

If we were to look at these two religions coldly, the religion of Jesus of Nazareth and the religion about Jesus of Nazareth, with an eye to their propositional content, viewed in the light of the contexts in which this content was produced, we would have trouble persuading ourselves that they were the same religion. Yet they were made into the same religion by the half-conscious choice of the faithful and of their Church.

The changed Christianity that I have explored in these pages may seem, for similar reasons, to be no Christianity at all. On its face, by the reading of propositions in context, it amounts to a different religion. Whether, however, it is the same or a different religion depends on a contest that has not yet even begun.

6

Deep Freedom

The Politics of the Religion of the Future

Political theology without God

No institutional form of the life of a people—that is to say, no law—can be neutral among social ideals or visions of the good. Every such order encourages some forms of experience and discourages others. The claim of neutrality in favor of a particular set of arrangements will always be found in retrospect to serve the entrenchment of a provincial and exclusive ideal and to inhibit our movement toward a greater life. Moreover, the false goal of neutrality helps prevent us from advancing in the realization of twin feasible goals: that the regime be open to a broad range of experiments in individual and social life and that, above all, it be maximally susceptible to correction in the light of experience.

Social ideals and visions of the good are inseparably connected with a view of who we are. Our fundamental ideas about ourselves and about our situation in the world share some of the characteristics of religion: they are at once descriptive and prescriptive. They form part of the process by which we come to commit our lives in a particular direction without ever having, for such a commitment, adequate grounds. One reason why politics is ultimately religious in its reach is that positions taken in the contest over our institutions and practices turn, ultimately or in part, on our ideas about ourselves.

It does not follow from the non-neutrality of a regime of social life with respect to conceptions of the good, and thus as well with regard to views of who we are, that a regime should or must be uniquely associ-

ated with one such account of the good or of human identity. Its arrangements, with their in-built biases in favor of certain forms of experience and against others, will characteristically be capable of being defended in the light of a certain range of such accounts. The range of views of the good and of human identity implied in one politically organized society will differ from the range of views of the good and of human identity embraced by other political societies.

Given the partial and defective character of all organized forms of social life, our interest is that no one institutional blueprint, and no one range of conceptions of the good and of human identity, be imposed upon humanity throughout the world. Our interest is also, however, that the concert of nations or of states impose limits, although wide limits, on the variations in forms of social life that can be allowed to exist. In the definition of these limits (conventionally described under the almost empty label “human rights”), we encounter all over again the same problem that we first faced in dealing inside a political society with the relation between its institutional arrangements and its presuppositions about the good and about human identity. Every way to formulate and to justify such limits requires us to think and to act in the name of beliefs about human nature and the human good. The range of the dialectic between ideals or interests and institutions and practices will now be more widely drawn, but it will nevertheless have limits. If it had no limits, it would have no meaning or value.

From where are these limits to be inferred? We cannot answer this question from first principles, or infer an answer from the system of a philosopher. We can answer it only in the light of living experience. The revolutionary ideas of democracy and of romanticism—the secular arm of the struggle with the world—have aroused humanity in every corner of the globe. They have shaken the whole world in the name of an idea that is also a hope: the power of every individual man and woman to exceed their circumstance and to share in a greater life. From this idea, there results, I argue in this chapter, a series of consequences for the practical organization of social life.

The idea is nevertheless religious at its core. To say that it is religious, in light of the way in which I have defined religion, is to affirm that it is contestable and contested: despite its unrivaled authority, this view of who we are and can become remains at war with other living

conceptions of our good and of our identity. To say that it is religious is also to recognize the disproportion between the disputable reasons to embrace it and the decisive consequences that result from its adoption.

If no social regime can be neutral among accounts of our humanity and of our good, with the result that politics must be ultimately religious, no religion that finds inspiration in the motives and goals discussed in the previous chapter can abandon society to its own devices. Three forces, above all others, work to give any such religion a political content.

The first force is the effort to deepen and to radicalize the dialectic of transcendence and immanence that has been the hallmark of all the higher religions, representative of the three orientations to existence discussed earlier in this book. From the standpoint of this dialectic, the social regime—the formative institutional and ideological structure of a society—matters both because it helps make us who we are and because it must not be allowed to have the last word over what we can become. It must enable us to make a practical success of social life. It must, however, also permit us, indeed encourage and empower us, to reinvent every piece of its institutional arrangements and ideological assumptions.

The second force is the demand to establish such arrangements and assumptions on a basis acknowledging the truth about our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability. The reverse side of our powers of resistance and transcendence is our ineradicable finitude and ignorance, our condemnation to death, and our longing for an absolute that we cannot possess and incessantly project onto unworthy objects. The political consequences of such an acknowledgement are no less momentous for being in the first instance negative. No regime can claim to be authorized by the ultimate ground of existence (because there is none that we can grasp), or to count on the patience of the deathless (because we are not they), or to trade on our contentment with particular advantages and roles (because no advantages and roles suffice to the beings that we are).

The third force is the revolutionary idea of our individual and collective escape (without the illusions and perversions of Prometheanism) from the evil of belittlement, falsely mistaken for an irreparable flaw in the human condition: the enhancement of life now, rather than in a historical or providential future from which we remain estranged. The political transformation of society is not the whole of the overcoming

of estrangement and belittlement. It is only a part. However, it is a part that changes, for better or worse, all the other parts.

The topic of this chapter is the meeting of politics and religion, viewed from the perspective of religion rather than from the vantage point of politics, which is the standpoint from which it generally has been viewed in the history of Western political thought since Machiavelli and Hobbes. Instead of asking what politics should do with religion, as they and most of their successors did, I ask what religion, the religion of the future, should do to politics. Such a political theology, or anti-theology, begins in a religious conception: the conception of a free society. The religious revolution for which I argue includes a political revolution.

Conception of a free society

A free society is a society whose arrangements express and honor the truth of personality as embodied spirit, situated and transcendent: the truth upheld in one measure or another by all versions of the struggle with the world and developed more radically by the religion of the future. No conception of a free society is definitive or all-inclusive. Any one conception reflects the limit reached, at any given moment in history, by the dialectic between our self-understanding and our actual or imagined institutional experiments.

By the light of the conception of a free society that our place in the history of thought and of institutional practice makes possible, our inherited views of freedom are fragmentary and incomplete. They express both a limited view of what society can become and a limited insight into ourselves. As always, the limits of the institutional imagination and the limits of our self-understanding reinforce each other.

For example, the classical liberal idea of freedom, developed in the course of the nineteenth century and inspiring even now many of the secular projects of social and personal liberation, combined an ideal of individual empowerment with a program for the institutional reconstruction of society. Both the program and the ideal are defective. The program put unwarranted trust in a particular system of private and public rights—a way of organizing the economy and the state—that has proved to be an insufficient safeguard against oppression and an inadequate basis

on which to develop our individual and collective powers. Its mistake was not simply to have chosen one institutional formula rather than another; it was above all to have committed itself dogmatically to any such formula. Moreover, the ideal of individual empowerment to which this institutional formula was wedded remained too closely modeled on a narrow aristocratic ideal of self-possession to serve us as a guide to achievement of a greater life.

Nevertheless, this classical liberal marriage of an ideal of empowerment with a program for institutional reconstruction represents a better model of what we need now than what has followed it in the history of political thought. It has been largely succeeded by a series of philosophical props to institutionally conservative social democracy. These props suffer from lack of institutional vision of any kind, other than the unacknowledged acceptance of the social-democratic settlement of the mid-twentieth century as the unsurpassable horizon of our transformative projects. Their commanding impulse is the speculative justification of what later in this chapter I call shallow equality: greater equality of circumstance to be achieved, in the absence of institutional reconstruction, by compensatory redistribution.

A simple way to describe the task of developing the conception of a free society is to say that it seeks to go on from where the classical liberals and socialists left off. The aim must be to reject their institutional dogmatism and to revise, in the light of the subsequent history of thought and of society, our hopes for the future. In so doing, we teach ourselves to hope for more, rather than for less, as we have been persuaded to do by those who have lent the prestige of philosophy to the interruption and containment of the struggle with the world. Such an effort retakes with redoubled force the determination of the liberals and socialists of the nineteenth century to marry the vision of a greater life (to which they subordinated the quest for greater equality of circumstance) and the commitment to change, for the sake of that vision, the institutional structure of society.

The following outline of the conception of a free society should be read in the context of my subsequent defense of a direction of institutional change.

Consider first the conception of a free society by the light of its implications for the relation of the self to the structure of society, and then for

the relation of the individual to other people. In each of its aspects, the conception describes a limit or an ideal that acquires greater meaning through the demarcation of a pathway of institutional change leading toward it.

By the structure of society, I mean the institutional and ideological presuppositions that shape the routine practices, conflicts, and transactions in that society, and that are largely taken for granted, even to the point of being invisible, as if they were part of the nature of things. In a free society, this institutional and ideological framework does not present itself as an alien fate beyond the reach of the transformative will and imagination. It is set up in ways diminishing the distance between the moves by which we operate within it and the moves by which we change it. In this way, it appears to us untainted by any misleading patina of naturalness and necessity. It shows as the flawed and revisable collective construction that it really is.

As the structure renders itself accessible to the reach of the transformative imagination and will, it wanes in its power to shape what comes next. The freer a free society becomes, the weaker the power of the dead over the living.

In a free society, the individual has the educational equipment, as well as the economic and political occasion, to cross the frontier between the activities that take the framework for granted and those that bring it into question. He has been educated in a way that enables the mind as imagination to become ascendant over the mind as machine. He has learned to philosophize by acting, in the sense that he recognizes in every project the seed of some great or small reformation. The practices of society and of culture multiply opportunities for the affirmation of this preeminence of the mind as imagination over the mind as a formulaic device.

He is secure in a haven of protected vital interests and of capability-generating endowments—above all, those of original and continuing education—that enable him fearlessly to face innovation and instability in the social and economic world that he inhabits. His sense of identity and of security is not invested in the permanence of a particular form of collective life.

He does not act or think at the behest of a social or cultural script that assigns him a role and tells him how to perform it. He recognizes

that the performance of roles gives rise to expectations and obligations, but none so weighty that they automatically trump loyalties to people or devotions to tasks. Roles are to be sometimes used and sometimes bent and stretched, so long as this bending and stretching not result in betrayal of individuals.

His life chances are not determined by the hereditary transmission of economic and educational advantage through the family, that is to say by mechanisms that reproduce class society. Equality of respect and of opportunity is sacrosanct. Inequalities of circumstance are outlawed to the extent that they either arise from inequalities of respect and of opportunity or result in them (as universally happens in a class society). Similarly, they are prohibited if they either reflect or reproduce privileged strangleholds on the political, economic, or cultural resources with which we define the future within the present. No free society can have a class structure. An especially poisonous form of such a structure is one that relegates a group of people to a degree of absolute poverty or relative deprivation that not only undermines equality of respect and opportunity but also destroys the practical conditions of self-reliance and self-construction.

An insult more subtle but no less dangerous to freedom results from the worship and rewarding of exceptional talents and natural endowments that already find powerful incentives in their own use. It is a species of power worship that, disguised as practical necessity, recoils on its supposed beneficiaries as well as on its manifest victims—all the others—and jeopardizes the inclusive cooperation on which a free society depends.

These commitments and constraints are compatible, in a free society, with significant inequalities of circumstance. It is a greater life for all, an enhancement of vitality diffused among many, that a free society seeks, not a lesser life rendered palatable by insistence on a rigid equality of result. Any metric by which we could claim to judge the allowable degree of inequality compatible with this conception is fanciful.

The standard is not that we tolerate only as much inequality as can be justified by greater wealth for all or for some, the most disadvantaged. The standard is the effect of the inequality, given the historical context in which it arises, on the capacity of the society to outdo itself, in every domain of its life. It does so by disengaging cooperation from the stranglehold of any entrenched scheme of social division and hierarchy. It does so as well by developing a structure of public beliefs and institu-

tional arrangements that has the best chance of mobilizing and developing everyone's talents. Such a structure does not sacrifice these lasting moral and material interests to any short-term advantage of entrenched inequality, whether represented in the language of economic incentives or in the language of coercive extraction (on the basis of inequality) of an economic surplus. In developing arrangements of this kind, we affirm our determination to seize on the kinship between our material interest in the plasticity of social arrangements and our moral interest in the overcoming of belittlement, by the many as well as by the few.

In its view of the relation between the individual and other people, the conception of a free society requires that the individual not be subject to any form of coercion by others, either directly at the hands of individuals or indirectly at the hands of a state acting as their instrument. (A single-minded focus on oppression by the state, in contrast to many other forms of belittlement, has been a hallmark of many conceptions of a free society.) A free man or a woman is not to be coerced materially or spiritually. His or her humanity-defining attribute of transcendence is to be respected and encouraged at every turn.

In a free society, economically dependent wage work is understood (as the liberals and socialists of the nineteenth century saw it) as the temporary and defective compromise that it is. It gives way, increasingly, to self-employment and cooperation, separately or combined, as the superior forms of free labor. As soon as the relative wealth and technological and scientific advance of society permit, no person is required to do the repetitious work that is properly consigned to machines. We use machines, in such a society, to do everything that we have learned how to repeat, so that the whole time of our lives can be reserved for the not yet repeatable.

Cooperation in a free society requires neither sameness nor inclusive agreement. It is energized by difference and disagreement. Differences are less the problem than they are the solution, because they generate the material on which the selective mechanisms of economic competition and organized political rivalry can operate. The differences that we create matter more than the ones we inherit and remember; prophecy counts for more than memory.

It is only through its extension into real or imagined institutional experiments that the conception of a free society gains detailed content

and meaning. We should not regard the institutional work as if it were simply the translation of ideas and goals into a design: an instrumental social engineering. It is by virtue of such work that we develop our ideas about the future of society, including the ideas summarized in this conception of free society. It is by confronting the choices between alternative ways to realize, in institutional form, our recognized interests and professed ideals that we uncover the ambiguities in our commitments and define what we really want.

There is no unique justification of the conception of a free society, and no method by which we can pretend to infer its content from supposedly weaker premises, having smuggled that content into these premises in the first place. The idea of a free society can be justified from the bottom up and from the top down.

From the bottom up, its justification lies in the power of the practices and institutions that it informs both to realize and to change our present understanding of our interests and ideals. It is justified to the extent that it changes our understanding of our ideals and interests in ways that give them more of a future and that place them in more direct communion with our most powerful aspirations and anxieties.

From the top down, the basis of the conception of a free society is the revolutionary orthodoxy of the struggle with the world. We come to such a conception when we are converted to the beliefs about who we are that this approach to the world proposes, recognize that these beliefs have implications for the reordering of social life, and rebel against the compromises and equivocations that now circumscribe their enactment and hollow out their meaning. The adherent to such a conception is a person for whom the prevailing, inherited forms of these beliefs are not enough: not enough to keep the message of this approach to existence alive by making it live in our actual experience of social life.

The religion of the future turns this attitude into a comprehensive view of our identity and vocation. In so doing so, it lends further support to the conception of a free society that I have just outlined. The value of this support is, however, qualified by the ineradicable contestability of any such comprehensive view.

It has been a continuing theme of this book that our commitment to any approach to the problems of existence (the overcoming of the world, the humanization of the world, and the struggle with the world

first among them) can enjoy no definitive justification. Its demands always exceed, immeasurably, its grounds for making them. It says, "Follow me." It can never give a conclusive reason to do so. All that it can do is to make an incomplete argument and a defeasible appeal. It cannot escape the circularity in all our large-scale transformative projects: for better or worse, each of them is a partly self-fulfilling prophecy. If it is embraced and if it works, it remakes part of experience in its image.

The conception of a free society and the religion of the future from which it may draw energy and authority are no exception to this rule. They are by their very nature endeavors that ask to be judged by the form of life and the type of humanity that they make possible.

The contestability of every approach to the world has the political consequence stated at the beginning of this chapter. No ordering of social life can claim to be neutral with respect to social ideals, conceptions of the good, or visions of humanity. No such ideal, conception, or vision can claim to be definitive. We cannot even be sure that it serves as a guide to the best direction. This fact is one of the foundations of the sacrosanct right of apostasy as well as of the pluralism of political forces, which the political arrangements of a free society must be organized to uphold.

The comprehensive conception of a free society that I have here outlined may give way to yet more expansive and ambitious views of freedom than the one that it embodies. There will be other, more limited views of freedom, emphasizing some aspects of that conception but disregarding or even dismissing others. The public culture of a free society benefits from such disagreement as well as from opposition to its most basic and pervasive intentions.

By virtue of such a divergence and contest of views, the conception of a free society becomes subject to a two-part test of its power and authority. The first part of the test is that, despite this diversity of more comprehensive and more limited conceptions or because of it and notwithstanding the defective character of its institutional enactment, it become second nature to the majority of ordinary men and women. It must prevail, in its appeal and influence, over those who reject it root and branch. The second part of the test is that the broader and more radical versions of the idea of freedom come to predominate, in the public culture of the society, over the more fragmentary ones. Such a

path of deepening in our hopes is what the religion of the future seeks and what it expects.

Four principles

The task now is to formulate and to justify the principles that should govern the political commitments of the religion of the future and inform the organization of a free society. It is to understand the practical implications for political life of the overlap between religion and politics, made manifest by the central role in politics as well as in the religion of a conception of human nature that is both descriptive and prescriptive. It is to see how we can establish our freedom rather than establishing our religion, but establish it in a manner that remains faithful to the twofold truth of transcendence and of groundlessness. It is to discover how we can best preserve and enhance the openness of political life to the future once we have abandoned the mirage of an institutional order that is neutral among clashing social ideals and among conceptions of humanity.

I address this task by stating and defending four principles. Together, they mark out the ground on which a freedom-preserving democracy can be reconciled with the beliefs central to the religion of the future, without reliance on the illusory attempt to establish institutional arrangements neutral among conceptions of the good.

These principles rest on two distinct types of justification. The first order of justification is the force of the ideas about who we are and what we should become that have been developed, in different ways, by the religions of salvation and by the secular programs of romanticism and democracy. Those ideas have demonstrated their force by their unexhausted fecundity: their power to penetrate and transform every aspect of our experience, to overthrow the conceptions that were until then ascendant in the high cultures of all the great civilizations, and to excite in every quadrant of the globe the impulse of revolution. This test of experience, met across a broad range of societies over many generations, is a vindication of the ideas that has more weight than do speculative arguments and attempts to mimic in philosophy the methods of natural science and mathematics.

The second order of justification of these principles is the broad range of the practical, moral, and spiritual interests served by the form of political and social life that they support. Even before discussion, later in this chapter, of the distinctive institutional attributes of this form of life, its most visible and pervasive characteristics should stand clearly in view. These characteristics suggest the range of those interests. They include the relative deliquescence of the fixed institutional and conceptual structures to which we habitually surrender; the imprint onto ordinary life of that level of aroused striving and engagement that we expect only in the midst of great crisis; and the tapping of all the sources of inspiration and challenge, beginning with religion, that classical liberalism and secular humanism have so zealously wanted to exclude from democratic politics. To recognize what is at stake in the commitments represented by these principles is to acknowledge both the religious character of politics and the political implications of religion.

The high-energy democracy that here is foreshadowed, with its diminishment of the dependence of change on crisis and its relativizing of the contrast between the ordinary moves we make within a framework taken for granted and the extraordinary moves by which we change pieces of the framework, is the political counterpart to the moral idea of enhancing the good of life. By deepening democracy, we continue our ascent, broaden the range of the near possible, and deal with our mortality and our groundlessness in a fashion that rests on no illusion. We solve, in the only way in which it can be solved, the problem of our estrangement from the present. We do so by establishing arrangements that give us a better chance, right now, of exercising our power to live, to think, and to feel without regard to any formula imposed on us by the social roles that we perform and the society and culture to which we belong.

The preeminence of the principles that I next discuss has a particular historical setting. This setting amounts to an aspect of the same situation that calls for a religious revolution. For Machiavelli and Hobbes, writing in the early modern period in Europe, the foremost issue of political life was social union and civic conflict. They saw conflict as both a threat to union and an instrument of union. The first task of the state was to deliver men and women from death at one another's hands and to impose an order on the ever-renascent disorder of social life.

Internal peace and union have now largely ceased to be the central problem of politics, save in an exceptional condition. The exception occurs when civic life is poisoned by the form of ethnic or national conflict that has become characteristic of our time: the rage of an empty will to collective difference, made all the more violent and intransigent by the fading of actual difference.

The problem that was central for those thinkers nevertheless persists in a special and more terrible form: a contradiction in the political development of humanity. Humanity can develop its powers only by developing them in different directions. Not only is there is no incontestable social regime, there is also no self-evidently justified form of a free society (a fact explored by the second of the four principles). The existence of separate states, or of separate blocs of states, is of immense value to humanity; the state represents the political shield of the formation for a distinct form of life. No world government, designed as a federation, would ever guarantee the divergence of forms of life as fully as can the existence of separate states.

These states, however, are armed. Their sovereign power to enable radical divergence is just the reverse side of their ability to wage war. The combination of radical difference in the forms of life—including the forms of a free society—with universal peace—the suppression of war—is therefore a fundamental requirement for the moral development of humanity. This combination requires a world political and economic order that does not make the peaceful engagement of a state in the global regime depend on the acceptance of any institutional formula, even any blueprint for the organization of a political democracy, a market economy, or a free civil society.

If economic openness and political security are made to depend on the submission of nation-states to such a formula, then the state, if it cannot or will not opt for isolation, will have to choose between surrender and war. The global political and economic order must be established on the basis of a principle of institutional minimalism: it must allow for the maximum of engagement with other states but exact only the minimum of restraint on the institutional arrangements of national society. Institutional minimalism makes it possible to reconcile divergence with peace.

As internal conflict and union cease to be the central problems in political life and the threatened contradiction between peace and di-

vergence is dissolved, the overriding task of the political life of a people changes in content. It becomes to fulfill the distinctively political conditions for the development of a greater life: not just for an elite of the advantaged or the gifted but for the mass of ordinary men and women. Democracy ceases to be solely the government of the many qualified by the rights of the few and becomes the master practice by which we create the new and loosen the grip of the established institutional and ideological settlement on how we can live and what we can do.

The four principles stated and defended in the following pages mark out the ground of a free society under the light of the religion of the future. In so doing, they describe, for men and women who have understood that politics is ultimately religious and that the better religion is also political, how politics and religion are to be connected.

The principle of apostasy

The first principle of political life, viewed from the perspective of the religion of the future, is the safeguarding of apostasy: that it is to say, not only of dissent from the religion of the future but also of vehement opposition to it.

Once we abandon the unrealizable and self-defeating goal of the neutrality of a political order among conceptions of the good and ideals of humanity, we must ask ourselves how we can avoid turning the visions and ideals informing the regime into an established religion. It is not enough that the citizens be free to defy these enacted assumptions. They must be free actively to oppose them, by collective as well as individual action. The sole acceptable restraint on the exercise of this prerogative is the exclusion of violence and civil war. There are three reasons to safeguard the privilege of apostasy.

The first reason is to recognize and honor, in the organization of political life, the dialectic of transcendence and engagement that helps define our humanity. We cannot become more human by becoming more godlike if we find entrenched in the arrangements of society a social ideal that we cannot attack. We would have to be able to distinguish institutional arrangements, susceptible to criticism and change, from an idea held above criticism. We can make no such distinction.

The law is the institutionalized form of the life of a people, understood and elaborated by reference to the understandings of the ideals and of the interests that make sense of it. If the rejection of the ideal of the neutrality were not to be accompanied by the safeguards to apostasy, those would be right who fear that the failure of neutrality would undermine freedom.

The second reason to ensure the prerogative of apostasy is to guarantee that the regime can be corrected. Only the internal enemies of the established order can guarantee its corrigibility, for it is they, and they alone, who can subject it to radical, not just superficial, opposition.

Corrigibility is not a minor attribute of the regime; it is one of its most important features. Its centrality results from awareness of the deficient and ephemeral character of every institutional design. The protection of apostasy is thus closely linked with the integrity of a free society: its continuing power to renew itself, the better to create the new.

The third reason to shield the prerogative of apostasy has to do with the relation that, under the guidance of the religion of the future, we should desire to have with the institutional order of our society. This third reason combines the view of the self, underlying the first reason, and the value placed on the corrigibility of institutions, crucial to the second reason.

We must reject the Hegelian heresy, with its attempt to treat a particular institutional scheme as the definitive home of embodied spirit and as the consummation of history. The apparent alternative to this mistake then becomes to treat all regimes as so many historical provincialisms. We must, according to such a view, choose one of these provincialisms and improve it by whatever standards our experience and our education make available to us. We cannot hope cumulatively to change the relation between the self and the institutional or conceptual structures that it inhabits.

If, however, we can transform the character as well as the content of such orderings of social life, seeing them for the revisable collective constructions that they are and rendering them open to challenge and revision in the midst of our ordinary business, then the prerogative of apostasy from the principles of the regime becomes sacrosanct. For it is only by the persistence of conflict and controversy over the fundamentals of the regime that we are able to keep forcefully before us the para-

doxical task of developing structures of life and of thought suitable for a being to which no structure can do justice.

Consider now the practical content of the privilege of dissent from the regime as well as from the visions and ideals supporting it. Part of the content of this prerogative is the right not only to criticize the regime and to attack its spiritual foundations but also to act against it by every form of individual and collective action short of violence and civil war. It is not good enough to require loyalty to the constitutional arrangements while professing to allow vigorous criticism of its assumptions. The assumptions matter because they are embodied in the arrangements. The arrangements are understood and defended in the light of the assumptions.

Rules deserve no loyalty; only people merit loyalty. To require loyalty to the constitutional rules or to any other impersonal norms is to invade the inner sanctum of the personality the better to commit an act of idolatry: the projection on a transitory and flawed form of organization of the reverence that we owe only to the thing itself: the living, suffering, transcendent, and situated person.

It is not enough to protect apostasy negatively. It is also desirable to equip a dissident consciousness with the practical means with which to sustain a form of life and to advocate its virtues, including access to the means of mass communication. Federalism should be stretched to allow different parts of the country or sectors of the society to develop counter models of the social future. These affirmative instruments must, however, be subject to two vital qualifications.

A first qualification is that the dissident group not be allowed, in the name of its distinctive vision, to oppress its members or to deny them, as children, the public education that can empower them to rebel against the community or the faith in which they happen to have been born.

A second qualification is that the individual be free to escape to another country, constituted in a different way, on the basis of different understandings. Thus, the division of the world into independent states is not only a condition for the development of the powers of humanity; it is also an indispensable safeguard of freedom. It may, however, lead repeatedly to war, the danger of which is mitigated by the institutional minimalism that I earlier described.

The radical protection of apostasy that these arguments and proposals express may seem too extreme to be compatible with the stability of a political order and with the cohesion of a society. In fact, a regime that cannot withstand such a challenge and prosper in the midst of its unarmed internal enemies is not worth saving. In committing ourselves to the protection of apostasy we make a double bet. We gamble that dissent and innovation go hand in hand and that innovation is the most important condition of worldly success. We also venture that, once enjoyed, the benefits of a greater freedom, developed for the sake of a greater life, will prove to be irresistible.

Here is an example of the content and the complications of the commitment to safeguard apostasy from the non-neutral ideals animating the order of a free society. It is the example of the Indian tribes that continue to live, sparsely, in the Brazilian Amazon, now in this first half of the twenty-first century, in widely differing degrees of assimilation and isolation.

The state reserves large tracts of land to the Indian peoples. In the name, however, of the preservation of their cultures, they are regularly denied economic and educational opportunity; its forceful provision by the central government is feared as a threat to their collective identities.

The administration of policy toward the Indians has traditionally been assigned to anthropologists, who have succeeded the priests of earlier historical periods as the chief specialists in Indian matters and the most committed non-Indian defenders of Indian interests.

The main line of anthropology represents a heresy within the civilization of the West: a tendency of thought in conflict with the major assumptions of the struggle with the world. According to this heresy, the chief protagonists in world history are not individuals; they are cultures organized as distinct forms of life and of consciousness. The identity of the individual and his supreme moral interests are inseparable, according to this view, from the preservation of these cultures.

The Indians—say these heretics—subscribe to a theology of immanence and to a pragmatics of sufficiency. The theology of immanence is another name for paganism: the worship of a natural world that both terrifies and entrances us. The pragmatics of sufficiency is the disposition to work only as much as is necessary to ensure a customary standard of life, with no impulse toward relentless accumulation and no

effort to accelerate the dialectic of self-transformation and world transformation. It is the thesis of the heretics that a form of life and of consciousness marked by these features is as worthy of preservation as any other, and that its disruption in the name of individual autonomy and empowerment amounts to an impermissible assault against a version of human life deserving permanent protection. The chief obligation of the republic with respect to the Indians is, by the light of this doctrine, to leave them alone.

It does not require the religion of the future to denounce this view of the Indians, of their material and moral interests, and of the obligations of a free republic with regard to them. The rejection of this heresy and of its practical consequences for the grant of rights is demanded by every version—sacred and profane—of the struggle with the world. The Indians should not be coerced, either as collectivities or as individuals, to abandon the theology of immanence and the pragmatics of sufficiency. Neither, however, should they be denied the means with which to rebel against their cultures and to change them. If we insist on such means for ourselves, we are not entitled to deny it to them.

No grown-up human being in possession of his faculties should be treated as a child. No culture—including our own—has more than relative and ephemeral value. We become ourselves by turning the tables on the institutional and cultural context that has shaped us. We need the economic and educational instruments with which to do so.

It is the conviction of the adherent to the struggle with the world, or to its successor in the form of the religion of the future, that, once experienced, the alternatives to the theology of immanence and to the pragmatics of sufficiency will prove irresistible. Moreover, in the real circumstances of the present, the Indians will come into contact with the white man, whether we or they want to or not. Deprived of economic and educational equipment, the Indians, as peoples and as individuals, are defenseless.

The implication of these arguments for the collectivity is that two distinct problems must be solved by different means: the empowerment of the collectivity and the empowerment of the individual. To the collectivity, the government must ensure economic and educational opportunity in a manner adequate to the degree of isolation or assimilation of the group. The more isolated a people, the greater the need for care in

ensuring that the manner of providing economic and educational opportunity to the Indian nation not predetermine the outcome, producing, by the very fact of its availability, the yet more complete assimilation (and the consequent destruction of the distinctive culture) that the Indians should collectively be empowered to embrace or to reject.

The individual Indian, however, is a citizen of the republic. From the republic, he must receive, if he so desires, the economic and educational tools with which to diverge from the path of the collectivity. Once again, these tools must be neither so inaccessible to the individual that they cease to be real options nor so ready to hand that their easy availability undermines the collective choice to tread a separate path.

The rights and wrongs of policy toward the Indians in such a circumstance are the rights and wrongs of empowered dissidence, in a free society, from the doctrine of that society. What we owe to them we owe to ourselves.

The principle of plurality

The institutional structure of a society is decisive for all our material and moral endeavors. Our interests and ideals always remain hostage to the institutions and practices that represent them in fact. If the religion of the future is to speak to the condition of society, it must do more than defend and support a particular conception of a free society. It must have an institutional program. Rather than treating the institutional design of society as a circumstantial afterthought to the enunciation of its political principles, it must recognize that there is an internal relation between our thinking about ideals and interests and our thinking about institutions and practices.

The direction sketched by the remaining principles of a free society reveals the political consequences of the religion of the future. It is also meant to suggest the general character of the political, economic, and social institutions on the basis of which we can today best hope to satisfy the desire for a greater life. The task here is not to describe this direction of institutional change. It is to address the problem and the opportunity resulting from the variety of regimes through which the conception of a free society can plausibly be made actual. There is no

single, self-evident institutional form that a free society, or a society faithful to the aspirations of the religion of the future, should take.

Contemporary social democrats are mistaken to treat the established and inherited institutional settlement as the more or less natural and necessary setting for the prosecution of their characteristic effort to reconcile economic flexibility with social protection, and efficiency with equity. Many political philosophers are wrong to treat the institutional structure of society as a concern peripheral to the enunciation of the principles of political life.

The liberals and the socialists of the nineteenth century were free from these illusions. However, they in turn erred in entrusting their political hopes to a dogmatic institutional formula: the establishment of a particular system of private and public rights, including a particular version of the market economy and of democracy (for the liberals) or the governmental control of the economy, accompanied by another style of democracy (for the socialists). In every instance, their institutional program proved inadequate to their goals.

Their mistake was not simply to have chosen one institutional formula rather than another. It was also to have failed to grasp the flawed, circumstantial, and transitory character of every institutional form given to a free society. We must choose a direction of institutional change rather than choosing a definitive blueprint. Moreover, we must choose it in the awareness that there are always other directions and that we may have reason to change our judgment of which direction is, on the whole, to be preferred.

It is not enough to respect the prerogative of apostasy from the visions of the good and the ideals of humanity informing the regime. It is also necessary to organize a permanent experiment, both worldwide and in the space of the independent states of the world, regarding the institutional arrangements of a free society. The apostates may dissent from the ideals and the visions associated with the free order, with the sacred or profane versions of the struggle with the world, or with their radicalization and reformation by the religion of the future. The votaries of these projects will and should diverge among themselves in their understanding of the institutional implications of their commitments. Such divergence is not an accidental or passing restraint on the revolutionary ideas, to be overcome by convergence and consensus; it is a

permanent feature both of the truth about politics and of the truth about freedom. This principle of plurality is the second principle informing the conception and design of a free society. It complements the first principle, of the protection of apostasy.

Three consequences follow from the principle of plurality.

A first consequence of the principle of plurality is that the organization of the world should be hospitable to collective experimentation with the alternative forms of a free society. It should not make the arrangements for security or for trade depend upon submission to a particular institutional formula. It should be marked by an institutional minimalism rather than by an institutional maximalism: the greatest economic and cultural engagement of peoples with one another, on the basis of the least restraint on their domestic institutional experiments.

Arrangements for world trade, for example, should not prevent experiments in the reshaping of a market economy, including those that associate government with private firms or that innovate in the basic rules of property and contract in the effort to organize multiple ways to decentralize economic initiative and organize access to the resources and opportunities of production.

However, a distinction must be drawn between institutional experiments that plausibly represent alternative forms of a free society and those that suppress freedom. Apostasy from the ideals of a free society is sacrosanct within any free state. Its sanctity does not imply a requirement for tolerance of the regimes that deny to both individuals and peoples the political, economic, and cultural means with which to pass judgment on the structure in which they find themselves.

Such regimes dishonor the core attributes of humanity. They also seek to entrench themselves, in the name of distinct vision, against any test of the claims on which they are based, other than the test of economic ruin and military defeat. The reasons not to intervene in them in a given circumstance are merely practical. They may nevertheless be overwhelming. In a world in which the great powers are unable to distinguish their interests from the interests of humanity or the conception of a free society from the flawed institutional arrangements that they embrace, and that they often seek to impose on the rest of mankind, intervention in the name of freedom may simply serve the hegemony of a great power.

We should desire to impose only those restraints on institutional experimentalism that help turn the world into a concert of free peoples. The less we allow access to the global public goods of political security and economic openness to depend on obedience to a single, worldwide institutional formula and the more vigorously divergent varieties of a free society are established in the world, the better our chance to achieve this goal.

A second consequence of the principle of plurality is that we should give special weight to the ideas and to the capabilities, as well as to the institutional arrangements, that make possible such experimentation with the alternative institutional forms of a free society. It is not enough to establish institutions that display, more fully than do our present institutions, the attribute of corrigibility and that enhance our ability to create difference rather than merely to remember and preserve it.

One of these future-enabling resources is an education equipping the mind as imagination to gain the ascendant over the mind as machine. Such an education turns the school into the instrument of access to a broader experience and vision that the established order can contain. It prevents the school from serving as the tool of either the family or the state. It recognizes in every child a tongue-tied prophet.

Our self-understanding across the whole field of social and historical study, of the social sciences, of the sciences of mind and behavior, and of the humanities, needs to supply us ideas that can inform the imagination of alternatives. To this end, each of these disciplines must be reformed to exemplify the connection between the understanding of what society has been and insight into what, for better and for worse, it can become. Legal analysis and political economy—the twin disciplines of the institutional imagination—must cease to serve the retrospective rationalization of social life and abandon the right-wing Hegelianism, the retrospective rationalization of the existent, that has long been their secret philosophy.

A third consequence of the principle of plurality is that each area of the life of a free society should be organized in a way that empowers experimental divergence in that domain. The capacity to innovate in the institutional forms of a free society must be manifest in the organization of each part of the regime, according to the distinctive problems and opportunities of each. Every area of social life should exemplify

and enhance the denaturalization of the social regime: the weakening of the contrast between our ordinary, structure-preserving moves and our extraordinary, structure-transforming efforts. Each domain of our experience should be so organized that it approaches, according to the special constraints and opportunities of that domain, the regulative ideal of a society in which no aspect of the institutional and ideological framework remains beyond our power to challenge and to reshape.

This third consequence of the principle of plurality has a corollary for the relation between institutional convergence and divergence inside each country or region of the world. Free societies must enjoy the power to innovate and to diverge, within themselves, not just among themselves in the way they shape markets, democracies, and civil societies. They must possess both the institutional and the conceptual means to create novel varieties of political, economic, and social pluralism. The established forms of the market economy, of representative democracy, and of independent civil society are hostile to such experimentation. This goal helps inform an agenda, given the very limited scope of institutional arrangements and ideas that are now on offer in the world, either in practice or in doctrine, and the relatively inelastic character of the stock of institutional alternatives at any one time.

Market economies remain fastened to a particular version of the idea of a market order, embodied in their systems of private law and often justified as the natural and necessary expression of spontaneous order in economic life. Alternative regimes of property and contract should, instead, come to coexist experimentally, gaining a greater or lesser foothold in different parts of the economic order. As a result, freedom to recombine factors of production within an unchallenged framework of production and exchange would extend into freedom to innovate continuously in the arrangements comprising such a framework.

Civil societies remain unorganized or unequally organized, under the provisions of contract, corporate, and labor law, and denied, as a result of their disorganization, the chance to share directly in the creation of alternative social futures. They cannot create law from the bottom up, not even law regarding their own organization. All they can do is vie for voice and influence in the making of law by the state. The bonds of solidarity in social life, rather than resting on the strong basis

of direct responsibility to help care for others, including others outside one's own family, depend on the weak cement of money transfers organized by government.

Civil society should be organized, independently and outside the state, the better to share actively and directly in the development of alternative social futures. It should not, and need not, do so simply through the work of elected officials and of the political parties. One occasion for such participation is engagement in the provision of public services, especially in those services, education first among them, that equip the context-transcending individual. Another opportunity is the generalization of the principle that every able-bodied adult should have at some time a responsibility to take care of other people outside his own family, thus providing social solidarity with a foundation stronger than money.

Democracies continue to be established in ways that make change depend on crisis, renew the power of the dead over the living, and allow an established structure to retain, until the next crisis, its semblance of naturalness, necessity, and authority. For democratic politics, the task is to understand and to organize democracy as the collective discovery and creation of the new in social life, not simply as the rule of the majority, limited by the rights of political and social minorities. Constitutional arrangements should hasten the pace of politics—the facility for structural change—as well as raising its temperature—the level of popular engagement in public life. They should exploit the experimentalist potential of federalism to generate counter models of the social future and establish in the state a power to rescue groups from situations of exclusion or disadvantage that they are unable to overcome by the means of collective action available to them. They should impart to representative democracy features of direct democracy. By all these devices they should vastly expand our power to create the new and the different, without requiring crisis as the condition of change.

Thus, to realize the principle of plurality it is not enough to ensure that different versions of a free society be established under the aegis of separate, sovereign states and be embodied in the legal orders of those states. It is necessary that each nation have at its disposal the arrangements and the ideas enabling it to reinvent markets, democracies, and civil societies. For it is only by the power and practice of such reinvention that the freedom-destroying weight of established structures can

be lightened, the power of the past over the future diminished, and prophecy enabled to speak more loudly than memory.

The principle of deep freedom

In the design of institutions, deep freedom has priority over any form of equality of circumstance. Equality of opportunity is a fragmentary aspect of deep freedom.

Freedom and equality may be shallow or deep. They are shallow to the extent that they take the established institutional structure for granted and are understood and implemented within the limits of that structure. They are deep insofar as they advance through the reorganization of that structure.

Deep freedom is therefore freedom, grasped and realized through change of our institutions and practices: not just through a one-time change but through a practice that can generate future, ongoing change in the institutional order of society. Deep freedom is thus also freedom as understood within the bounds of what I earlier described as the conception of a free society. The idea of deep freedom develops through an interplay between the conception of a free society and the institutional arrangements required to make that conception real. The conception informs the making of the institutional alternatives. The making of the alternatives prompts us to enrich and revise the conception.

According to a belief widespread at the time that this book was written, the distinction between the Left and the Right, between progressives and conservatives in politics, is chiefly a difference between the relative weights that they give to equality and to freedom. The leftists or progressives would be those who accord priority to equality, fairness, or social justice; the conservatives or liberals (in the contemporary European sense) those who put freedom first. This set of identifications results from a confusion between shallow and deep freedom or equality. It is, moreover, false to the history of progressive or leftist ideas. We should reject it; it both reveals and reinforces a misguided direction in practical politics as well as in political thought.

Almost universally, the liberals and socialists of the nineteenth century viewed equality as an aspect of freedom. Their core commitment

was to the empowerment of both the individual and the species: the formation of a greater humanity and of a greater self. They differed in their understanding of this greatness as well as in the institutional formulas on which, mistakenly, they pinned their hopes. They understood that no sane man or woman who could have a greater life would settle instead for a rigid equality of outcome or circumstance. They regarded abolition of the injustices of class society and of economically dependent wage labor as an important part of the fight for a larger freedom. They would never have accepted the notion that we can redress the greatest evils of social life by compensatory and retrospective redistribution of income through money transfers or social entitlement programs organized by the state. In professing these beliefs, they were revolutionaries, as we should be today and tomorrow, opposing the established regime and prophesying a greater life for mankind.

Those who take the priority of equality over freedom to be the keynote of the progressive cause make an unacknowledged and decisive assumption: they accept the established institutional settlement. If they live in the rich North Atlantic countries, the settlement that they chiefly accept is the social-democratic compromise of the mid-twentieth century (with its New Deal counterpart in the United States). If they find themselves in another part of the world, they are nevertheless likely to see that compromise as the horizon and limit of our democratic hopes.

The progressives or the leftists then become those who, within the limits of the social-democratic settlement, want more equality. What that must largely mean, given respect for the established institutional arrangements, is after-the-fact redistribution and regulation rather than any reshaping of either production or politics. By the terms of that bargain, any attempt fundamentally to alter the productive and the political arrangements was abandoned. The state was allowed to gain wide-ranging powers to regulate, to redistribute, and to manage the economy counter-cyclically.

The conservatives are, according to the same way of thinking, those who want to shift the weight of that historical compromise in the direction of freedom and efficiency. For them, freedom is greater room for maneuver within the terms set by the established forms of the market economy and of constitutional democracy: less regulation and less

redistribution so that there may be more space for individual initiative and self-determination, free from the tutelage of the state.

This primitive ideological structure invites a further narrowing of the scope of politics, presented as a synthesis. The aim becomes to reconcile economic flexibility with social protection.

Shallow freedom and shallow equality are freedom and equality viewed within the restraints imposed by the prevailing institutional settlement. The actual experience of political life provides an endless series of clues to the inadequacy of this view. For example, at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, some of the countries most admired as examples of social democracy experimented with initiatives that came to be dubbed “flexsecurity”: universal endowments instead of tenure in particular jobs, with the result that, on a very small scale, it seemed possible to enjoy more fairness and more flexibility at the same time. No one, however, imagined that a similar effort could be conducted on a much larger scale through the reformation of the institutional arrangements, including the arrangements of property, of contract, and of relations between public power and private initiative, that shape a market economy.

Shallow freedom and shallow equality are false options. They are based on the unwarranted acceptance of the existing institutional framework: the contingent outcome of that last major institutional reformation. They presuppose the validity of a simple and misleading hydraulic model of ideological debate: more market, less state; more state, less market; or a combination of state and market designed to ensure that the inequalities generated by the market are corrected by the redistributive and regulatory activity of the state.

It is this simple and false scheme that is presupposed by the philosophies of distributive justice exercising the greatest influence in these same societies. The abstract and unhistorical character of these philosophies cannot conceal their operative intent: the justification of compensatory redistribution under institutionally closed social democracy. Because their theoretical egalitarianism is the reverse side of their institutional emptiness or conservatism, they cannot make good on their professed aims. They argue for the humanization of a world that their adepts judge themselves powerless to reimagine and to remake, and define this humanization narrowly, to suit the devices to which they are committed.

When we demand more than an attempt to humanize the supposedly inevitable, we turn away from shallow freedom and shallow equality to deep equality and deep freedom. Deep equality, however, is opposed to the ideals and to the interests that have been central to socialism, liberalism, and democracy. The first to reject it should be those who remain faithful to the largest and most enduring aims of the Left. In the religion of the future they will find further reason to cast it aside.

Deep equality is the priority granted to some form of equality of circumstance or outcome, achieved through whatever reshaping of institutions may be required to reach this goal. Equality of respect and equality of opportunity are intrinsic to freedom and to the conception of a free society: not just to the radical conception earlier proposed but also to any conception that remains in close connection with the ideals supported by the profane or sacred versions of the struggle with the world. Shallow and deep equality converge in the primacy that they accord to equality of circumstance. This egalitarian commitment may be formulated outright as a prohibition of extreme inequalities of living standards, income, or wealth. Alternatively, it may be qualified by a willingness to countenance whatever inequalities can be justified by their contribution to the circumstances of the worst off, so long as the fundamental principles of equality of respect and of opportunity remain inviolate.

Deep equality is distinguished from shallow equality by its refusal to take the established institutional arrangements, including those that shape the market economy, for granted. Its characteristic device is not, as with shallow equality, compensatory redistribution by tax and transfer. It is a change in the institutional arrangements, especially those that organize production and exchange, the better to influence the primary distribution of wealth and income.

Once the basic institutions are rendered susceptible to rethinking and reform, the qualified forms of egalitarianism—those that justify departures from equality of circumstance by their contribution to the improvement of the circumstances of a particularly appealing group, such as the worst off—cease to be well-formed ideas. Compensatory redistribution produces its effects immediately, in the form of resource transfer. Institutional change produces such effects in historical time. Unless the relevant time span is arbitrarily restricted, the most extreme

inequalities now could in principle be justified by their speculative contribution to the improvement of the conditions of the most disadvantaged at a much later time. Such is, in a sense, the justification of class society in Karl Marx's historical materialism: coercive surplus extraction, made possible by class hierarchy and class oppression, creates the material conditions that permit the overcoming of scarcity long after the victims of class oppression are dead.

An egalitarianism justifying departures from equality of outcome or of circumstance only by their beneficial effect on the situation of certain groups such as the most disadvantaged can, for this reason, be only shallow equality. Shallow equality is in fact the province of the contemporary egalitarian theories of justice. Their implicit institutional conservatism cuts their theoretical egalitarianism down to size: they must achieve whatever they can hope to accomplish by a form of corrective redistribution and regulation leaving the structure of the market and of democracy untouched. Deep egalitarianism can allow for no such qualification.

Deep equality is what, for example, the Spartans had among themselves, although not with the helots. It is what Proudhon, William Morris, and many other socialists of the past have desired. It can be secured only by imposing radical restraints on the sale of property and the accumulation of capital. There are two major historical instances of such a project.

One example was the effort to achieve equalization conducted, notably through agrarian reform and to the detriment of landowning grandes, in many of the ancient imperial states. When it succeeded, it produced a relatively greater equality in these still largely agricultural societies. However, it was not the ideal of deep equality that moved the reformers who sat in the seats of imperial power. Their motive was to assure the state of a source of tax revenues and military recruitment not subject to the control of the landowning magnates and warlords. Restraints on the power of an oligarchy of landowners and warlords to subjugate a smallholding class succeeded, when they did succeed, within a larger social and historical order that remained starkly hierarchical. Such an order resisted the influence of the attempt—shared by the visionary founders of the higher religions—to deny the reality or the authority of the divisions within humanity.

A second historical instance of commitment to deep equality is the state socialism of the twentieth century in those periods (such as Stalin's rural collectivization drive or Mao's Cultural Revolution) when egalitarianism gained the upper hand. The collectivization as well as the nationalization of the means of production, the outlawing of any private accumulation of capital, the widespread restraint on the alienation or the acquisition of significant property, and the insistence on suppressing private wage labor all formed part of these experiences. In the absence of the invention of new, disaggregated forms of property, even the Yugoslav self-management system could not render its enterprise regime stable without resorting to broad restraints on alienation and expansion. In this twentieth-century state socialism, radical inequality nevertheless continued to exist, if not in economic circumstance, then with regard to power and education. The political and cultural inequalities almost always had direct or indirect economic consequences.

Who wants deep equality? Not the hundreds of millions who have fled from countryside to city, even when in the city no work awaits them. Not the multitudes who sit transfixed before their screens watching the fantastical narratives of empowerment and escape of popular romantic culture. Not searchers after more consumption, more excitement, more diversion, or more capability. No one wants it who could have, with a measure of abundance, anything else. And when they want it, if indeed they understand it, they want it only as a consolation, in the absence of such more appealing goods. Austerity, drudgery, and monotony, a narrowing of alternatives of action, can seem an acceptable form of existence only if they appear to be the sole alternative to stark oppression. Ancient Sparta has few takers.

Deep equality cannot be the core of the program of the progressives. It fails to capture the concerns and aspirations that have historically driven them. The common notion that the Left is distinguished by the priority that it gives to equality over freedom remains plausible only so long as we limit ourselves to comparing shallow freedom to shallow equality: only when the horizon of programmatic argument has narrowed to the point of balancing economic flexibility and social protection against each other, within an institutional system that the political forces have no impulse to reconstruct. The abdication of such institutional reshaping, however, amounts to the belittlement of the progressive

cause, leaving it unable to address any of the major problems of contemporary societies.

Deep freedom is the sole defensible political goal of progressives, of those who have understood the political implications of the struggle with the world and who want to rescue this orientation to existence from the compromises and surrenders that continue to circumscribe its reach. It is therefore, as well, a political principle of those who move in the direction of the religion of the future. Deep freedom, in its fullest sense, is the dialectic between the conception of a free society and the cumulative institutional innovations that can make this conception real.

These two elements—the idea and the institutions of freedom—develop together. The transformational process resulting from their reciprocal connection is more important and more revealing than any one moment in the marriage of conception to arrangements. The conception gains meaning by reference to actual or imagined institutional developments. The institutional innovations, however, are not simply the technical translation into social reality of a view independently established. Instead, the institutional choices disclose the ambiguities and the alternative possible directions, concealed, at any moment, within the idea.

There is no stock set of institutional arrangements that, once enacted, make the conception of a free society live in social reality. There is an open array of institutional enhancements, many of them rough and flawed functional equivalents to other such arrangements. What matters is the direction, defined precisely through the interaction between the understanding and its institutional expressions.

The distinction between Right and Left has not lost its meaning. It nevertheless needs to be redrawn. To confine it within the limits of the contrast between shallow equality and shallow freedom is to reduce it to a contrast between two versions of counter revolutionary thought, both of them antagonistic to the driving political aspirations of the struggle with the world, to be upheld and advanced by the religion of the future.

On this account, the conservatives are those who despair of our power to raise ourselves up, through the transformation of our arrangements, to a greater life, not for a group favored by society (in the form of hereditary economic and educational advantage) or by nature (in the form of greater genetic endowments), but for all. The progressives are

those who insist on transforming the institutional structure of society to the end of achieving a greater life for all. They do not want merely to substitute one structure for another. They want to change the sense in which the structure is a structure, by making the social order hospitable to structure-defying structure, which is to say by rendering it friendly to freedom. This transformation may be gradual and piece-meal in its method but nevertheless radical in its outcome if it persists, informed by a developing idea of freedom, in a particular direction.

The practical significance of deep freedom is made clear by spelling out its implications for inequality of circumstance.

First, no inequality of circumstance should be tolerated that threatens either equality of respect or equality of opportunity. These two aspects of equality form part of freedom. They can be secured only by the combination of the public defense of an inclusive idea of freedom (to which the religion of the future gives the most comprehensive support) with an institutionalized broadening of access to economic and educational opportunity. It is as the result of the force of institutional arrangements resistant to revision that such inequalities exert their effect. It is by appealing to a defective, partial idea of freedom that they retain their authority. The correction of such inequalities should therefore rely first and foremost on the change of institutions and the criticism of beliefs, only secondarily on compensatory redistribution.

Second, inequalities of circumstance resulting in inequalities of opportunity or respect become especially damaging when they are expressed as privileged holds on the economic, political, or cultural resources with which we create the future within the present. If, for example, the result of an inequality of circumstance is to allow a certain class of society to exert decisive influence over the government, under the guise of democratic institutions, and in effect to buy political influence, the system of freedom is violated. Once again, inclusive engagement in the creation of the future within the present requires, above all, innovation in our arrangements and beliefs, regarding the organization of the market economy, of democratic politics, and of civil society.

Third, inequalities of circumstance that have as their consequence or their expression the subversion of free labor; or the predominance of the inferior form of free labor, wage work, over the superior forms, self-employment and cooperation; or the consignment of people to work

that could be performed by machines are by that very fact suspect. The presumption weighing against them is, however, relative and rebuttable. The existence of alternatives, feasible in the prevailing condition of scientific and technological development, determines whether the presumption can be defeated. Even when it can, however, what matters, once again, is the trajectory: the opening of a path of change of institutions and of beliefs that press beyond them, taking advantage of the indeterminate possibilities created by science and technology and moving in a particular direction.

Fourth, inequalities of circumstance that result from the reproduction of class society by the hereditary transmission of unequal economic and educational advantage through the family are to be combatted. Only the institutionalized broadening of economic and educational opportunity can effectively overcome them. A more intractable problem results from whatever part of inequality of circumstance can be attributed to inequality of natural endowments. As the development of an endowment is usually its own chief reward, the temptation further to reward its expression is to be opposed within the limits of what is reasonable and feasible for such imitative and praise-seeking individuals as we are.

Fifth, inequalities of circumstance may be defended by their supposed contribution to the development of the wealth and practical powers of society. However, the inequalities thus justified must never be allowed to accumulate to the point of trespassing on the concerns expressed by the first two ideas (the primacy of equality of respect and of opportunity and the exclusion of inequalities that result in privileged strangleholds on the making of the future). They must be prevented from relegating the mass of ordinary men and women to dependent wage labor or to formulaic, machine-like work (the third idea). Moreover, they should not be allowed to serve as a disguise for the legitimization of class society or for the veneration of exceptional endowments under the banner of merit. Such veneration is a species of power worship, an inverted Prometheanism. It is poisonous to the public culture of a free society and incompatible with the view of humanity that such a culture shares with the religion of the future.

Sixth, we should approach the reconciliation of the fifth idea with the other four in the spirit of an open-minded, experimental, and hopeful

search for arrangements lying in the zone of potential intersection between the institutional conditions for the development of the productive capabilities of society and the institutional requirements for the overcoming of domination and dependence in society. Having abandoned the faith of the nineteenth-century liberals and socialists in an institutional formula that would advance both these families of goods simultaneously, we should take care not to replace it by the equally dogmatic and false belief in a tragic contradiction between them. We should proceed instead on the basis of hope in identifying and developing a subset of the institutional conditions of the first good that serves the second, and a subset of the institutional requirements of the second that advances the first. The long-established primacy of innovation and of capability over the size, at any given moment, of the economic surplus preserved over current consumption, as a constraint on economic growth, argues powerfully in favor of the reasonableness and of the fecundity of this hope.

The ideal of equality—equality of respect and of opportunity, and greater equality of circumstance only insofar as it enhances equality of opportunity and of respect or is required by them—is best defended when it is subordinated to the greater and more inclusive ideal of deep freedom. For it is this ideal that most directly touches our interest in making ourselves more human by making ourselves more godlike. The revolutionary reach of this ideal becomes clear as soon as we insist on equipping it with its most useful instrument: the institutional reorganization of society.

Those will be disappointed who expect from ideas about the limits to permissible inequality of circumstance, such as the six propositions just enumerated, a metric of distributive justice. The institutions of society, and the ideas predominant in its public culture, count for more than the instantaneous reallocation that can be achieved only, when at all, by retrospective and compensatory redistribution. The direction of social and personal change matters more than the short-term arithmetic of redistribution. Our chance of rising to a greater life, without abandoning some to belittlement, and of beginning our rise right now, in a present from which we need no longer be estranged, is the standard by which we should ultimately distinguish between the permissible and the impermissible forms of inequality.

The principle of higher cooperation

The priority of deep freedom over equality of circumstance has as its complement a change in character of our cooperative practices.

An idea of cooperation forms part of the conception of a free society. Other things being equal, the more we are able to organize our activities through a division of labor, untainted by subjugation and dependence, the freer we become. Insofar as we achieve this goal, we can do more and we can become more, individually as well as collectively. We soften the conflict between the enabling conditions of self-assertion: the imperative of connection and the imperative of independent agency. We diminish the price, in loss of autonomy, that we must pay for connection. We do so, moreover, outside the realm of the intimate personal relations in which love offers the consummate form of such a reconciliation. Cooperation substitutes for love in life among strangers.

The capacity to cooperate is, at the same time, the most powerful and pervasive influence on the development of our practical capabilities. Together with the enlistment of science and technology in production, it is the overriding factor in the material progress of society. Although this capacity is shaped by institutional arrangements, it acquires a life of its own, sustained by habits of action and of mind. The practices and institutions in which cooperation, as a division of labor, is embodied define a cooperative regime. A cooperative regime may favor or inhibit the development of capabilities of cooperation.

In the long sweep of economic history, we can distinguish three stages in the development of our capacities to produce goods and services: the most fundamental of our practical capabilities if we are to lift from human life the burdens of poverty, infirmity, and drudgery. In the first, most primitive stage, the size of an economic surplus over current consumption remains a powerful constraint on the expansion of output and the enhancement of productivity. Large states, such as the agrarian-bureaucratic empires prominent in so much of world history, may find in this constraint reason to organize the coercive extraction of such a surplus against the background of stark social hierarchies and divisions. The economic theorist may be tempted, however, to exaggerate the importance and persistence of this constraint. It is a limitation

soon overridden, in its economic significance, by the capacity to innovate in both the technological instruments of work and the institutional arrangements of cooperation. Karl Marx exaggerated in his account of the history of the social division of labor when he explained class society functionally, as necessitated by the indispensable coercive extraction of a surplus. Adam Smith exaggerated in his analysis of the technical division of labor when he described the hyper-specialization of labor and the consequent brutalization of the worker in the pin factory as a consequence of the need, under the then-available technology, to realize economies of scale.

In a second stage of the development of productive capabilities, production comes to be supported by science, embodied in technology. Industrial mass production, of the kind that came to prevail in most advanced economies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is the characteristic example. Under this regime, the worker works with the machine as if he were a machine. The formulation and supervision of productive tasks are rigidly distinguished from their execution, and every job from every other.

In a third stage of the history of production, production rather than being just supported by science becomes a materialization of science: a continuing experiment, a practice of permanent innovation, a turning of our cooperative activities into an expression of the analytic and synthetic operations of the mind. At this stage, the worker uses machines the better not to act as if he were a machine: that is to say, he works, non-formulaically, continuously revising the productive plan in the course of implementing it.

Such is the promise of what today is often described as the new, creative, or post-Fordist economy. At the time when this book was written, this style of production remained largely confined to vanguards, weakly linked to other sectors of each national economy. Most of the labor force, in the richer countries as well as in the major developing economies, remained excluded from this economic vanguardism. Its practices were, nevertheless, applicable, in principle, to every sector.

If we look back at this history of production from the perspective of its third and last stage, we can see that the overriding principle in this evolution has been the relation between experiments about nature, informed by science and enacted in technology, and experiments about

the form of cooperation. The more closely the two sets of experiments are connected, the more each becomes an incitement for the other, the greater the success in attenuating the tension between the need to cooperate and the need to innovate, designing the cooperative arrangements most hospitable to permanent innovation both about nature and about cooperation itself and providing opportunity and material and conceptual equipment to the largest number of people, the more rapidly do the productive capabilities of society develop.

At each turn in this history, however, two forces contend. On the one hand, there is the functional advantage provided by greater facility to innovate with respect to both nature and cooperation itself. On the other hand, there is the pressure to do so in ways that least disturb the predominant interests and beliefs. This mitigated disturbance is what we might describe, in each historical circumstance, as the path of least resistance. For example, the present confinement of the practices of the new economy to relatively isolated advanced sectors has been the path of least resistance for the development of the emerging style of production. The work of transformative thought and politics is to create alternatives to the path of least resistance.

The functional advantage can always be realized in more than one way. Its achievement, in addition to being regularly (but not necessarily) reduced to the path of least resistance, is achieved with the institutional and intellectual materials that happen to lie at hand, generated by many loosely related sequences of past change and compromise. There is no preset menu of institutional options, much less a predetermined succession of indivisible institutional systems, driven forward by laws of historical change, as much classical European social theory supposed.

Some countries have prospered through the circumstantial deployment of radically different sets of institutional arrangements. For example, the United States, whose public culture suffers from the temptation to exempt its institutional arrangements from the reach of the experimentalist impulse that is otherwise so vigorous in its life, nevertheless cast aside a fetishistic view of the market economy, during the Second World War of the twentieth century, and managed production as well as war on principles opposed to its prevailing public ideology. Other countries have tried many alternative ways of organizing the

economy, and failed at all of them. The relative diffusion of an ability to cooperate across the lines of all divisions of class, creed, culture, race, or gender helps determine the extent to which any institutional model can be successfully deployed to carry out the practical work of society.

Institutions as well as education may either encourage or inhibit the development of our cooperative capacities. So, however, does an idea: the idea, inspired by the past wave of religious revolution, of the shallowness of the divisions within mankind. There is no simple relation between the authority that this idea exercises and the class structure of society. The force of the idea may lead to the denial of class, in the midst of its existence, and support, all by itself, the disposition to cooperate across class lines. In moving from the devaluation of social divisions to rejection of the fate of belittlement, the religion of the future establishes the disposition to cooperate with strangers on the strongest foundation that it can have: the basis of our understanding of who we are and of what we can become. No definitive institutional formula can capture the potential for cooperation because none, more generally, can do justice to our powers of experience and of creation. However, one institutional settlement may be better than another because, by facilitating its own correction, it enables us to innovate, as well, in our cooperative practices.

That cooperation can be both part of the idea of freedom and part—a large part—of the path to worldly success should encourage us in the hope of identifying a zone in which the institutional conditions for the advance of our material interests overlap the institutional requirements for the promotion of our moral interests.

To move in the direction of deep freedom, a cooperative regime must exhibit four features. Each of them needs to be manifest in the institutions defining the regime as well as in the practices and the beliefs reproducing it. These features modify both the organization and the experience of the division of labor in society.

It may seem strange to consider the content of such a regime, including its consequences for the organization of economic activity, in a book on religion that is also a religious book. The religion of the future, however, must resemble the religions of the past two and a half millenniums in its impulse to inform the whole of our experience. Moreover, it cannot remain faithful to the image of the person as embodied spirit,

which it inherits from the struggle with the world, if it abandons our material life in society to practices and beliefs that weaken and deny our power to resist and revise the context.

A first feature of higher cooperation is that to the greatest extent possible the cooperative regime, and the nature and scope of the tasks that each participant undertakes, should not be predetermined by any ready-made script resulting from the structure of division and hierarchy in society, or from the translation of that structure into a system of stereotyped social roles. Everyone and every social situation have a history. However, cooperation is the more perfect the less the dead rule over the living and the less the living have to follow, in their cooperative activities, a set of formulas implicit in the present organization of society and of culture.

Whether they are members of this or that social class (so long as class society has not been destroyed) or of this or that community of sentiment or of belief, their respective membership in any of the divisions of humanity should count as least as possible when they meet to cooperate. They should meet, insofar as the reality of society and of culture allows it, not as Robinson Crusoe met a subordinate Friday but as he might have met an alter ego of himself.

As with any activity in the world, cooperation requires implicit and therefore as well local knowledge. It matters, however, that this implicit and local knowledge be dissociated from the role or class-specific injunctions that normally accompany it. How hard or easy such a result is to achieve depends on the degree to which the institutionalized structure of society has moved toward the ideal of a structure-denying structure: that is to say, an institutional framework that multiplies occasions and instruments for its own revision and thereby weakens the dependence of change on crisis and the influence of the past on the future. Our experiments in cooperation can nevertheless run ahead of such an institutional evolution, serving as its front line.

A second trait to be sought in the cooperative regime is that it be so arranged and understood as to moderate the tension between cooperation and innovation. Other things being equal, the best regime of cooperation is the one that is most favorable to collective learning and permanent innovation.

It is not enough to cooperate; it is also necessary to innovate. Like the facility for cooperation, the facility for innovation has both a moral and a material aspect. The ability to innovate in organization and ideas as well as in technologies soon overrides the size of the economic surplus over current consumption as the main constraint on economic growth. It is an imperative central to every realm of practical activity, from administration to warfare. It is as well a call to combine people, resources, and machines in ways that step over the limits imposed by established assumptions and arrangements. It uses the transformation of nature as an incitement to the self-transformation of humanity.

Innovation requires cooperation. Every step in a process of innovation requires cooperative activity, both to develop the innovation and to implement it. However, every innovation also jeopardizes cooperation because it threatens to disturb the vested rights and the settled expectations to which an established cooperative regime gives rise.

Consider the simple case of a technological innovation. It will benefit some segments of the labor force of a firm or of a sector and threaten others, given the present technical division of labor and the framework of rights, expectations, and practices in which it is embedded. Consequently, tension and conflict are likely to ensue, first over its introduction, and then over its distributive consequences. A similar consequence results, with increasing force and expanding scope, as we move from technological to organizational innovation.

The extent to which the requirements of cooperation and innovation contradict each other vary according to the arrangements and practices of society. One cooperative regime may differ from another in the measure in which it is conducive to innovation and moderates the tension between the need to cooperate and the need to innovate.

The single most important condition for success in the effort to the reconciliation of these two imperatives is that the security of the individual in a haven of protected vital interests and endowments be combined with the enhanced plasticity of the surrounding social and economic space. It is a dialectical movement: something is protected, the better to open up a great deal else to experiment and change.

Consider, again, the familiar example of the Scandinavian and Dutch labor-market reforms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and imagine that these reforms went further than they in fact did.

The individual worker and citizen benefits from enhanced compensation for the effects of economic insecurity as well as from strengthened economic and educational endowments. The protections are not job-specific, nor do they take the form of tenure-like rights to the preservation of a present job. They are universal, portable, and compatible with frequent rearrangements of relations among people, machines, and resources. The enhancement of his educational and economic endowments, guaranteed universally by the state independently of the possession of any particular job, makes it more likely that he will be able to thrive in the midst of the instability that results from permanent innovation. In such a circumstance, cooperation will be more hospitable to innovation than it would otherwise be. The conflict between the imperatives of cooperation and of innovation will be moderated, over a limited range of social life.

This example represents a special case of a much more general and less familiar phenomenon. Once we grasp its range, we can begin to identify its revolutionary implications. Both the generality and the implications are most clearly exhibited in the contrasting characters and effects of different regimes of rights.

The identity, security, and economic and educational endowments of the individual may be deeply entangled in the protection of a certain form of life. In such a circumstance, no distinction exists between the immunity of the individual and the defense, or even the petrification, of that social space. No such system will be secure unless it is represented in consciousness as necessary and authoritative. No such representation is more aggressive in its claims than one that claims to provide an established social arrangement with a cosmological or theological basis. Such was the scriptural caste system in ancient India, although we know that the historical caste system was always far more open to variation and revision than any such representation would suggest.

We can, however, imagine, in the spectrum of social possibilities, an opposing circumstance. The protections and endowments of the individual are so designed that they leave society maximally open to transformation. Something is taken out of the terrain of open experimentation—the rules defining the protections and the endowments of individuals—the better to open up more of the rest of social life.

Secure in his protection and empowered by his endowments, the individual is able to confront instability, unafraid, and to thrive in its midst. Such a project reveals the salvageable practical content of the idea of fundamental rights once we expunge from it its metaphysical and theological veneer. An experiment designed to reconcile flexibility and security in the organization of work represents no more than a fragmentary foreshadowing of this larger vision.

The arrangements of contemporary market economies and representative democracies, sequels as they are to the proto-democratic liberalism and to the private-law systems of the nineteenth century, fail to exemplify such a reconstruction. Rather, they lie in an uncertain intermediate space between the contrasting limiting cases of the scriptural caste system and of its imaginary opposite. To move in the direction of the second limit, we need to change, step by step and piece by piece, the institutions shaping markets, democracies, and civil societies.

A third attribute of higher cooperation is that it combine a multitude of stimulations to novelty with a remorseless mechanism for the competitive selection of the results. Prospective encouragement must give way to retrospective judgment. Winnowing out must follow on fecundity.

This idea is most immediately exemplified in the work of thought and in the distinction between the logics of discovery and of justification. The inspirations to discovery in thought are multiple and open-ended; they obey no formula and respect no limits. To invent an idea, however, is not to vindicate it. Having called the spirits, we wait to see whether they will come. We subject the creatures of inspiration to the tests that convert conjecture into justified belief.

These tests are normally those established in a particular discipline. The more revolutionary the intellectual invention, however, the greater becomes the chance that its acceptance and development will require a change in the practice of the discipline and therefore as well in our approach to the justification of ideas. The deeper and more fertile our intellectual practice, the more does normal science take on the characteristics of revolutionary science, and the more frequent the change of method in the light of discovery is likely to be.

Our practices and regimes of cooperation become richer in their practical effects and closer to the attributes of the imagination as they

come to be marked by a similar combination of prospective fecundity and retrospective selectivity.

The production of goods and services is the domain of social life most readily exemplifying the practical implications of this principle. The state should encourage a fervor of entrepreneurial activity and innovation. It should also, however, work to ensure that the results of this fervor are subject to draconian competitive selection in the market. The more the state is engaged in encouraging productive activity, the greater the reason to sharpen the subsequent competitive selection.

Consider the example of industrial policy, understood as a term of art denoting any form of coordinated action between governments and private firms in any sector of the economy. Production normally develops by analogical extension: new lines emerge from established lines. When the circumstance is one of relative backwardness—of a sector of production or of the entire national economy—or the new line runs well in advance of existing lines, the chain of analogies may be thin. Government can then compensate by facilitating access to the missing inputs of credit, technology, capabilities, and staff. Its actions are more likely to be beneficial if they ally agnosticism about the choice of particular sectors or lines (it is the future that chooses which lines and products are future-bearing) with initiatives designed to counterbalance the thinning out of the chain of analogies.

Such initiatives, undertaken in a broad range of contemporary economies, richer and poorer, may be most likely to remain faithful to the spirit of such a marriage of agnosticism, encouragement, and fervor if they resist the choice between the two models of government-business relations that are now available in the world: the American model of arm's-length regulation of business by government and the Northeast Asian model of formulation of unitary trade and industrial policy, imposed top down by a governmental bureaucracy. The form of strategic coordination between governments and firms should be decentralized, pluralistic, participatory, and experimental. Firms that are medium-sized or small but nevertheless vanguard businesses may have the best chance to develop a culture of permanent innovation if they build among themselves practices of cooperative competition: pooling resources, people, and ideas while competing against one another.

Pluralistic strategic coordination and cooperative competition in turn prefigure innovations in the institutional arrangements of the market economy—innovations designed to make more innovation possible. The integrity and the efficacy of such a scheme of prospective incitement require that it be followed by a radicalization of competitive selection. The institutional innovations that serve the arousal before the fact then become part of the institutional setting of market competition after the fact. It is a connection reenacting in material life the experience of innovation in thought.

From such innovations in the arrangements governing the relation between governments and firms there can arise in turn alternative regimes of contract and property. Each such regime organizes decentralized access to the resources of production and to the opportunities of economic initiative in a different way. Each strikes in different form the balance between giving voice to multiple stakeholders in particular productive resources and ensuring the power of entrepreneurs to bet their stake against dominant opinion. Variation will increase within national economies as well as among them. More people will then be more likely to have more access to more markets, capabilities, and capital in more ways. Diversity, in organization as well as in experience and perspective, will serve as an incitement to fecundity. Because scale will be achieved, for the same reasons and in the same manner, in many different ways rather than only in ways that place the power to direct capital in a small number of hands, competition can more easily be sharpened without imperiling scale. What the fervor creates the competition will judge.

A similar combination between prospective provocations to invent and retrospective procedures to select can and should be established in the organization of democratic politics as well as in the organization of civil society. The political and social forms of such a combination are, however, less obvious, and more subtle, than its economic ones.

The constitutional arrangements of a high-energy democracy must favor the creation of a broad range of experiments: for example, by allowing particular places and sectors to create counter-models of the national future (the radicalization of the experimental uses of federalism). Yet the power of governments and electorates to overcome impasse and to choose, in the light of such experiments, a way forward

can be enhanced by other arrangements that prevent or overcome impasse between the political branches of governments and engage the people in a continuing conversation about the alternative futures of their country.

The counterpart in democratic politics to competitive selection in the economy is thus the provisional and reversible choice of a direction for a country or a group of countries. The master instrument of this deliberation is the state.

The state matters for two reasons: one tragic, the other hopeful. The tragic reason is the need for the political protection of distinct forms of life, from which there results the danger of war. This danger is mitigated but not avoided by a world order disassociating the goods of political security and economic openness from any requirement to convergence toward similar institutional arrangements.

The hopeful reason is that a commitment to organize cooperation on the basis of deep freedom has no single and self-evident institutional expression. It lacks such determinate expression not because it is empty of content but rather because it is full of alternative defensible and promising content. We can never infer from an ideal of free cooperation the institutions of any particular cooperative regime. A state is needed not only to protect a distinctive form of life but also to define in law the scope of a chosen content and of a national direction. Such a choice will be blind unless it is informed by a wealth of experimental variation.

For national politics to serve as the site of such decisive choices, the constitutional arrangements of government must be such that the liberal principle of the fragmentation of power in the state not be confused with the conservative principle of the slowing down of politics: the deliberate inhibition on the political transformation of society that results, for example, from Madison's scheme of checks and balances in the American presidential regime. The liberal principle should be reaffirmed even as the conservative one is repudiated. A multiplicity of sources of initiative and of power should not result, by design, in a divided government, incapable of decisive action.

A power for decisive action, informed by a vast range of experimental variation within government, the economy, and civil society but subject at every turn to challenges that can result in a change of direc-

tion, is what we should desire. The dialectic between the experiments in a place or in a sector and the society-wide struggle over a direction, subject to reversal, serves as the counterpart in national politics to the sequence of prospective stimulus and retrospective selection in economic life. To act on this analogy is to make both production and politics more closely resemble thought.

A fourth feature of higher cooperation follows from the need—and the chance—to narrow the distance between the characteristics of experimental thought and the traits of our political and productive practices. A cooperative regime should take as its regulative ideal to become an embodiment of the imagination in the workings of the division of labor. The relation between the reshaping of the cooperative regime and the work of the mind in its second, imaginative aspect may be less than a homology. It is, however, more than a metaphor.

By recasting our cooperative practices on the model of imagination, we serve many of our most fundamental interests. We establish a setting favorable to innovation in every domain of experience. We oppose the force and influence of any entrenched scheme of social division and hierarchy, given that the power of any such scheme is the enemy of the imagination in social life. We change, decisively, our relation to established structures by acquiring the power to rethink and remake them in the midst of our ordinary activities. As a result, we improve our chances of advancing in the zone of intersection between the institutional requirements of our material and our moral interests.

One way to give substance to the analogy between cooperation and imagination proceeds in the abstract, by relating features of cooperation to traits of the imagination. It works from the top down. Another way takes its point of departure from the analysis of a historical circumstance, relating the analogy to changes that are already taking place in our cooperative practices and arrangements. It works from the bottom up. I now explore, in sequence, each of these ways of making good on the effort to turn our cooperative practices into the social expression of our imaginative powers.

The imagination is the aspect of the mind that is not modular, that is not formulaic, that exhibits a power of recursive infinity, and that enjoys a power of negative capability. By the power of recursive infinity,

it can combine ideas or interpreted perceptions in an indefinite number of ways. By the power of negative capability, it can discover or invent more than it can prospectively justify, defying and transgressing the methods and presuppositions on which it ordinarily relies. We can see and understand more than our practices and rules countenance. We then revise them retrospectively, deriving power from defiance.

That a practice of cooperation is not modular means that under it a specialization of roles is never more than relative. The relativity of role assignments is closely related to the openness of the frontier between the conception and the execution of particular tasks. Under a superior form of cooperation, the understanding of a task is continuously revised in the course of its execution. The fluidity of roles and of the distinctions among them follows as a corollary of such experimental revision.

The plasticity of the brain—the ability of discrete portions of brain structure to acquire new function—is a physical characteristic conducive to the non-modular character of the mind as imagination. No institutional and ideological settlement represents more than a relatively shallow and temporary fix on our possibilities of association. No social role, and no place in a technical division of labor, defines a human being. More generally, we must choose a particular course of life, undergoing the mutilation that such a choice imposes. However, we are less than fully human, and we interrupt our ascent to a greater life, if we fail to resist in deed and in thought the consequences of this inescapable partiality.

That a practice of cooperation is not formulaic means that it can admit no definitive constitution. It must be organized to be effective in the attainment of its immediate practical goals. However, its organization must be open to adjustment in the light of experience. There must be no absolute distinction between the work of cooperation and the reform of a cooperative regime; the latter must arise, often and easily, from the former.

This ideal cannot be honored in practice so long as the cooperative regime conforms to an established scheme of division and hierarchy in society. To change the vocabulary, the technical division of labor must not passively reflect and reinforce the hierarchies and divisions of the social division of labor. It must run before them, embodying the first

feature of cooperation in a free society—that our ways of cooperating with one another not be circumscribed by a preexisting plan of social hierarchy and division.

That a practice of cooperation enjoys, in conformity to the model of the imagination, a power of recursive infinity means that it confirms its advantage by the fertility of the combinations and innovations that it makes possible. It can operate successfully over a broad range of circumstances. In those circumstances, it can innovate more frequently and more radically. Many such innovations will begin in the recombination of elements that are already familiar, or in their analogical extension, moving from the more familiar to the less familiar.

That a practice of cooperation exhibits, as does the imagination, a power of negative capability means that it proves itself as the collective device by which we can do more than the established order of society and culture appears to accommodate or than the existing circumstances seem to make possible. Defying any formula, it turns transgression to advantage.

A practice of cooperation marked by these traits of the imagination is more likely to flourish in a society that has already moved far in the direction of the ideal of a structure of no structure. Instead of being the consequence of such institutional arrangements, it can serve as their forerunner.

The attempt to reshape a cooperative regime on the model of the imagination may seem to provide only the most general and remote guidance in our efforts at institutional reconstruction. Yet it has a wealth of implications for the ordering of practical social life. To understand these implications, consider what such an attempt must reject in the organization of economic and political life.

First, it must oppose any way of organizing a market economy that fastens the market to a single dogmatic version of itself, even if that version is falsely represented as the institutional crystallization of spontaneous economic order. Such a freezing of the arrangements for exchange and production conflicts with the nature of the imagination, which proceeds by distancing itself from the phenomenon and by subsuming it, once distanced, under a range of transformation.

Second, for the same reason, it must rebel against any form of political life that by lowering the temperature of politics (the level of organized

popular engagement in political life) and by slowing down its pace (particularly through the designed perpetuation of deadlock between the political branches of government) inhibits the political transformation of society. The low-energy democracies of today cannot serve as political embodiments of the imagination. One of the marks of the imagination is to do the work of crisis without crisis. Another is to diminish the tropisms of perception and insight. The existing democracies, however, continue to make of crisis the indispensable condition of change and to renew the power of the past over the future. They do so by their failure to develop a form of political life capable of bringing the established structure of society within the grasp of the transformative will.

Third, it must not accept a world political and economic order that is hostile to the experiments and heresies on which the development of such economic and political alternatives depends. That order takes in vain the name of political and economic freedom to impose on the whole world conformity to a restrictive institutional blueprint as a requirement of access to the global public goods of political security and economic openness. It seeks to give things and money freedom to roam the world, while leaving people imprisoned in the nation-state and inhibited from building, through their perpetual movement, both the unity and diversity of mankind. Such an order amounts to a conspiracy of the great powers against the place of imagination in the world. The success of this conspiracy depends on lack of imagination as much as it depends on interest and fear.

Fourth, it must not allow the forces that can most threaten this structure—the visionary and prophetic forces that lie dormant in religion and in high and popular culture—to be privatized and cut off from the public conversation of the democracy. The result of this privatization of the sublime, reversed only by catastrophe, is to produce a public discourse that is incapable of subsuming the existent under a range of alternative possibilities, as the work of the imagination requires. It is an effect reinforced by the methods and ideas of the prevailing practices of social and historical study, which sever the link between insight into what exists and imagination of the accessible alternatives.

Fifth, it must insist that no man or woman be forced, in order to work and to earn a living, to do the repetitious work that can be undertaken by a machine. A machine is a contraption ruled by a formula de-

scribing something that we have learned how to repeat. As such, it is the opposite of the imagination. Our liberation from machine-like jobs depends on the massive economic and cultural changes that would allow us to create non-formulaic jobs in large number. These changes are unlikely in turn to advance far until wage labor begins to give way to some combination of self-employment and cooperation as the predominant form of free labor. The broad mass of ordinary men and women can then become masters of themselves, opposing the interests of those who, in the name of either private property or the state, would control them.

These goals, making explicit what it would mean to reshape a cooperative regime in the semblance of the imagination, are so remote from our present or our powers of proximate implementation that they can easily be dismissed as a utopian dream. Their role, however, is to signal a direction, made all the clearer by the intransigence of its intentions. To mark a direction is the first attribute of a programmatic argument, informed by an understanding of transformative opportunity. The second attribute is to identify, in a particular circumstance, initial steps by which to begin moving in that direction.

In the spirit of envisaging such steps, consider the affinity between our cooperative practices and our imaginative life from the vantage of momentous changes already taking place in the organization of work and production. A new way of cooperating begins to emerge throughout much of the world. Although it has been studied at greatest length as a form of industrial production, it applies as well to other sectors of the economy and to extra economic activities, from administration to education.

Its hallmarks are the weakening of any rigid contrast between conception and execution, the permanent reinvention of specialized work roles, the mixture of cooperation and competition in the same domains, the ongoing revision of the way identities and interests are understood, and the turning of the practical activity, whether within or outside production, into a practice of collective learning and collective innovation.

Will the sectors of practical activity marked by these characteristics remain a worldwide archipelago of islands of experimentalism, from which the vast majority of men and women remain excluded in richer

countries as well as in poorer ones? Or will these advanced practices increasingly penetrate and transform wide areas of the society and the economy? The answer to these vital questions depends on the institutional reorganization of market economies, representative democracies, and independent civil societies. Such reorganization cannot take place within the limits of the established institutional and ideological settlement.

The socially exclusive form of this change—the form that it now predominantly takes—is the path of least resistance: the one that we can most easily tread because it disturbs the least the preexisting structure of powerful interests. Any alternative supporting the diffusion of these new forms of practical life throughout large parts of the economy and the society requires the marriage of cumulative institutional innovations in the organization of the market economy and of democratic politics with a reinterpretation of our interests and of our ideals.

The emergence of this new way of doing things is not a horse that we can ride to deep freedom. We can nevertheless use it to our larger ends, but only if we redirect and reshape it. Radicalized in method, broadened in scope, and made more inclusive in its social base, it can be made to serve the dissolution of rigid structure and the triumph of imagination over fate.

And so it will happen in every historical circumstance. In the political theology without God of the religion of the future, transcendence no longer takes the form of projecting the good—our rise to a greater life or to life eternal—onto a historical or providential future that leaves us estranged from life in the present. Transcendence takes the form of a rejection of the path of least resistance in the circumstance of our time: working with the instruments of the circumstance against the logic of the circumstance and, through such engagement and resistance, beginning to make ourselves right now into what we hope to become.

7

Becoming More Human by Becoming More Godlike

The Conduct of Life in the Religion of the Future

The enhancement of life

Every religion grounds an orientation to existence in a comprehensive view of who we are, of what we can become, and of our place in the world. It does so even if the comprehensive view is one that emphasizes the limits to our understanding of the world and of our place within it. The meaning of any such inclusive account becomes clear only through its implications for how we are to live. It is above all by a judgment of its bearing on the conduct of life that we read the message of a religion. It can be no different for a religion of the future.

The earlier argument about the occasions and aims of religious revolution has as its central thesis the claim that the higher religions, products of spiritual innovations achieved many centuries ago, provide an inadequate basis for our decisions now about how to live and what to do with our lives. A reorientation of existence, against the background of a reconstruction of society, is the prophetic core of a change in our religious beliefs.

The first task is to describe the central idea of such a reorientation today. The second task is to achieve clarity about the form that arguments and proposals about the conduct of life in the religion of the future should take.



The change of life that we should seek, in the light of the earlier arguments of this book, is to live in such a way that we die only once. It is also to increase our share in some of the attributes that we ascribe to the divine while renouncing any effort to share in certain other attributes. The widening of our part in the marks of divinity must begin in the recognition of the incalculable distance to be traversed in the course of its pursuit. If the vocation of man is to be godlike, man as he has been is, as Emerson wrote, a God in ruins. To the never healing wounds of mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability, the indifference of nature, the cruelty of society, and the corruption of the will add the burdens of belittlement—both imposed and self-inflicted.

We squander the good of life by surrendering to a diminished way of being in the world. We settle for routine and compromise. We stagger, half-conscious, through the world. Anxious for the future, we lose life in the only time that we have, the present. This squandering is a dying many times. Our interest is to stop this dying, so that we can live until we die all at once.

To grasp what is at stake in the enhancement of life, we must recognize the marks of vitality: surfeit, fecundity, and spontaneity, and thus as well the ability to give surprise and to be surprised.

Surfeit is excess over structure: the overcoming of the limits that an established order places on insight, experience, and vision. The order may be the institutional arrangements of society, embedded in a view of the possible and desirable forms of human association. It may also be the rigidified version of the self in one's own character. Surfeit is expressed in works and deeds that are not countenanced by the settled orders of society or of character.

Fecundity is the vigor, variety, and range of what we do and make in the possession of life. Its outward sign is a ceaseless exuberance, an energy that ends only in death.

Spontaneity is the weakening of the influence of the past on the future: the attenuation of path dependence in our experience. It is confirmed by the ability to surprise ourselves as well as others.

Viewed from another, complementary angle, the purpose of our self-transformation is to increase our share in some of the attributes that we

ascribe to the divine while eschewing any effort to possess, or to mimic, other such attributes. We can make ourselves more godlike in the sense of the first set of attributes. However, we cannot become God: the second set of attributes is not only forever beyond our reach but also incompatible with our humanity.

The qualities to which we cannot and should not aspire are those of eternity, omniscience, and completeness. We cannot aspire to eternity because we are mortal. We cannot aspire to omniscience because we are groundless. We cannot aspire to completeness because we are insatiable. All of our activities take place in a finite world, in which we enjoy limited capabilities. The strengthening of our powers can never approach the limit of omnipotence.

It is because we do not and cannot have these resources that we may hate God, or rather hate in ourselves the lack of the divine powers that are denied to us. This hatred and self-loathing can become obstacles to the possession and the enhancement of life. They leave their mark on our refusal to acknowledge the irreparable flaws in human existence. It is a refusal that expresses itself, by subterfuge, in the cruelty, born of self-hatred and despair, that remains an undercurrent impulse in all the world-historical religions but especially in the religions of salvation. For it is these religions, with their conception of a transcendent, all-powerful, and all-knowing God who intervenes in history, that show us, by contrast, what we can never hope to become.

The essence of Prometheanism, as a sequel to the struggle with the world, is the attempt to become more godlike in precisely this sense: the sense of the attributes that are prohibited to us. The triumphalism, the resentment, and the cruelty accompanying Prometheanism rank among the psychological consequences of this misunderstanding of our condition.

Our share of the divine lies in another direction: the direction of embodied spirit. We transcend finite circumstance. We are also incomplete: it is only by connection with others that we enhance the sentiment of being and developing a self. That all such connections also threaten us with loss of individual distinction and freedom is the contradiction inscribed in our being. This contradiction is most completely resolved, to the extent that it can be resolved at all, in love, freely given

and freely rebuffed. It is also resolved, although less fully, by the higher forms of cooperation.

The powers to transcend definite structure and to respond to our incompleteness through love and cooperation are complementary, not contradictory, features of our experience. To the extent that we experience ourselves, and act, as puppets of an established regime of life, thought, or character, we cannot fully engage other people or the world. In the salvation religions, even the transcendent God is represented as being incomplete: he needs man, whom he creates—a notion disconcerting to the theologians and philosophers who struggled to represent the one and transcendent God in the categories of Greek philosophy.

By transcending finite structure and by living out, through love and cooperation, the implications of our incompleteness, we open ourselves both to other people and to the world. This, and this only, is the experience of the divine in which we can hope to share, not the inhuman powers that the Promethean wants to claim for mankind. It is with regard to this second set of attributes of the divine that we can aspire to become more godlike by the same means, and in the same fashion, in which we become more human.

The enhancement of life and the sharing of some (but not other) of the qualities that we ascribe to God represent two convergent descriptions of the goal to which our self-transformation is best directed.

Method and vision

Having stated the central idea informing the view that I here develop, I now consider the method by which to develop this view and to argue in its favor. I do so in the form of four methodological preliminaries to the statement and defense of a vision of the conduct of life. These preliminaries show that the conventional methods of moral philosophy and of moral casuistry are inadequate to the task. We need, for this purpose, another way of thinking and of arguing.

A first preliminary deals with the objection that any argument of the kind that I here propose disregards the distinction between the *is* and

the ought: between the description of what our circumstance is, or might become, and the defense of a way to live, given this circumstance. By inferring a prescriptive conception from a view of the facts of the matter—the truth about our identity and our situation in the world—we would be violating a distinction indispensable to clarity of thought. This supposed rule of inference is attributed, with only limited justification, to Hume, who himself derived an ethic of altruism and fellow feeling from a view of human nature but who rightly refused to let the inference pass undisguised in the equivocal use of words about what is and what should be.

As our beliefs about our identities and our situation in the world become more comprehensive, the distinction between description and prescription begins to lose pertinence. The only general reasons that we could ever have for directing our lives in one way rather than another are those that give us cause to accept, to resist, or to revise our wants, desires, and aspirations, as we experience them. Such reasons give us grounds for action by proposing or by presupposing a view of our nature and of our place in the world. To root an existential imperative—an orientation to life—in a vision of who we are in relation to the world (even if it is an anti-metaphysical metaphysics, like the vision animating classical Confucianism) is a pervasive and persistent feature of our religious experience, both after and before the emergence of the higher religions. It becomes as well a characteristic of philosophy insofar as philosophy comes to share in the concerns of religion or to conceive the dangerous ambition of replacing it.

The effort rigidly to distinguish the *is* from the *ought* makes sense in the setting of local arguments about what to do or not to do in a certain circumstance, at a particular time. However, this distinction begins to break down as we approach the horizon of comprehensive views about our situation in the world and about how best to respond to it. One way to understand why it breaks down under these conditions is to recall the analogy to natural philosophy suggested in the first chapter of this book.

A dominant practice of explanation in the tradition of science inaugurated by Galileo and Newton is the distinction that this practice of scientific explanation makes between stipulated initial conditions and a configuration space defined by those conditions. Within such a space,

unchanging laws of nature govern recurrent natural phenomena. This Newtonian paradigm may work when deployed to explain parts of nature. However, it fails when we try to apply it to the whole of the universe and its history. We can then no longer distinguish between explained phenomena and initial conditions, or observe or prepare copies of the phenomena, or imagine the observer, placed, as if God, outside the configuration space. This cosmological fallacy—the unwarranted universalization of an explanatory style suited to local uses—represents a cosmological equivalent to the fallacy in moral theory of turning an objection to the local uses of a contrast between the *is* and the *ought* into a blanket prohibition of any such passage from description to commitment.

If we consider the matter from the opposite perspective—that is to say, from the vantage point of where we could find support for an orientation to life, rather than from the perspective of what authority our comprehensive views have to guide the conduct of life—we reach the same conclusion. There can be no support for such an orientation other than an inclusive account of our identity and of our place in the world. It will always be a defective and defeasible grounding. However, it is the only kind of basis that we can ever hope to find. The salvation religions are no exception to this rule, for they too anchor a view of how to live in an understanding of ultimate reality, even if it is one that reason, unassisted by revelation, is powerless to attain.

The complaint of an illegitimate passage from description to prescription nevertheless holds an element of truth. As it becomes comprehensive, a conception also becomes contestable. Whatever the degree of inner conviction that we may experience in upholding it, we never have enough reason to do so. It can always be challenged—and it remains subject to doubt and to loss of faith—in the light of other aspects of our knowledge and experience.

Moreover, it works as a self-fulfilling prophecy. It asks us to change the world—at least our world—according to its dictates. By so doing, we make the world come closer to what, according to the comprehensive view, the world already is. The facts, however, of natural, social, or psychological reality fight back against the self-fulfilling prophecy, providing a test, albeit an inconclusive one, for what always continues to be an idea open to attack.

The contestability of the conception taints the approach to life that must rely on it. A comprehensive view demands that we commit our lives in one direction rather than in another. A daunting disproportion remains between the weight of that commitment and the adequacy of its grounds. This disproportion is the limited truth in the otherwise unjustified objection to a passage, intrinsic to religion, from is to ought.

A second preliminary is to identify what it is that we seek to change when we speak, in such an argument, of changing ourselves. It is our constitution or our nature. But what kind of reality is our nature? We know ourselves only as what we are like now, formed by the history of our societies and our cultures.

The self-transformation sought by the religion of the future makes two crucial assumptions of fact. Both are controversial when considered from the standpoint of ideas that have exercised influence in thought over the last few centuries. These ideas form part of the metaphysical background to the struggle with the world. The religion of the future explicates and deepens this background rather than replacing it.

A first factual assumption is that the self is continuous, from birth to death, and has indefinite depth. Any belief that contradicts or qualifies the continuity of the self, and that dissolves the self into ephemeral states of being, is incompatible with the religion of the future, as it was incompatible with every sacred or profane variant of the struggle with the world.

A second factual assumption is that we all share in the nature of the species, the human race. There is no simple distinction between invariant and variable aspects of human nature. Every aspect of our experience is penetrated by the history of society and culture.

Recall, for example, the contrast between the two sides of the mind: the mind as machine and the mind as anti-machine, or imagination. Although the physical structure of the brain foreshadows and enables the workings of the imagination, it fails to predetermine the relation and the comparative force of these two sides of the mind. Their relative ascendancy depends on the character of education, as well as on the organization of society and culture, which may either broaden or narrow the space of the imagination.

So it goes with every part of our constitution, including the fundamental condition of embodied spirit, as both situated and transcendent,

and the conflict between the imperative of connection to other people (which finds its consummate forms in personal love and the higher forms of cooperation) and our striving to escape subjugation and loss of the sentiment of self and of the power of self-direction. As the history of politics is internal to the history of the mind, so too is it internal to the history of every major aspect of existence.

All of our experience, not just a part of it, is on the line in history. Every form of life, institutionalized in society and conceptualized in culture, tilts the scales, encouraging the expression and development of some varieties of experience while inhibiting others. Nevertheless, we are not a plastic mass of revisable dispositions, freely open to radical re-engineering by transformative political and moral projects. We change, with difficulty, over time and at the margins. As the poet writes, we would rather be ruined than changed.

Given these contrasting features of the relation of human nature to history, we can safely understand human nature only as what we are like now, or have been, individually and collectively, and as what we might next become, in the penumbra of the adjacent possible, thanks to our efforts to change both ourselves and society.

We are, to return to the central idea of the self as context-shaped but nevertheless context-revising and context-transcending spirit, incapable of being reduced entirely to the regime of society or of thought in which we happen to find ourselves placed. The next incongruous experience, or rebellious thought, or transformative albeit unintended experiment may put paid to the pretense of that regime, of its votaries and apologists, to circumscribe the perimeter of our powers. The regime may be organized to suppress this residual capability of ours: by widening the distance between our regime-preserving and our regime-reforming moves, thus making change depend on crisis and strengthening the dominion of the dead over the living. However, such suppression will never be complete: the power to see, think, feel, act, connect, produce, and organize in ways that the present order of society or of thought fails to countenance will remain, if only as a residue. The residue may then be hailed as a prophecy and taken as a road.

It follows, with respect to society, that normative argument need never be solely contextual or internal, judging a regime by its own stan-

dards, criticizing institutions and practices in the light of the prescriptive conceptions of human association that they are held to embody, and then reinterpreting these conceptions in the light of our actual or imagined experiments in their reform. It follows, with regard to thought and to science, that our methods of argument and standards of justification are always both contestable and revisable and lack the authority and the power to contain discovery and to limit insight into either ourselves or the world; what we find out we may only retrospectively justify.

Our comprehensive conceptions of our identity, viewed in relation to our place in nature, are not, in this account, to be understood as merely or chiefly conjectures about a natural phenomenon, as if human nature were a thing. They do not resemble the thinking that produced the standard model of particle physics or the periodic table. They are prophecies, indeed imperfectly self-fulfilling prophecies, as I have argued in my defense of the concept of religion.

Nevertheless, they are prophecies, embedded in, or connected with, at least two sets of empirical conjectures. One set of conjectures address how far we can go in changing ourselves (which is to say, changing what we are like now). When, for example, the founders of the three orientations to existence considered earlier in this book called for the substitution of an ethos of proud and unforgiving self-assertion by one of sacrificial benevolence, in frontal conflict with dominant experience as well as with prevailing ideas, they made a claim about what we might become. A second set of conjectures deals with the comparative power and endurance of our contradictory desires. It formed part of the teaching of some of those same prophets (but not of others) that acceptance is better than triumph; that love, whether given or received, counts for more than altruism; and that no flourishing in the world can be reconciled with the enhancement of life if it is predicated on failure to recognize and respect our longing for the infinite and the unconditional.

The self-transformation sought by the program of the religion of the future has our human constitution as its subject matter. It proceeds from a view of who we are, as embodied and situated, but also of the forces within and around us that undermine and corrupt the affirmation of our identity. It wants us to become who we are, if only we could understand

this phrase in a manner that gives history and transcendence their due and that consequently puts in the place of a rationalizing teleology the dialectic of path dependence and prophetic innovation.

A third preliminary draws the right conclusions from the near uselessness of the methods and meta-discourses favored by contemporary academic philosophy. The agenda of self-transformation that I here explore and defend is a first-order proposal. It yields no rules and standards for application in moral casuistry. It nevertheless results in a vision of the conduct of life.

This argument about the conduct of life relies on a practice of thought that insists on the connection between a higher-order discourse about methods and presuppositions and a first-order discourse about what to do with them. For such a practice, the worth of every higher-order discourse must be vindicated by its first-order fecundity. The reach and power of first-order proposals are revealed by their implications for the change of our higher-order presuppositions and methods.

We cannot be satisfied with a way of doing philosophy that explores the contrasts among meta-discourses deployed to reach the same first-order results, or to arrive at no first-order results at all. Nor should we accept a philosophical practice that uses higher-order discourses only negatively, to attack all other such discourses, as if the problem of how to think could solve itself spontaneously.

Look and see what we find in the school philosophy of today. In political philosophy, few disagree about the intended outcome: liberal social democracy, some improved version of the social-democratic settlement of the mid-twentieth century. They disagree only about the philosophical vocabulary (social-contract, utilitarian, or communitarian) in which the preset political line is to be defended. They place a philosophical gloss of humanization on arrangements that they do not believe themselves able to reimagine and remake.

Open the equivalent books of moral philosophy, with their supposed contrast among consequentialist (especially rule-utilitarian), Kantian, and contractarian approaches to moral obligation. It is easy to reconcile them; they have in common the idea that the task of moral philosophy is to define our obligations to one another and to do so on the basis of a view that sees self-interest as the problem and a legalistic altruism,

or the disinterested universality of duty to others, as the solution. Such a view amounts to a threefold mistake.

It is a mistake, first, because the constraint of universality never suffices to single out one course of action against others. It is always compatible with many. It gains content only if this content is independently chosen for other reasons and motives, and then expressed retrospectively in the language of universality. Consider, by comparison, the Marxist idea of ideology: the interests of a class must be represented as universal interests of humanity to acquire the force of legitimization. It is true that to win the authority that comes with universality, they must allow themselves to be constrained in some way. We may have hoped to infer our truest interests (without knowing anything about them) only from the idea of universality itself. We are in fact, however, able to infer from this idea only what we first secretly placed in it. This secret placement is the chief operational significance of the moral meta-theories.

It is a mistake, second, because the choice of altruism as the organizing principle of the moral life, although a common move among the world religions, is a belief that the struggle with the world rejected—rightly, as I earlier argued. It rejected this belief in the sacred voice of its theological teachings as well as in the profane voice of romanticism. In the dialectic between the idea of man as the infinite imprisoned within the finite and the notion of the primacy of love over altruism as the organizing principle of the moral life, this approach to existence established a deeper vision of humanity. This view acquired substance and influence by helping inform the revolutionary projects of political and personal emancipation that have shaken the whole world over the last several centuries. The return to the idea of the predominance of the problem of altruism, affirmed in the roughly equivalent languages of Benthamite and Kantian doctrines, represents an attempt to step back from this revolution and to dilute its message. Rather than arguing for this pietistic reaction, the counter-revolutionaries of moral theory disguise reaction as rationality.

It is a mistake, third, because our ideas of obligation work in fact—that is to say, they acquire meaning and direction—only by being embedded first in latent, inarticulate, undeveloped, and undefended but nevertheless comprehensive views of who we are and of how we fit into the world and then in conceptions of society, together with the institutional programs enacting them.

Down with a style of philosophizing that separates higher-order discourses from first-order proposals, and pays for its emptiness with its sterility.

A fourth preliminary is to understand and to develop the suppressed and misunderstood teachings of the struggle with the world about the relation of spirit to structure and of self to others. These teachings suggest what the enhancement of life means, as well as what it requires by way of our activity in the world.

All the religions of transcendence, each in its own way, insisted on replacing the ethic of martial valor, of pride and self-assertion, dear to the fighting and ruling classes of the great states of the past, with an ethic of inclusive solidarity and fellow feeling. This substitution found support in the denial of the reality or authority of all divisions within mankind. Such was the truth proclaimed in Buddhism and Confucianism as well as in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The moral philosophers, with their emphasis on ethical universalism, maintain this focus, in the bloodless and lifeless mode of the fake contest among their meta-theories.

It was the distinctive achievement of the struggle with the world, in all its theistic and secular forms, especially Christianity, democracy, and romanticism, to have subordinated this ethical universalism to another moral vision: one in which our ability to imagine and to accept one another (in love and in the higher forms of cooperation) and our capacity to see and act beyond the limits of the established structures of life and thought become the commanding impulses. This vision remains surrounded and compromised, in the organized religions and the established social orders, by beliefs, practices, and institutions that contradict its insights and defeat its intentions. Once we set out to confront and to overcome these obstacles, we are ready for a revolution in our beliefs.

The crucial element in the turn taken by the struggle with the world is the marriage of our ideas about connection and cooperation with our ideas about the longing for the infinite: the striving for the insights and the powers that are denied to us by the limiting structures of life and of thought that we must inhabit. The quest for such insights and powers in turn leads to the decisive concern with the path to a greater existence. This path must be founded on the recognition rather than on the denial

of our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability. It must reaffirm our desire to live for the future as beings not determined by the present conditions of their existence. It must represent a fight nevertheless to escape estrangement from the highest good, life, which we can possess only in the present moment.

These themes set points of departure for the religion of the future. They generate no rules to tell us whom we should cast into the sea when the boat is sinking under its weight, or how we should solve any of the other conundrums that occupy the time of those who think that rule-books and casuistry can compensate for lack of vision in deliberating what to make of life.

The ambitions that we have been taught to cultivate by the tradition of the struggle with the world present us with two distinct but related problems. One of them has a familiar but misleading description in the history of the West. The other is at once pervasive and unspoken.

The familiar problem is the one that is inadequately described as the reconciliation of Christian love with pagan greatness. The idea that our ability to imagine and to accept other people, in personal love and in the higher forms of cooperation, has precedence over altruism in the organization of the moral life is central to the Christian faith. However, it is equally basic to all that is deepest and most powerful in the secular culture of the West and in the programs of political and personal liberation that have resonated throughout the world over the last two centuries.

What we are inclined to call the pagan idea of greatness need not be pagan at all. It can be another name for the exercise of our power to turn the tables on our arrangements and presuppositions. Rising from tutelage to a higher life, we conceive the aim of changing the nature as well as the content of our frameworks of existence and of thought so that we may cease to live as exiles in the world, and no longer obey institutions and doctrines that insult the condition of embodied spirit.

Our efforts at solidarity are penetrated and transformed by our rebellion against belittlement and by our longing for the infinite, which changes their nature and redirects their course. Connection among beings who can accept their allotted social stations, credit the dogmas of the established culture, and find closeness in sameness or convergence is one thing. Solidarity among people who believe themselves to

be unrepresented and unaccommodated by all established structures of life and of thought is another thing. What exactly that other thing is and what it requires, by way of reorienting life as well as of reconstructing society, is one way to describe the content of a religion of the future.

What lies beyond the established structure also lies beyond the present moment. We reach for what we do not have and despise what we do. So arises, in the course of the attempt to reconcile solidarity with empowerment, the daunting problem of our estrangement from life as we can alone live it, in the present.

The view of self-transformation in the religion of the future bears directly on this problem. The reconstruction of society takes place in historical time. We do not control the relation of our life spans to those social events; at best, we can aspire to a foretaste, within our own life experience, of the social future that we seek.

The reorientation of life, however, is a task that falls squarely within the bounds of biographical time. It is ours to achieve or not. It begins in clarity about what we can and cannot change. We cannot escape our mortality, our groundlessness, or our insatiability. The attempt to deny or to overcome them amounts to a vain struggle against the nature of our existence, a refusal of our humanity.

In coming to see this truth, however, we free ourselves to confront another facet of our experience, which we may easily mistake for a fourth, incurable defect of human life: our susceptibility to belittlement. The chief form of the susceptibility to belittlement is the failure to exercise our powers of transcendence over the established regimes of society and of thought and the willingness to allow these regimes definitely to shape our dealings with one another.

This failure can be remedied by both the reconstruction of society and the reorientation of life. These two remedies support each other. A society whose institutions are hospitable to the higher forms of cooperation and whose public culture and education recognize and sustain our condition as embodied spirit is one in which the needed reorientation of life can more readily occur and more quickly advance. In the absence of the institutional and cultural changes permitting these results, the reorientation of life becomes at once more difficult and more important. Within a broad margin, self-transformation can stand in for the remaking of society and of culture. The virtues, redefined, can help supply the deficit of our established institutions and prevailing beliefs.

Our estrangement from life in the present turns perversely into a source of belittlement. Thus, the orientation to the future, which the struggle with the world has established in every department of our political and moral experience as the road to the salvation of our souls or to the improvement of our societies, turns against itself.

To live for the future, whether it is the providential future of God's plan or the historical future of a greater life for humanity, is to resist the finality of established arrangements and ruling assumptions. It is to affirm ourselves as beings whose possibilities of vision and experience are not limited by the circumstances in which we find ourselves. This announcement that we make to ourselves is a prophecy of greatness in the midst of the ordinary and an intimation of our ascent to a higher state of being.

However, the orientation to the future then takes back what it has given us when it becomes, as it has become in the history of the sacred and secular struggle with the world, estrangement from the present. Revulsion against life now diminishes our regard for our greatest good and denies us all guidance about its preservation. It deprives us of the means to avoid dying before death. We waste, unknowingly, the treasure that fell into our hands.

Thus, the religion of the future derives three related tasks from its close kinship with the struggle with the world. The first task is to reconcile transcendence with solidarity, not in the abstractions of philosophy but in the conduct of life and the organization of society. The second task is to redirect the orientation to the future in a form that overcomes alienation from the present. The third task is to give effect to the impulse that the sacred and profane versions of the struggle with the world have established in the hearts of men and women: that we must live and understand our lives in a way that does justice to who we are. We will renounce the longing to be God and become, instead, more godlike. We will set aside the hope of eternal life, the better to possess the mortal life that is ours.

The overthrow: from self-subversion to self-transformation

A way of living that keeps faith with these concerns, experiences, and ideas must begin in the overthrow of ourselves. By the unwavering recognition of death, groundlessness, and insatiability, we awake to life.

In our advance to a greater life, we confront an initial obstacle. Unless we remove or overcome this obstacle, we can rise no further. We spend our time in a daze of diminished existence, neither awake nor asleep. We resign ourselves to compromise and routine, seeing the world through the categories of the prevailing culture or the methods of established ways of thinking. We reconcile ourselves to the mutilation of our experience that we began to accept when we entered on a particular course of life. We allow ourselves to be subdued by the carapace of diminished experience that formed around us, as we grew older. For the vast majority of men and women, overwhelming economic necessity and drudgery overwhelm and disguise a stupefaction that would otherwise be apparent. For the increasing number of people who, with the material progress of society, are released from grinding material constraint, there is no such disguise.

In this way, we cease to live as embodied spirit: as the context-bound but context-resisting agents that we really are. That which is most precious—life itself—we give away in return for nothing. We belittle ourselves, wrongly mistaking our belittlement for a fate as inescapable as our mortality, our groundlessness, and our insatiability.

The antidote to this diminishment is to face the terrifying truth about our situation. Our confrontation with the three great terrors of human life shakes and arouses us, if only we could bring ourselves to reenact it, always and to the end.

The first terror is the certainty of death, grasped in the context of our groundlessness. Each of us will be annihilated. None of us can, without lying to himself, claim that this annihilation is less real or definitive than it appears to be: that we will somehow live in other people in any way other than in a metaphorical sense or as if our commitments, attachments, interests, and ideals, defective, partial, and accidental as they are, could stand in the place of the tremendous, unbounded, and therefore incomparable experience of being alive. Our sense of fecundity—of all that we might be and might do—collides with the awareness that we are death-bound.

That we are surrounded on every side by enigma and remain forever powerless to decipher the mystery of our existence, and of the reality of the world and of time, only makes the certainty of death more horrify-

ing; we can place neither life nor death within a framework that explains them in ways communicating with our experience and concerns. Nature, indifferent to these concerns and working on a scale immeasurably disproportionate to the span of a human life, operates as if what matters decisively to us counts for nothing to it. As our knowledge of the universe increases, this disconnection between the views from inside and from outside the human person seems only to widen. Whether there is one universe or a plurality or succession of universes, our part in the story leaves us only with the contrast between what we believe ourselves to be and hope to become and what we know awaits us. It awaits us in a universe about which we can only ever discover what matters less rather than what matters more.

The second terror is the recognition of our groundlessness against the background of our mortality. That we should have been born and then die, that life should be so full of incident and end in nothing, that the succession of time and of worlds upon worlds should be what it is rather than something else, and that the advance of our insight into nature should never bring us any closer to knowledge of the ground of reality—of the being of anything at all—all this imparts to our existence its dreamlike character.

If, in the midst of our ordinary state of half-consciousness, we stop for a moment to consider the impenetrable character not only of our own existence but also of all being, the fantastical quality of our situation becomes momentarily apparent to us. Unable to dissipate the enigma, we would plunge into life, if we did not more often prefer to cling, in half belief, to one of the religions or philosophies that falsely claim to disclose the ground of existence.

We can never remove, confidently or definitively, the threat of nihilism: the apprehension that our lives and the world itself may be meaningless: that is to say, not open to any explanation that is either comprehensive enough to elucidate why there is what there is or cast in terms that communicate with our concerns about our ephemeral and mysterious existence.

All our understandings are fragmentary. All rest on disputable presuppositions. Our methods and disciplines are a dime a dozen. Our insights are not only partial and precarious; they also fail to meet in a single encompassing vision. Or, rather, we can make them converge into so

many alternative visions that their convergence or consistency is of no value in bringing us closer to the truth about the ground of existence.

At the end of our efforts, we find ourselves as distant from the prize as we were at the beginning. At first exhausted and frightened but then schooled in the indifference bred by our dimmed awareness of the world, we may embrace one of the handy accounts of the ground of existence that have been ceaselessly generated in the history of religion and of philosophy. Once, however, we reject the consolations of this false grounding, as delusional and cowardly and as incompatible with our struggle for a greater life, we face, defenseless, the enigmatic nature of our existence.

That we must face it in the shadow of death ensures that we cannot console ourselves by hoping for a later revelation. The constraint of mortality closes the circle around us, imparting to our existence and to its darkness their decisive concentration.

The third terror that we must experience is the unlimited character of our desires. We want, especially of one another, more than the world or any living person can give. We want the impossible: the absolute represented in the finite. Of one another, we want the assurance of an unconditional place in the world. We want difference and union at the same time.

The restlessness of desire appears at first in the rhythms of wanting, satiation, boredom, and more wanting. It acquires a frenzied quality in obsession and addiction. It becomes vast in our desire for one another and sets an indelible mark on our erotic life.

It has often been said that this view of desire and of love is an invention of Christianity, remade by romanticism. Only in the cultures that have been penetrated by these beliefs, according to this view, is the desire for the absolute combined with desire for another person, with the result of arousing an expectation that real people and societies cannot meet.

Christianity and romanticism, however, opened a road to the discovery of the nature of the self as embodied spirit: the context-bound and context-transcending person. Everything in the history of belief and of politics works in the same direction: the development and deepening of selfhood turns deepened selves into objects of unlimited potency, fascination, and danger for one another and arouses the hope of forming attachments in which we can soften the conflict between the

enabling conditions of self-affirmation: between our embrace by another person and our separateness from her. In this embrace, we seek an assurance of our own being that can withstand the prospect of death and the inscrutability of existence.

However, no finite circumstance or attachment can bear the weight of this unlimited longing for the infinite. The very attribute that makes us into the prime candidates to serve for one another as proxies for the inaccessible absolute—the indefinite depth and obscurity of the self—ensures that we cannot satisfy our desire for an acceptance so unconditional that it can rob both death and groundlessness of their terrors.

The life of desire—for things and then for people—is a restlessness from which we have only the false rescue of diminished life and consciousness. The more we discover and affirm the character of the self as situated and transcendent, the more do we find ourselves chained to the wheel of insatiable desire and condemned to demand the absolute from the relative, the unconditional from the conditional, the infinite from the finite.

Terrified by the certainty of death, forced to recognize our inability to understand the ground of being and of existence, and tormented by insatiable desire, for people if not for things, we have cause to wake to life from our daze of resignation to belittlement. Unwavering recognition of these incurable defects in existence affords three vast and distinct benefits.

The first benefit is the service that truthfulness about the fundamental facts of our existence renders to self-understanding and that self-understanding gives to our rise to a greater life. In the history of the struggle with the world, every sacred and profane discourse has, to one extent or another, enlisted illusion in the service of an arousal of the will.

For the sacred versions—the religions of salvation—the illusion has been a direct denial of the irreparable character of the defects in human life and the belief that we can repair them with help from a transcendent God who intervenes in history. The strengthening of the will, accomplished at the encouragement of these beliefs, would enable us to achieve a combination of patience and striving in the face of death and suffering: not only to compose ourselves but also to improve both ourselves and society.

The profane forms of the struggle with the world—the secular programs of political and personal liberation—have often sought to strengthen the will through an appeal to a historical providence occupying the place that divine providence holds in the salvation religions. Take the example of Marxism, the most important intellectual influence on the Left over the last hundred and fifty years. That history has a plan might seem to reduce the will to nothing. Nevertheless, the belief that history will work as an invincible ally of ours can excite the will to exertions against obstacles that might otherwise seem insuperable.

Or consider romanticism. There the illusion is that we can save ourselves without having to change the structures of society and of thought; one structure is as inimical to our humanity as another. Only disruption, undertaken by individual or collective action (according to the distinct programs of individualist and political romanticism), creates the interludes in which humanity can flourish. Disrupting the structures will afford us at least a taste of undiminished existence.

The ideas informing these secular campaigns of emancipation do not directly deny our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability. Nevertheless, they evoke a world of heroic political or personal action, grounded only in itself, and wholly within the power of the will to achieve. In this world, we can forget the truth of our circumstance. If we are Marxist revolutionaries, for example, we can try to shift our focus from the dying individual to the relatively immortal species. If we are romantics, we can hope to describe insatiability as adventure and groundlessness as self-grounding. Only death will defeat our efforts at such re-description and require that we cope with it in the only way that may, according to the romantic, be readily available to us: by a show of power and of invulnerability.

Whether it is direct or indirect, the denial of the truth about our circumstance taints with self-deception our struggle for a greater life. Mystification is too high a price to pay for the arousal of the will. In every instance, it results in a mistake of direction, as the examples of Marxism and romanticism suggest.

The second benefit of the acknowledgement of our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability is that it prevents the effort to come into a fuller possession of life from degenerating into Prometheanism or power worship. The sole reliable safeguard against our self-deification

is the unstinting acknowledgment that we are death-bound, forever in the dark about the ground of our existence and of reality, and doomed to yearn ceaselessly for an unconditional and absolute that we cannot have and are always tempted to mistake for the finite and flawed beings around us. No triumph can be celebrated by a being who will soon be annihilated, who must live without grasping the framework of his life, and whose desires immeasurably exceed the satisfactions that they can achieve.

As large as these two advantages may be, they are not as significant as the third benefit to be enjoyed by abandoning the denial of the truth about our circumstance. The third benefit is to break the spell of the sleepwalking, the unthinking routine and repetition, the surrender of consciousness to the ready-made categories of the established culture, in which we habitually spend our vanishing time.

Like a man who is wakened in the middle of the night by his executioners and whose final minutes seem to last and to be crowded with incident, as his eyes are wide open and his life passes before him, so can we become when we finally decide no longer to deny the reality of our situation. We are then both the overthrowers and the overthrown; denied the protection of the habits and the illusions that have sustained the will at the cost of its misdirection, we turn to face and to possess life so long as it can be ours.

Our terrorization of ourselves, through heightened awareness of our situation in the world, has no set sequel. It can serve, and in the history of thought and of experience it has served, as a preliminary to very different next steps. What is remarkable is that for the most part the philosophers have imagined the sequel to the overthrow in such a way that it bears little intrinsic relation to the experience that motivated it. It appears in their thought as an epilogue with no close connection to the story that it follows. Recall two examples from the history of Western philosophy, Pascal and Heidegger, both of them focused on the first and most powerful of the three terrors that I have enumerated: fear of death.

For Pascal, the condition from which we must arouse ourselves is that of *divertissement*, the diversion of our efforts and devotions to objects that are, by their very nature, unworthy of our ultimate attention.

We suppress the prospect of death and the passage of time, by delivering ourselves over to one diversion after another. Each diversion is an instance of false transcendence, a selling of ourselves short.

From this self-inflicted damnation, we begin to escape by making against ourselves the terrorizing argument that we will die, lost in what appears to be a vast and frightening void. What we do next, in this account, is to throw ourselves into the hands of a remote and voiceless God, who looks into our hearts from behind an impenetrable cloud. Only he can give us what we most want: eternal life. The consequence of our self-terrorization is to show all our diversions for what they are and to subordinate all our efforts, after the terror, in this brief passage through the world, to the single-minded aim of finding favor in the eyes of him who holds the keys to life eternal.

For Heidegger, the terrorization and its sequel are addressed in different moments of the evolution of his thinking. *Being and Time* delivers, without qualification or compensation, the message of the terror. We are lost in dispersal or distraction: *Zerstreuung* here plays the role of *divertissement*. Our existence is inauthentic: we surrender our thoughts and experiences to the collective formulas of society and culture.

These collective automatisms rob us of ourselves, submitting our cares and powers to their tropes. They confront, however, a limit in our foretaste of death. Each man's experience of death, and of his march to death, remains his own. As we pursue the implications of this fact, and begin to reread being in the light of human existence and human existence in the shadow of death, our willingness to hand ourselves over to an inauthentic life is shaken.

Once again, as in Pascal, the focus falls on the first and most terrible of the defects in human life: the fear of death in the context of groundlessness. What is to follow this arousal? For a moment, in Heidegger's trajectory, it seemed that the awakening to the truth about the human condition—and about being, grasped from the all-important vantage point of our existence—would be followed by politics. It turned out to be a species of violent political romanticism with no close connection to the preceding analysis of existence (other than an affinity of attitudes and of symbols) and with no definite institutional content (other than the anti-institutional biases of the romantic imagination).

The failure and abandonment of this political conversion were followed by the “turn” of Heidegger’s late philosophy: the outright attempt to reverse the religious revolutions resulting in the higher religions in favor of a pagan worship of being. A polytheism was to take the place of the dialectic of immanence and transcendence that has been central to every version of the struggle with the world. Under the dispensation of this paganism, we strive once again for serenity and at homeness in the radiant world, as the pagan philosophers always taught us to do. We cure ourselves of the sickness besetting all the sacred and profane versions of that spiritual approach, estrangement from life in the present, and open ourselves up to the revelations of immediate experience. We do so, however, only on the condition of renouncing the attribute that in fact makes us both human and godlike: our power of resistance to the contexts of life and of thought that shape us.

The better sequel to a confrontation with the truth about the human condition is not Pascal’s or Heidegger’s or any other response that is only obliquely connected with the source and subject matter of our overthrow of ourselves. The better sequel is our conversion to life undimmed. The terrors of death, groundlessness, and insatiability concern defects in existence. By facing them, what we get as reward is existence, seen as it really is, that we may live it as it might become.

Aroused from our daze, we begin to recover the highest good: life now. We then confront the quandary that we have been taught to appreciate by the achievements and insights, as well as by the failures and illusions, of the struggle with the world. We must find a way to live for the future without being estranged from life in the present.

Living for the future means living as beings whose consciousness and trajectory are not finally determined by the present circumstances of their existence. In particular, they are not restricted by the established structure of society and of thought. Such beings are able to envision a greater life and to project the path by which they will reach it. All their deeds and thoughts are premised on insight into the disproportion between who they are, as context-shaped but also context-transcending agents, and the situation in which they find themselves. As a result, they do not regard their susceptibility to belittlement as a flaw to be accepted together with their mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability.

They understand the decisive importance of drawing in the right place the line between the immutable circumstances of human life and the alterable organization of society.

If, however, the whole point of their overthrow of themselves is to possess life, they will not resign themselves to the vision of a good that they can never possess because it is relegated to a future that remains always beyond their reach. “Thou shall be king hereafter,” Macbeth is told. He fails to understand the meaning of the words: that he shall never be king in the present that he can possess. Hereafter is never. To live for the future in such a way that our desired ascent begins right now, cleansing from the exercise of our power of transcendence the stain of estrangement from life in the present, becomes a defining concern for the religion of the future.

There is one last benefit that we gain from an unconditional recognition of the irreparable flaws in human life. As we awake to life, shaken by the awareness of the truth about our condition, we would be overwhelmed by exultation at being alive. The philosophers have told us that we can no more look death in the face than keep looking straight at the sun. It is life, however, more than death that we cannot regard directly: that we should have been born, and possess life and individuality, is the sole incommensurable joy. If we were unable to counterbalance this joy, it would paralyze us.

There are two ways in which we can contain it. One way deprives us of the highest good; the other helps us possess it. One way is premised on forgetting or denying our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability; the other depends on recognizing them for what they are.

The first way is to settle for the diminished existence and awareness—the dissipation and diversion—in which we ordinarily spend our time and dilapidate the good of greatest value. We then protect ourselves against the exultation of being alive by experiencing a lesser life. The crucial condition of this approach is denial of the truth about the human condition.

The second way is to affirm this truth, so unreservedly and constantly, that it can darken the vision of life. We may then hope to live and to see in the space marked out by this great light and its accompanying shadow.



Ideas and stories are not enough to ensure that we will awake from the daze of a diminished existence to possess life in the full. To achieve this goal, we must supplement them either by practices that society and culture establish or by virtues that make up for their absence.

The German soldiers who carried Heidegger's *Being and Time* around with them in the First World War did not need the ideas of that philosopher to lift themselves from the sleepwalking of everyday experience. They had war to remind them at every moment that they were death-bound. The words on the page mattered for a few because they seemed to give voice to an experience of terror that many experienced without having read them.

How are we so to shape our experience that we no longer require the devotions of war—or of any other limiting and terrifying experience—to come to life? Society and culture must be so organized that they diminish the distance between the ordinary moves that we make within an institutional or ideological framework that we take for granted and the exceptional moves by which we challenge and change pieces of that framework. Our normal science, for example, must acquire some of the features of revolutionary science. Our education must be designed to school the mind in ideas and visions remote from those that prevail in the established culture and to free it from passivity and subservience by exposing it, at every turn, to contrasting points of view. Our democracies must be arranged in ways that increase the temperature of politics (that is, the level of organized popular engagement in political life) and hasten its pace (that is, the ability to break deadlock and bring about structural reform), diminishing the dependence of change upon crisis. Our market economies must favor an organization of work by which tasks are redefined in the course of being executed and an organization of the market economy in which we are free to innovate in the arrangements of production and exchange as well as in combinations of people, technologies, and capital.

In these ways, and in many like them, we move toward the creation of structures that impart to our ordinary experience the qualities that we are accustomed to see only in our exceptional experiences

of structure-revision. This change in the character of ordinary experience confirms and sustains the arousal to life that we may achieve initially from our recognition of death, groundlessness, and insatiability.

But what if such institutional arrangements, as well as the practices that rely on them and that reproduce them, are missing? Then certain habitual dispositions to action—the virtues—must do the work that would otherwise be done by practices and institutions. Political institutions make political virtues not unnecessary but less necessary. We establish political institutions so that we can depend less on these virtues.

The same relation between our arrangements and our dispositions reappears in the moral realm, beginning with its most important part: the awareness and affirmation of life. If we lack institutions and practices that diminish the distance between the reproduction and the revision of institutional and conceptual structures, then we must make up for their absence by certain forms of action and of consciousness. They will always be important to our rise. In the absence of structures with these attributes, however, they will become all the more vital. Without them, we will be unable to keep what we acquired when we faced the reality of our situation.

Virtue as self-transformation

With these preliminaries in mind, consider two complementary accounts of the change in the conduct of life that the religion of the future requires. One perspective takes the form of a doctrine of the virtues. A second perspective is a conception of the course of existence: of the formative incidents by which we uphold or squander the good of life.

A virtue is a habitual disposition to action. The legitimate role of habit and repetition in our experience is to form a setting in which the new becomes possible in that experience. As we are not to be enslaved to the established regime of society and culture, so too we are not to be imprisoned by the rigidified form of the self, our character.

The aim, however, is not to wage war against all routine and repetition. Such a war would amount to a campaign against existence itself.

It would aggravate our alienation from the present rather than overcoming this estrangement. We would be committing the mistake of the romantics, and reenacting the Sartrean heresy about self and structure. The point is to enlist repetition and routine in the service of the power of transcendence, just as the modular, formulaic, and machine-like aspects of the life of the mind help explain the work of the mind as imagination. It may even be the case that one of these habitual dispositions is the enhancement of our power to envision and to enact the new, that is to say the non-habitual.

A characteristic teaching in the tradition of moral philosophy that we associate with the discourse of virtue (“virtue ethics”) is the importance of forming a character that is inclined to practice certain actions. Character economizes on moral deliberation (a scarce resource), just as political institutions economize on political deliberation as well as on civic virtue or, indeed, on virtue altogether (equally scarce resources).

For any view that develops out of the struggle with the world, however, including the view that I here call the religion of the future, character becomes a questionable good: to be embraced and denied, or to be accepted in a novel and qualified sense. Two things are fatal to the mind, wrote Friedrich Schlegel: to have a system and not to have it. A character is the system of a personality. It is fatal to our moral development to have and not to have a character. It is fatal not to have a character because our transcendence over circumstance requires effective personal agency, which in turn depends on a cohesive personality with a set of recurrent dispositions, which is to say a character. It is fatal to have a character because the rigidified self works as enemy to the transforming self.

The solution to this apparent dilemma is the equivalent in the organization of our moral experience to what a structure open to revision and experiment represents in the organization of our social experience. We should seek in our institutions and practices that they facilitate their own revision, diminishing the distance between our structure-preserving and our structure-revising moves and weakening, as a result, the dependence of change on crisis as well as the influence of the past on the future. Such a structure-destroying structure deprives itself of the aura of naturalness and necessity. It ceases to present itself to us as an unchosen fate, as part of the way things are.

By changing the institutional and ideological order of social life in this direction, we acquire a great benefit: we can better advance in the zone of intersection between the institutional conditions of our most basic material and moral interests—the development of our practical capabilities, both as individuals and as collectivities, and the freeing of cooperation from the incubus of class society.

An analogous principle applies in the ordering of our moral experience. The hardening of a character denies each of the attributes of life: its qualities of surfeit, fecundity, and spontaneity. It prevents us from dying only once.

The solution, however, is not to be without a character, thus attempting to reject in the nature of a personality the dialectic between habit and rebellion. It is to form a character distinguished by its openness to experience and by its readiness to change. Such a character has the mark of a patient and hopeful availability, safeguarding vitality rather than strangling it. The power of transcendence, which is the condition of spirit, enables us to imagine and to accept other people as more than the products of a circumstance or as placeholders in a scheme of social division and hierarchy. More generally, it allows us to counteract our self-absorption and to receive, more widely and intensely, the impressions of reality. It renders our vision more inclusive and universal. In so doing, it offers a kind of salvation.

One of the signs of success in the formation of such a character-defying character is that we will become better able to surprise ourselves as well as others. In society, the more revisable structure diminishes the force of path dependence, even as it makes trauma less necessary to transformation. In the ordering of our moral experience, the counterpart to this intensification of vitality is that, subject to the constraints of society and the decline of the body, we become better able, at each moment of experience, to see and to do more than our previous course of life seemed to hold out for our future.

The history of moral ideas in the West has rendered familiar the metaphors of the voyage, the pilgrimage, and the adventure. To the Christian mind, they gave some indication of how life in secular society should be lived. For the romantic imagination, these same metaphors took on the aspect of a war against repetition and structure and thus against life itself, as it can be experienced over the course of an actual

existence in a real society. For the ideologists and militants of the political programs that, over the last two centuries, proposed radically to alter society, the war against routine was replaced by the fight for a future social order in which all our relations to one another would appear transformed by the overcoming of social and economic subjugation.

What has always remained deficient in this history of our moral ideas is any detailed view of the habitual dispositions—the virtues—of a person who tries to live out the view of the possibilities of life that these metaphors, however darkly, convey. There are at least two places in our tradition in which we can look for greater insight into these matters. Both of them are inadequate.

One of these sources of insight is the Christian doctrine of the theological virtues—faith, hope, and charity—generally understood to add a new dimension of freedom and possibility to the pagan virtues extolled by both the ancient and the modern philosophers of the West. The interpretation of faith, hope, and charity has almost always remained tainted by the failure of the salvation religions to work out what I described in Chapter 4 as the suppressed orthodoxies about spirit and structure and about self and others—orthodoxies that, once understood and accepted, would revolutionize what these religions have generally been taken to mean. As a result, the doctrine of the theological virtues failed to be developed into a detailed view of how we can and should transform all of our life experience: of how each of the secular virtues would change as a result of the advent of the theological ones. Such a view becomes all the more necessary when, having lost faith in a narrative of divine intervention, we seek to develop, without support from such a narrative, an account of our humanity that does justice to our powers of transcendence.

Another such source of insight is the nineteenth- and twentieth-century novel. This art form rings the changes on our experiences, of living and of failing to live, as embodied spirit in societies that treat us as something else. Art, however, is not philosophy. It cannot, without violence to its nature, turn its discoveries into a teaching about the conduct of life. It can only enlarge the field of vision on which such a teaching can draw.

A doctrine of the virtues serves as a device, among others, by which to make up for this silence.

Virtues of connection

The threshold obstacle that we face in the making of a self is our self-centeredness. Having discovered in early childhood that the world is not organized around him, the individual resists renouncing his self-centeredness and submitting to the discipline of society. From the perspective of the morality honored in every social and cultural regime, the premise of what we owe one another is that each of us is simply one among many. Even the most hierarchical order insists on engaging those who occupy the highest rank in its hierarchy in a web of reciprocal obligations.

The overcoming of our self-centeredness manifests itself, in the first instance, in constraints that the individual must recognize and observe on the pursuit of his own interests in relation to the interests of others: whether they are strangers or people to whom we have close attachments. Moral philosophers have generally taken the justification and guidance of this task—the taming of self-interest by obligation to others—to be the entire object of morality and therefore as well the whole subject of their philosophy. This prejudice accounts for the way in which modern moral philosophy has amounted largely to a series of variations on ethical universalism. It has been content to represent, in cold and anodyne form, the moral residue of the religious revolutions of the past: the advocacy of an inclusive altruism, reduced, for the most part, to a doctrine of impersonal and disinterested obligation.

In fact, however, the overcoming of self-centeredness represents only a preliminary, albeit an indispensable one, in the organization and direction of our moral experience. Any view that accords it—as moral philosophy generally has—a central or even an exclusive role will appear to us as a crude and childish representation of what is involved in shaping our relations to other people. That is why the works devoted to the elaboration of this view seem to be about a much simpler and more stupid kind of being, one more deficient in the capacity for life, than the one represented in the literature that we cherish.

The first element missing from that picture of our humanity is an appreciation of what we most want from one another: to be imagined

and accepted for what we are and might become. Such is the direction of a greater love or, in the absence of love, of the higher forms of cooperation, not of a perfect altruism. Its requirement is the acceptance of an enhanced vulnerability. The obstacle that it must overcome is our obscurity to one another, itself the consequence of the unlimited depth of the self. The subject matter on which it touches is the conflict between the conditions of our self-assertion: between our needs for connection and for self-standing personality.

This conflict is resolved not by altruism—which maintains the posture of a superior benevolence—but by the development of all those forms of attachment and association that exact less by way of surrender and subjugation. The invention and development of such forms is the overriding task of the moral imagination. It is a task that we advance when we treat a remote and disinterested altruism as inferior to a personal and engaged love, or when we reject, for the sake of a regime of cooperation with the attributes that I earlier described, the established arrangements of the division of labor in society.

The second element missing from that account of what we owe another is a reckoning with the shadow that falls on our attachments: our ambivalence to other people. This ambivalence is, in one sense, a source of our failure to give greater weight to the interests of other people. It is, in another sense, a complication besetting our connections, regardless of the ascendancy of altruism over self-interest.

Hatred arises within love, and love within hatred. Every emotion conceived in the context of a connection turns readily into its opposite. Only indifference affords a relative protection against ambivalence. It does so, however, at the cost of inhibiting our progress toward attenuating the conflict between the enabling requirements of self-assertion. The others are at once our heaven and our hell.

What this ambivalence reveals is the ultimately insoluble character of the problem presented by what we demand from other people. The problem is not that we find it hard to give them their due. In fact much of ordinary human life is, and always has been, sacrificial—for the family, for the state, and for the future. The problem is that we want from others more than they can give us: an assurance of our place in the world, an antidote to mortality and groundlessness. Thus, the insatiability characterizing our whole experience of desire is excited to a

feverish and uncontainable degree in our relations to other people. Our unspoken apprehension of this truth is manifest in our ambivalence to the others, from whom we seek, and know already that we are unable to obtain, what matters most.

The third element missing from that conception of our bonds to other people is insight into the implications of the relation between the two problems that have been central to thinking about life in the tradition of the struggle with the world: the problem of self and others and the problem of spirit and structure. Whatever belittles us, by turning us into the pawns and puppets of an established order of society and of culture, or into prisoners of our characters, also diminishes the depth and value of our attachments.

We cannot recognize and accept one another in love and in a community of difference, or work with one another in the higher forms of cooperation, if we have failed to turn the tables on context and character, and to give practical effect to the idea of embodied spirit. The exercise of our power of transcendence suffuses and transforms our experience of solidarity; our longing for the infinite sets an indelible mark upon our longing for one another. The weakening of our powers of transcendence over context, of society and of thought, saps as well our ability to soften the conflict between our need for other people and our resistance to the jeopardy in which they place us.

For these reasons, we should not understand the virtues of connection, as the Greeks and the Romans did and the moral philosophers continue to do, as simple restraints upon selfishness: the habits of a reflective altruist. We should understand them in the light of the complications that are inseparable from their place and potential in moral experience. To this end, we must borrow the words of pagan moral philosophy but stretch and bend their meaning.

The first of the virtues of connection is respect. Respect is best understood as the recognition of our common humanity: our sharing in the condition of embodied spirit. Such an acknowledgment remains incomplete until it is penetrated by imagination of the subjective experience of other people. The development of such an experience, as many of the religions of the past—Confucianism first among them—have understood, represents one of the highest tasks of civilization. It is, in particular, the work of the humanities.

The most important practical expression of respect is an ability to see and to treat another person as more than what he appears to be: that is to say, as more than the occupant of a particular station in society and even as more than the character that he displays in his actions. Respect is a variety of reverence, a worship of that in us which entitles us to renounce our self-hatred for not being God while encouraging us in our hope of becoming more godlike. Such an attitude dismisses the high-handed and self-defensive benevolence concealing the unacknowledged and resentful impulse behind the philosophy of altruism.

Respect for others is incompatible with the cult of any set of institutional arrangements or with the unequivocal acceptance of any social role. No institutionalized form of social life provides a human being with a setting adequate to his nature, although some institutional regimes are less inadequate houses for embodied spirit than others. No social role has a dimension proportionate to a person.

Part of the work of self-transformation is to become more ambivalent to the roles that we must occupy and to the regimes under which we must live, the better to become less ambivalent to the individuals whom we encounter. If we identify fully with a conventional social role and with the expectations that it arouses or if we conduct ourselves as the obedient servants of the established regime of society and culture, we cannot recognize either ourselves or other people as who we and they are. We then fail in both respect and self-respect. No measure of sacrificial benevolence can make up for our failure. We may then increase our resemblance to generous, self-denying social insects, not to embodied spirits. Lack of imagination will diminish and corrupt our solidarity.

The task must come before the role. We will have to begin by using the roles that exist, until other ones can result, over time, from the arrangements and beliefs to which transformative action gives rise. In performing them, however, we shall begin to reinvent them. As the conventional understanding of what each role is for generates expectations of conduct, these small acts of reinvention will pose troubling questions. Are such acts driven by self-interest or by solidarity? Are they simply an excuse for betrayal and a device of self-aggrandizement? Or do they open a route to the refinement of solidarity by the fire of

transcendence? The imperative of self-sacrifice, and thus of altruism, keeps its authority and importance. It describes, however, only part of what is required from us if we are to honor the duty, and cultivate the virtue, of respect.

A second virtue of connection is forbearance: the restraint that we impose on the expression of our views and on the vindication of our interests, so that others may have the space in which to express and to develop theirs. To practice the virtue of forbearance, we must master our ambivalence to others as well as our self-centeredness. Forbearance requires the marriage of self-denial with imagination: insight into the inner world of other people. A generosity bereft of such insight is in fact a form of cruelty and subjugation, incompatible with our respect for one another as context-resistant originals.

Engagement with those who hold a view of our humanity denying our power of transcendence puts forbearance to the test. Forbearance then becomes the moral equivalent to the political principle of apostasy. Thus, the reasons that give force to the virtue of forbearance contain a large part of the moral truth of political liberalism: a limited, one-sided truth but a truth nonetheless.

The power of this truth rests on two connected but distinct foundations. Its first basis is the requirement of respect for the conditions of independent agency. In the absence of forbearance, even altruism becomes a struggle for power. Its second basis is the contestability of all commitments, including the commitments that define the religion of the future. Every individual human life, like every society and culture, is an experiment in humanity. Our situation is such that we must settle on a direction, individually and collectively, without having grounds that are commensurate with the fatefulness of the choice. Forbearance safeguards our margin to experiment with ways of being human at the same time that it expresses reverence for the condition of embodied spirit.

A third virtue of connection is fairness. We should not understand it as giving each person his due. Although each of us has obligations and commitments to others, none of us can determine the limits of what we owe one another; our obligations are proportionate to our hopes as well as to our promises and transgressions. Nor does there exist a grand book of accounts in which the moral credits and debts of each human

being are written down. To reason as if such a reckoning existed is a perversion pretending to endow an ordinary human being with a power of judgment that the salvation religions reserve to God. Such a pretense diverts our legitimate effort to become more godlike into an attempt to put a legalistic moralism in the place of a lost faith.

We should rather understand treating others fairly as treating them in ways that diminish the price in subjugation with which every connection threatens us. In this manner, we help attenuate the conflict between the enabling conditions of self-construction: between our need to bind ourselves to others and our struggle to escape the jeopardy in which all such bonds place us.

We do so, however, not for ourselves but for others, as we would wish them to do for us. We collaborate in their self-construction. Fairness, practiced in this way, is a kind of compassion, closely linked to respect and forbearance. I will not make you denature yourself in any degree, nor will I expect you to serve my will, is what our actions say to another person when we treat him fairly. As a result, you will be a little freer, a little more assured in the sentiment of being, than you were before.

There are four main contexts in which such fairness can be practiced. Each of them permits and requires a distinct variant of this virtue. The first context is personal love, founded upon the imagination of the other and a heightened acceptance of vulnerability and resulting, when it survives, in our most complete experience of success in reconciling the contradictory requirements of self-assertion. The second context is joint participation in a community for which sameness or similarity of interest and mentality has ceased to be a premise of reciprocal engagement. Our interest is to replace this premise by ideal commitments and personal loyalties that flourish in the midst of difference. The third context is a higher form of cooperation: one that, among other features, no longer rigidly contrasts the conception and the execution of tasks. The fourth context is a way of treating strangers, outside any context of love, community, or cooperation, that expresses reverence and that demands nothing but respect in return.

A fourth virtue of connection is courage: the disposition to overcome fear, especially the fear of the harms that we must face to become freer and greater. We become freer and greater by standing up

to the structures of society, of thought, and of character and by refusing, in our relations to others, to settle for the middle distance.

Courage may at first not seem to be a virtue of connection at all. It touches on every aspect of existence, not simply or directly on our dealings with other people. Courage is not simply the first virtue of the citizen and of the thinker. It is also the enabling virtue, without which all other virtues, including respect, forbearance, and fairness, are rendered sterile.

Courage has a decisive bearing on our connections to other people. We cannot become bigger without being courageous. We cannot transform our ties to others, in the direction sought by the religion of the future, without becoming bigger. Cowardice is belittlement. The acceptance of belittlement negates a defining goal of the spiritual transformation for which the religion of the future speaks and corrupts all of our relations to one another.

In the forms of moral consciousness that prevailed before the rise of the higher religions, courage was associated with the ethic of martial valor that the world religions rejected in favor of an ethic of universally inclusive fellow feeling and disinterested, sacrificial benevolence. In so doing, they also redefined what it means to be courageous and what makes courage so important. They separated courage from fighting and domination, and associated it, instead, with *agape* and mindfulness of others.

It is this reinvention of courage that the religion of the future must both reaffirm and develop. What it must reaffirm is the rejection of the old ethic of proud self-assertion and will for dominance. What it must develop is the internal relation of courage to the experience and the virtues of connection. In the moral vocabulary of Western civilization, this effort may appear as an attempt more fully to reconcile the pagan ideal of greatness with the Christian ideal of love and, inside Christianity, the ideal of love with the idea of embodied spirit as the infinite within the finite.

These categories, laden as they are with the baggage of over two thousand years of spiritual conflict and intellectual history, fail to do justice to the human experience that is at stake in the reinvention of courage. The same theme recurs in this account of each of the virtues of connection: the quality of our attachments is modified by the enactment of our powers of transcendence. The solution that we give to the

problem of spirit and structure leaves its mark on the way in which we reckon with the problem of self and others. The more we succeed in ascending to a higher life, the less do these two domains of our experience appear to us as separate. We recognize them as two aspects of the same movement.

With regard to our attachments, the most important form of courage is the acceptance of a greater vulnerability, as indispensable to love as it is unnecessary to altruism. Love cannot be sustained without a lowering of the defensiveness through which we habitually confirm our ambivalence to others. To recognize and receive love requires an acceptance of vulnerability no less than to offer love: in offering it, we risk rebuff and failure. In receiving it, we denude ourselves of part of the paraphernalia of society and stand naked under the gaze of the other. A less radical form of vulnerability is required, as well, by the higher forms of cooperation and by the varieties of community that are built on difference and reciprocal engagement rather than on sameness and mimicry.

With respect to our resistance to circumstance and context, courage begins in our willingness to defy the script that we are handed by the established order of society or of thought, and to risk disillusionment as well as isolation. Our ascent is incompatible with the security afforded by a posture of ironic distance from any demanding moral or political faith. To the self-protection of irony, the courage required by the religion of the future prefers the painful dialectic of faith and disillusionment. This dialectic makes possible both self-discovery and discovery of the world. It dissolves the routines and compromises that rob us, little by little, of life.

It is by a similar practice of courage that we struggle against our own character. Unable to change character by a direct act of will, we will ourselves into circumstances that rob us of our shields. The overthrow that I presented as the first part of the religion of the future generalizes the sense and scope of this struggle beyond the limits of the attempt to loosen the bonds of the petrified self. It requires us to face, without denial or compensation, the truth about our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability and to seek the enhancement of life in their shadow. It demands that we abandon our envy of the God in whom we have ceased to believe. It requires that we distinguish, without illusion, our part in the attributes of divinity.

By reinventing courage to change ourselves, we create the basis for a solidarity that is not predicated on belittlement.

Virtues of purification

A second set of virtues had no place in the philosophical and religious traditions that preceded the revolutionary emergence of the higher religions. Nor does it have a place today in the crypto-paganism common among the moral philosophers, including the ones who profess to be Christians. When these virtues are taken into account at all, they are viewed from the single-minded perspective of the commitments to altruism and to ethical universalism: that is to say, from the standpoint of our obligations to other people. They are not seen, in their depth of emotion and experience, as valuable in their own right or as requirements for the development of a higher form of life. Thus, for example, the altruist or the ethical universalist will admonish us not to consume a disproportionate share of the non-renewable resources of the earth only because he views our prodigality as an illegitimate taking from the poor and the unborn.

The problem addressed by the virtues of purification is the belittlement resulting from our failure to distinguish the central from the peripheral in existence and our consequent absorption in concerns that separate us from ourselves and divert us from the enhancement of life. This absorption in the peripheral amounts to an aspect of the diminished experience of life that it must be the purpose of our self-overthrow to overcome.

Self-absorption inhibits the exercise of our power of transcendence over the structure of society, thought, and character. By imprisoning us, it weakens our ability to receive the impressions of the manifest world and to identify the transformative possibilities in our circumstance. Openness to such impressions is inseparable from willingness to resist and transgress the institutional, conceptual, and psychological schemes shaping our ordinary experience of life.

The double and connected loss of the power to transcend and of the power to see more amounts to an attack on the condition of embodied spirit. It interrupts our ascent to a greater life. This connection between

transcendence and objectivity is part of what makes us both human and divine. By having more of it, we become at once more human and more godlike.

The object of the virtues of purification is the enhancement of life, achieved through what the patristic theologians of early Christianity called *kenosis*: an emptying out, undertaken for the sake of a raising up of our faculties of resistance and reception, valued as a heightening of life. One of the tests of the efficacy of these virtues is therefore that they support each of the attributes of vitality: surfeit, fecundity, and spontaneity. The enemy with which the virtues of purification contend is death lurking within life: our self-bestowal on what is not only unworthy of us but also inimical to the intensification of life.

As the burden of material scarcity begins to be lifted from humanity, the work of the virtues of purification becomes more important. It is, however, far from being confined to our material existence. We may fail in the practice of the purifying virtues in every aspect of our existence. Our attempts to use the accumulation of things as an alternative to our dependence on people, as a consolation for our mortality and groundlessness, or as a vain effort to quiet insatiable desire represent only the most visible form of such failure.

A first virtue of purification is simplicity. Simplicity is the disposition to renounce the material and immaterial bric-a-brac of ordinary experience for the sake of focus on what matters: our devotion to others and our wrestling with the institutional, conceptual, and characterological settings of our existence. The commitment of consciousness to the trivial amounts to a lesser idolatry. It squanders our ultimate resource—time—in efforts bearing no relation to either of the two chief aspects of our experience: reconciliation with other people and overthrow of the dictatorship of context—whether of society, thought, or character—in which we move. By practicing the virtue of simplicity, we signify our intention to recognize the value of every moment and prepare ourselves to overcome estrangement from life in the present.

A second virtue of purification is enthusiasm. Enthusiasm is readiness to give oneself to an activity that once found not to disregard the virtues, or to violate the obligations of connection, absorbs us for a while without residue or reservation and seems to be eternal while it lasts. In the experience of enthusiasm, we have a partial antidote to the

sufferings of mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability, one that does not depend on self-deception or require indifference.

The activities to which we are able to devote ourselves wholeheartedly and single-mindedly suspend the sense of the passage of time and offer us a temporary immortality. They draw us into an experience that provides its own justifications and sets its own terms, without pretending to offer a solution to the enigma of the world and of existence. They rivet desire, not to an object or even to a person but to an activity, in which we are able to recognize ourselves as embodied spirit. They interrupt for a while the sad procession of longing, satiation, boredom, and more longing. Through enthusiasm, the clock stops, experience appears to be self-validating, and the fulfillment of desire seems to bring empowerment rather than the belittlement of the self. What more could we ask? Only for something we cannot have: that it last.

Enthusiasm is a virtue of purification because it reproduces in its internal structure the relation between our transcendence over context and our receptiveness to the world. This relation forms a defining attribute of the condition of embodied spirit. A mark of enthusiasm is its liquefaction of the arrangements, ideas, or habits within which the enthusiast moves at the moment of enthusiasm; they appear as if dissolved under the heat of a visionary impulse. It is as if, for that moment, the instruments and occasions of activity were finally adequate to its intentions.

The seemingly paradoxical outcome of this incandescent dissolution of the contrast between structure and vision is that we become relatively more open to the impressions of some aspect of reality. Before our enthusiasm, we saw through the lens, and acted at the behest, of the structure, as if another person could take our place, in the same dumb service. Now, the scales are removed from our eyes. Or so it seems to us, because we forget as it is happening that it amounts to a reprieve rather than to a salvation.

Compare the sequel of enthusiasm to the legacy of moments of re-foundation in politics. A reform of the political or economic regime, typically adopted under the pressure of crisis, suspends or weakens temporarily the power of the preexisting institutional arrangements. To succeed, such a reform must leave a lasting institutional legacy. In addition to changing part of the established institutional and ideological

settlement, it may, at the height of transformative ambition, help change the quality as well as the content of the established structure. It may contribute to a subsequent circumstance in which part of the reformation—of its enlargement of the penumbra of the proximate possible, of its weakening of the power of the dead over the living—passes into the routinized, post-reformation society.

So it happens with enthusiasm. Some part of the system of ordinary experience melts away in the heat of that time-suspending joy. But what happens next? When the enthusiasm recedes, will the lasting shape of experience have been changed? Will some part of the attributes of enthusiasm have entered into our ordinary existence? The legacy of enthusiasm, at the height of its transformative power, is conversion to life in the present and avoidance of death before death, in the long prose of day-to-day life.

The phenomenology of religious, artistic, or political enthusiasm can easily be misinterpreted as a revelation about the world when it is in fact a revelation about our humanity. Misunderstood in this way, it can serve as an inducement or an excuse to worship the radiance of being (as in the later philosophy of Heidegger). Such is the message of a paganism that would reverse the religious revolutions of the past. Our task, however, is not to reverse them but to advance yet further in the direction in which they have taken mankind.

A third virtue of purification is attentiveness. Attentiveness completes the work of simplicity and of enthusiasm. It is their consummation and their reward. Through the virtue of attentiveness, we turn to the manifest world and approach the ideal of a mind on which nothing is lost. The perceptual immediacy of the world in childhood, celebrated by the poet as a lost paradise, is recaptured by the grown man as intensified and discriminating vision. An aspect of the recovery of this immediacy is our capacity to recover the sense of the strangeness of what appears to be natural as well as of the excess of nature over established thought.

If simplicity and enthusiasm serve chiefly as instruments by which we cease to be in thrall to context, attentiveness describes principally our relation to the reality beyond the self and its contexts of society, thought, and character. Our relative openness to the promptings of the manifest world is a mark of embodied spirit and a sign of the enhancement of life

in a human being. If genius rather than thinking better sees more, attentiveness enables the attentive to share in the experience of genius.

Attentiveness, however, is not only a prize; it is also a fight. Its discipline is the fight against prejudice: the inescapable prejudice that every set of methods, presuppositions, and categories embodies. We cannot do without them; we need them to make sense of our experience. In surrendering, however, to any one version of them, we lose all prospect of extending our vision, and retreat from our universal share in the power of genius. To resist them, even as we use them, is a definition of transcendence in the domain of perception and of thought. Thus, the connection between transcendence and objectivity, which penetrates and unifies the virtues of purification, appears as well in the inner structure of attentiveness.

Virtues of divinization

The virtues of connection and of purification create the basis for a third set of virtues, which in turn modify their nature and effect. These virtues lack any counterpart in the ancient eudaimonism. Among the world religions, they have no secure place, other than in the Christian conception of the theological virtues: faith, hope, and charity. Even there, however, an important change is required. Love takes the place of *agape*. The axis of hope becomes the relation between living for the future and changing our experience of life in the present, from which we are no longer to be estranged. Faith appears with its human face: first, as the need to commit our lives in a particular direction without ever having adequate grounds for such a commitment and, second, as the impulse to put ourselves into the hands of others to honor that commitment.

The problem to which the virtues of divinization respond is the one that the religion of the future takes as its first inspiration: the correction of our belittlement, the overcoming of the gap between our self-understanding as embodied spirit and the ordinary circumstances of existence, the striving to extend our share in the attributes of the divine that are accessible to us while renouncing the infinite powers and the eternal life that are denied to us.

Teach me how man makes himself eternal, writes the poet. If we replace, in this expression, eternal by greater, more lifelike, more godlike, and therefore more human, we have described the work of the virtues of divinization.

They are analogous to the theological virtues of Christian doctrine. Openness to the other person is the equivalent of charity. Openness to the new is the equivalent of hope. Acceptance of the vulnerability required by the always inadequately justified commitment of life to a particular direction is the equivalent of faith. It is manifest in a hopeful and patient availability to the risks of engagement and attachment. Thus understood, the virtues of divinization are at once the path and the outcome of an ascent. They promise a greater life, but deliver it only through forms of experience and engagement that give us this life right now. The prize that they offer, and convey, is to enable us to die only once.

Consider first the last of these three virtues: the acceptance of the risk and of the vulnerability that are implicit in the choice of any commitment of our existence in a particular direction. Begin with what is true no matter which direction we choose. We must commit our lives. Men and women do not ordinarily do so explicitly and knowingly. Instead, they accept, and half-believe, the ideas prevailing in their circumstance. Nevertheless, their course of life shows what choice they have made, even if it is a choice never experienced as a series of acts of will.

An individual commits his existence, one way or another, not just when he chooses, to the extent that the constraints of society permit it, a particular course of life, but also and above all in the attitudes and beliefs that he brings to the course of life that society may have imposed on him. If, at the extreme, he is enslaved, he must still decide how to respond to enslavement. Moreover, he must respond to it in a way that also reveals his vision of our place in the world. It forms part of the condition of embodied spirit that no society and culture are so firmly entrenched and naturalized that they can become ventriloquists and turn us into puppets.

Yet, although we may make our commitment in the grip of beliefs that seem to us self-evident, or of signs that appear to us as irresistible (such as those that religious revelation wears to the eyes of the believer),

an insuperable gap remains between the fatefulness of the commitment and the adequacy of the grounds on which we may make it. The grounds are always immeasurably weak by comparison to the significance of their object. Wait only a little, we may say to time, while I inquire further, as if more time would enable us to conclude. Follow the objective morality, teach the moral philosophers, as if the juxtaposition of their empty abstractions with their arbitrary casuistry could provide any guidance in the conduct of life.

We can strive to learn from experience, and to revise our commitment accordingly. However, we deceive ourselves if we suppose that this cumulative reflection brings us any closer to a conclusive justification of our choice. The failure of our reasons to bear the weight of the choice of a course of life reflects, in the formation of our core beliefs, the groundlessness of existence.

We must not only accept this daunting imbalance between commitment and reason but accept as well the first consequence of inadequately grounded commitment: that we place ourselves in the hands of others. The deficit of reason is supplied by society: the shared beliefs informing all our initiatives. All our activities take the form of incomplete contracts, reliant upon premises that are at once shared and inexplicit. Like every incomplete contract, they award discretion and power to other people: those with whom we must cooperate in the collective spiritual and practical endeavors that give sense and direction to our lives.

The first virtue of divinization is to accept the risk and the vulnerability that this disproportion between our life commitments and their grounds entails and to respond to this disproportion by moving toward life rather than away from it: more engagement, more connection, more commitment, more risk, more vulnerability. It is to prefer the life-giving dialectic of faith, disillusionment, and revised faith to the life-narrowing posture of ironic distance and self-protection. The result manifests itself in the cultivation of a hopeful and patient availability: availability to this dialectic and to the suffering that it exacts.

Openness to the other person and openness to the new are the other two virtues of divinization. As courage is an enabling virtue with respect to all the virtues, our acceptance of a heightened vulnerability to the risks of attachment and engagement serves as the enabler of this

pair of virtues of divinization. Of them, little need be said because much has been said earlier in this book.

Openness to the other is what the doctrine of the relation of self to others teaches. The religion of the future takes this view over from the struggle with the world and pursues it free of the equivocations that surround it in that tradition. Its supreme form is personal love among equals rather than benevolence offered from on high or from a distance. Its more diffuse expressions, outside the circle of our closest attachments, are communities cemented by difference rather than by sameness and the higher forms of cooperation, organized institutionally in the practices of production, politics, and civil society. Its work is the same as its presupposition: attenuation of the conflict between our need for other people and our need to escape the jeopardy in which they place us.

Openness to the new is the virtue that describes the moral consequence of the doctrine of the relation of spirit to structure. The religion of the future inherits this doctrine from the struggle with the world, and radicalizes it. This virtue acts out the human truth of our relation to the settled contexts of our life and thought. That they are ephemeral and defective, that they cannot accommodate all the experience and insight we have reason to value, that there is always more in us, individually as well as collectively, than is, or ever can be, in them are facts giving us persistent reason to rebel against structures.

In rebelling against them, we must seek to change their character as well as their content: their relation to our structure-defying freedom. If we surrender to them and allow them to have the last word, rather than keeping the last word for ourselves, we interrupt our attempt to increase our share in the attributes of divinity. We cease to be fully human.

The degree to which a conceptual or social regime seizes its participants and reduces them to the condition of being its puppets depends on the character of that regime as well as on the powers of insight that these would-be puppets have developed, with the support of the regime or in defiance of it. However, no matter how far an established institutional or conceptual order has gone in entrenching itself against challenge and change and in surrounding itself with the aura of a specious necessity or of unquestionable authority, it cannot in fact suppress experiences that contradict its assumptions. Nor can it erase the history

of alternative orders: of the roads not taken, and of the solutions rejected or subordinated, in the history of thought and of institutions.

These contrasting experiences supply the material with which political prophecy and intellectual vision must work. We use paths foreworn to envision alternatives in the penumbra of the feasible next steps. That we can all do so, according to our temperaments and circumstances, is not only part of the creed of democracy; it is also part of the truth about who we are. Openness to the new is openness to ourselves and to one another.

In this way, there emerges the new in life and in thought. That the new can emerge is a consequence both of who we are and of how nature works. It results from who are: we exceed the organized settings of life and of thought. It follows as well from how nature works: if time is real and inclusive, not even the laws of nature and the basic constituents of the observed universe can be beyond its reach. They, too, must in principle be mutable. Over a long enough stretch of cosmological time, the laws of nature may evolve together with the phenomena that they govern.

If anything can be really new in the world, it must not be simply the enactment of a possible state of affairs that was simply waiting for the conditions of its enactment to be fulfilled. There must not be a closed horizon of possible states of affairs, real but not actual, in the ghostlike condition of possessing all the attributes of reality except for the final attribute of embodiment in the actual. Our view of the possible must be subsequent to the creation of the new, not prior to it. When the new emerges in nature or is created by us, we change retrospectively our understanding of the possible. Such an account of the workings of nature provides the conception of the new with a second source, outside the constitution of a human being.

Our openness to the new is related to our openness to one another. Both can find inspiration in the same comprehensive view and in convergent impulses. If we were to give the last word to the structures of society and of thought, they would suck life out of us, for the first attribute of life is our surfeit over these structures. They would require us to view one another and to deal with one another according to the places that we occupy in them, or to the roles that they assign to each of us. We, however, are who we are precisely because we are not simply the

protagonists in their scripts. We cannot respect one another without disrespecting them.

The practice of the virtues of divinization modifies the meaning and content of the virtues of connection. It turns respect into compassion or fellow feeling (untainted by the self-defensive ploys of a high-handed benevolence), forbearance into self-sacrifice, and fairness into mercy. It also changes the experience—central to the virtues of purification—of losing the self the better to regain it. The ascent of the self, through simplicity, attentiveness, and enthusiasm, now undergoes a decisive reorientation. Instead of keeping out of trouble to achieve composure, the self looks for trouble to find, affirm, and express its own infinity.

The course of life: decentering

Each of us is born in a particular time and place, of parents we did not choose and with genetic endowments that will be forever ours. The circumstances of our birth and upbringing favor certain stations in society and place others largely beyond our reach. The decisive majority of the human race continues to labor under crushing material constraint, in poverty, drudgery, and infirmity. We all remain at the mercy of fortune and misfortune in our attachments and initiatives as well as in our physical survival and vitality. What space there was for self-construction is further diminished by the regimes of society, of thought, and of character. We can be annihilated in an instant, and we know (although the religions of salvation deny it) that annihilation awaits us, but not before even the luckiest and greatest among us have been subject to long belittlement and humiliation.

Our dreamlike existence passes while we are largely occupied in dealing with these constraints. They appear to us as if welded together and threaten to give to a human life the form of a fate, imposed upon the will. All the while we are tormented by insatiable desire, from our physical cravings to our longing for one another (poisoned by our ambivalence) and to our yearning for the absolute (frustrated and disoriented by the lack of worthy objects). We are denied (except in metaphysical or theological fantasy) any insight into the ground of reality and of existence, which appear given over to necessity and to chance.

Our joys, although they may be intense and rather strengthened than undermined by reflection, are short-lived and as mysterious as our long-standing tribulations. We know, even as we undergo them, that they will never be accompanied by any solution to the enigma of reality and that all surfeit and fecundity of experience will end in death.

It is against this background, variable according to the vagaries of fortune but constant in its basic elements, that we must conceive and implement the hope of entering into the fuller possession of life. The rule of contingency and constraint can be circumscribed both by the reorganization of society and by the reorientation of the individual. There are certain recurrent incidents or turning points in human life, no less universal than the irreparable flaws in the human condition.

I previously presented the moral agenda of the religion of the future as a doctrine of the virtues. I now restate it as a conception of our response to these points of inflection in human existence. The two statements are meant to be convergent and complementary.

Early in childhood, every human being finds out that he is a distinct self and that this self is not the center of the world. He discovers that there are other human beings and that he is one among many.

This discovery occurs so early that it seems to be coeval with the birth of consciousness. For consciousness has two fundamental aspects. One aspect of consciousness is mindfulness about the body, or rather the body lived as mind. It is this fundamental feature of consciousness that led Spinoza to make his exaggerated claim that the mind is the idea of the body. Every modulation of our bodily condition is present to us as immediate experience, that is to say, as consciousness. It is only through this presence of the body as mind that we enjoy sensation and perception, encountering the world.

The other aspect of consciousness is the experience of a boundary between each of us and other people. Many metaphysical doctrines, especially those associated with the overcoming of the world, have denied the ultimate reality of the distinction among minded selves and affirmed the existence of unified and universal mind or being. For many of these doctrines, the conscious life of an individual human being is an ephemeral piece of universal mind.

We should distinguish in these doctrines an element of truth and an element of falsehood. The falsehood is so intimately mixed with the

truth that the former corrupts the latter. The element of truth is that what we ordinarily take to be the eternal and general condition of nature turns out, on our best contemporary understanding of the universe and its history, to be only one of its variations: the one prevailing in the mature, cooled-down universe. In this variation, nature exists as a differentiated structure as described at both more fundamental levels (as by particle physics) and less fundamental levels (as by chemistry).

The laws of nature can then be represented, in the language of mathematics, separately from the phenomena that they govern, a fact that misleads us into supposing that causal relations are derivative from laws of nature as their instances. In fact, it is the opposite: causal relations are primitive features of natural reality and acquire law-like regularity only when, as in the cooled-down universe in which we find ourselves, nature takes the form of an enduring differentiated structure. There are here only few degrees of freedom and a limited range of adjacent possibles—of what can happen next—surrounding any state of affairs.

However, nature wears other disguises. It also exists in forms with none of these characteristics. In the very early history of our universe (or, on some cosmological models, at the end of its history, or repeatedly in the succession or “bounce” of universes, if indeed there is such succession), everything was different. The phenomena were excited to very high (albeit finite) temperatures and energy densities, with many degrees of freedom, and gave access to a broad range of proximate possibilities. Nature was not yet, or had ceased to be, organized as a typology of natural kinds, in the form of distinct building blocks. States of affairs could not be distinguished from the laws of nature governing them; indeed, they may not yet have acquired, or may have lost, the repeatability that gives causality a law-like shape. The truth in the doctrines of universal mind or being is the recognition that nature as we know it is not for keeps and that all distinctions, including the distinctions among selves or minds, travel from annihilation to annihilation on the sea of time.

The falsehood in those doctrines is the dismissal or the demotion of the reality of the distinctions among minds, among selves, and among living and lifeless things in that long-lasting variant of nature in which

we emerge and have our being. The discovery of the reality of individual existence and of our failure to hold the center is therefore a discovery of the facts of the matter about the world and of our place within it.

This insight enters from the outset of our existence into the nature of insatiability. In the human experience of insatiable desire, we can distinguish three elements. The first element is the dynamic of privation, want, satiation, boredom, and more want and privation. This dynamic is modified by our progressive understanding of how nature works, which is in turn inseparable from our insight into how it can change, in different circumstances or as the result of different interventions. Our practical interests drive our cognitive development, which in turn both informs and outreaches them. Because we are capable of relatively disinterested insight, we can in such moments escape, temporarily, the pressure of insatiable desire. Schopenhauer understood this capacity of ours for the overcoming of the will in the contemplation of reality as a form of salvation from the suffering inherent in the restlessness of desire. In fact, it can be no more than a temporary reprieve. Otherwise it would sap the vigor of life and deny us its attributes of surfeit, fecundity, and spontaneity. To be alive is to be insatiable; all the more insatiable when more alive. “The world is not enough” is the motto of the living.

A second element of insatiability arises from the contradictory and ambivalent nature of our relations to other people, following directly from the early discovery of our decentered selfhood. Having found that he is only one among many and that the consciousness of another person is not only distinct from us but also all but inaccessible to us, we long for acceptance and recognition of our worth and our very existence in the world. This desire is insatiable: it has no limit and can never be completely satisfied. Every sign of acceptance and recognition, even when supported and magnified by love, is the token of a good that can be delivered only with reservation, under the prospect of being taken back. It represents a down payment on a transaction that can never be completed.

Our limitless longing for what others can never completely give us penetrates and modifies the whole life of desire, even when the proximate objects of desire are things rather than people. We sometimes

seek in the accumulation of things a futile surrogate for dependence upon people and at other times project onto particular things the unlimited yearning inspired in us by individuals. The result is to enhance the insatiable character of even our most material desires, making them proxies and pawns of the experience of personal encounter.

A third element in the experience of insatiable desire arises later, from the discovery of death and groundlessness. This discovery can never be completely avoided, despite the charms of the feel-good philosophies and theologies. To the extent that it is undergone, although denied, it inspires in the individual the longing for the absolute, which the salvation religions represent as a transcendent and interventionist deity and the religion of the overcoming of the world associates with impersonal, hidden, and unified being. Just as the unlimited longing for others (accompanied by fear and ambivalence) penetrates and modifies our material desires, so the longing for the absolute, inspired by our confrontation with death and groundlessness, enters into every part of the life of desire and changes its character. In addiction or obsessional desire, it is displaced onto material objects. In our dealings with other people, it appears as the doomed attempt (made explicit and extreme by romanticism) to use our attachments as a salvation from the experience of the factitiousness—the sheer just so-ness—of our existence.

The second element of insatiable desire—our unlimited longing for others—is modified by its juxtaposition to the other two elements and follows directly from the awareness of our situation as one, bounded self, placed among many other selves, whose depths of subjective experience we cannot hope to plumb. This unlimited longing for others, which works both through and beyond our erotic life, is riven by the ambivalence on which I earlier remarked. From this ambivalence we win release only when we settle, uneasily, into the middle distance of indifference. In that middle distance, however, we can never win the prize of the unconditional assurance that we seek.

This ambivalence is no minor and passing perversion. It threatens to overshadow the whole of social experience. Combined with the perennial rebirth of our bodily needs and wants and with the inevitable frustration of our longing for the absolute, it threatens to deny us the power to enter more fully into the possession of life. This failure turns readily

into self-hatred and hatred of the God in whom we can no longer believe.

The ambivalence that darkens the life of encounter expresses a truth about the self. This truth is the contradictory character of the conditions of independent selfhood. The nature and resolution of these contradictions are the subject of the undeveloped and suppressed orthodoxy about the self and its relation to other selves in the tradition of the struggle with the world.

Altruism cannot serve as a sufficient antidote to this poisoning of social life by our ambivalence to one another. For the altruism that has provided moral philosophy with its chief theme and thesis is closer to being part of the problem than it is to being part of the solution. In its single-minded concern with the restraint to be imposed on self-interest, it fails to address the conflict between our need for others and the jeopardy in which they place us. It is silent about the fundamental requirement of our reconciliation with others: the capacity to imagine them. It supports a patronizing benevolence, offered from a distance, that may itself represent an exercise of power and a form of cruelty.

The only axis of our moral development that can offer the prospect of attenuating our ambivalence and of moderating the conflict between the enabling conditions of self-assertion is the one that goes from love, in our most intimate experience, to a community based upon reciprocal engagement and recognized difference, rather than upon similarity or sameness, in our continuing attachments. From there, it extends to the reform of the division of labor in the spirit of the higher forms of cooperation.

The defining attribute of love is the recognition and embrace of the beloved as a completion and affirmation of one's own existence. The essential test of its transformative power is the ability to flourish in routine and repetition rather than to remain what romanticism takes it to be: an ecstatic deviation from the tenor of ordinary experience.

The distinguishing mark of the better form of community is that it can withstand difference (of origin, experience, and perspective) and even conflict, and make commitments prevail over memories. The decisive test of its success is deepening of reciprocal engagement in the face of multiple forms of difference and the turning of conflict into a source of union.

Recall the features of the higher forms of cooperation: the ability to connect people regardless of their place in a set scheme of social division and hierarchy, the weakening of any contrast between the responsibilities to define tasks and to implement them, the use of machines to save our time for the activities that we have not yet learned to repeat, and the enhancement of a zone of protected immunities and capabilities as a spur to putting everything else up for grabs. Every instance of such a higher form of cooperation amounts to the practical prophecy of a way of organizing society. The vital test of its success is its power to reform and to renew itself against the widest range of varied and changing circumstance.

These three instances of reconciliation—love, community, and cooperation—lie on the same continuum of moral experience. All three of them rest on the same double requirement. The first requirement is the acceptance of heightened vulnerability to other people: to the beloved, to the other members of a community of difference, to those with whom one cooperates when cooperation can no longer conform to an invariant and hierarchical scheme. The second requirement is the cultivation of our ability to imagine alien experience, the experience of those whose otherness we discovered when we underwent our painful decentering. To develop this faculty is one of the powers of poetry, of imaginative literature, and of the humanities.

It is only when we have taken this path—the only real and reliable sense of salvation—that we can hope for an altruism wiped clean of cruelty. Only then can generosity be both guided and redeemed by the imagination of otherness.

The course of life: downfall

A second formative incident in the course of life is our evasive encounter with death and groundlessness. It takes place not long after our decentering, and results in a second and more decisive downfall. Instead of seeking vainly to reverse it, our interest is to recognize in it one of the conditions of a higher existence.

Our groundlessness would, I argued at the beginning of this book, have a completely different meaning if it were not accompanied by the

fact and the knowledge of death as well as by the anticipation of death in physical and mental decline. Ignorant of the ultimate ground of reality, and of the beginning and end of time, we could nevertheless exist in an unhurried and endless roaming. Life would lose its dramatic concentration. Our experience would more closely resemble that of an animal. It would be without the selective memory that we possess. It would not include the foreknowledge of the annihilation that awaits us. We would approach the experience of an eternal present, not in the form in which we can now know it—that of an all-consuming activity that releases us temporarily from concern about the past and the future—but as a persistent and normal feature of existence.

We could leave the question of the ground of reality in suspense, or indefinitely postponed, in the hope that we might someday be able to answer it, or simply dismiss it in the midst of our endless present. Our eternity would radically diminish the weight of our groundlessness.

Suppose, on the other hand, that we were, despite our mortality, able to discern the ground of being and to look into the beginning and end of time but that we nevertheless remained condemned to die. The ground of reality could not be one that denied the reality of death, for death forms part of the hypothesis. We cannot consider the implications of such a circumstance for our experience without the content of supposed solutions to the enigma of reality and of existence. This much, however, seems clear: no matter what the answer, it would leave us unreconciled to the world: no riches of the universe and no marvels held in the womb of time could ever compensate us for not being part of that future. On the contrary, the more wonderful the future of the universe might be, the more terrible would be the punishment visited on us by the certainty of death.

In the history of thought, however, the set of such understandings of our situation is an empty one. Every philosophy or theology that has claimed to disclose the nature of ultimate reality has denied death. The religions of salvation deny it by promising eternal life. The overcoming of the world (whether in Buddhism, the Vedas, or the philosophies of Schopenhauer and of Plato) denies it by negating the deep reality of the distinct self or by describing us as chained to a wheel of endless rebirth. They too are feel-good theologies and philosophies precisely because

they bring us the good news that we need not fear what we in fact most fear: our impending dissolution. We need not fear it because it does not really exist; the victory of death is illusory or temporary.

The humanization of the world with its anti-metaphysical metaphysics (as exemplified by the teachings of Confucius or by the contemporary conventional secular humanism) does not deny our mortality and groundlessness outright. However, it turns decisively away from them into a world that we can build and control. A wise man, remarked Spinoza (whose philosophy is otherwise a qualified version of the overcoming of the world) thinks of life, not of death. In this spirit, the humanization of the world puts aside the awfulness of death and nihilism the better to focus on its effort to inspire a form of life in society bearing the mark of our concerns. In so doing, however, it bears false witness to our condition and casts aside an instrument indispensable to our ascent.

Nor can we look to natural science for a conception that would claim to probe the ground of existence while continuing to acknowledge the reality and the inevitability of death. Natural science works in exactly the opposite direction. The advance of our knowledge, even in cosmology, brings us no closer to understanding why there is something rather than nothing or why the universe is what it is rather than something else. Every discovery of how nature works, or of what course it has taken, poses the question: why? And every answer to every such question prompts a further why. The inability of natural science to cast light on the ground of reality and existence does not, however, prevent it from asking itself not only how death and decline might be delayed but also even how they might be escaped.

Death and darkness appear early and together in our experience, as two sides of the same unwanted truth. Each is modified by its combination with the other. The further we reflect, however, on the relation between them, the more clearly we see that in its effect on the shaping of our experience, groundlessness is subservient to mortality. Our groundlessness magnifies the significance of our mortality but would lose much of its frightfulness were we deathless.

It is therefore together, and in this unequal combination, that we face the discovery of death and the enigma of the world and of our

mortal existence within it. Our first interest in this discovery is to acknowledge it, to imprint it clearly on the mind every day of our lives, to resist, on that account, the charms of the feel-good philosophies and theologies, and to put natural science in its place.

Recall the three great benefits of this acknowledgement of the truth about death and groundlessness. The first benefit is to rescue us from self-deception about the most basic features of our circumstance. If we excite a heroic will of resistance only by resorting to a lullaby, we have to fear that the self-deception will outlive its supposed role, tainting and disorienting the subsequent exercise of the will. The second benefit is to help arouse us from half-life to full consciousness of existence and of time and thus to the possession of our highest good. By addressing the argument *ad terrorem* against ourselves, we open ourselves to a change of life—above all, to a change that gives us life itself. The third benefit is to guard against a danger that results from our openness to the future. Our openness to the future threatens to estrange us from the present. A misguided response to this estrangement is Prometheanism: the cultivation of power, by the self-reliant individual, in the hope of making himself into something other than the flawed and dying creature that he is. Another inadequate response is the romance of the ascent of humanity: our vicarious sharing in the future triumphs of mankind. These two responses leave us deceived and unchanged. Fortunately, they are no match for the anticipation of death experienced against the backdrop of our groundlessness.

The consciousness of death saves us from losing ourselves in an endless present and protects us against the misrepresentation and perversion of our humanity by triumphalism and hero worship. It guards against idolatry in the form of self-deification.

The acknowledgment of our groundlessness undermines any attempt to give unconditional value to any particular organization of society or of thought. It neutralizes idolatry in the form of any attempt to accord absolute value to a historically contingent organization of society and of thought. Our wrestling with nihilism becomes a device by which we expunge from our beliefs the element of idolatrous superstition.

We can respond to our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability in ways helping us enter into the possession of life. One such response is engagement in activities that command all of our passion. In those

activities, the hold of each of the irreparable defects of life on our experience of life is temporarily suspended. Insatiable desire comes, for a while, to rest: it finds an object and an expression that seem adequate to our context-transcending humanity.

In such engagement, we respond to our groundlessness by means of activities that command our attention and generate their own terms of reference and of justification. If ever there were truth in the idea of creating meaning in a meaningless world, it would be in such a circumstance.

In this situation of total abandon to all-consuming activity, we are released for a while from the bonds of time. It is the closest acquaintance we can ever hope to have with the timeless. At the limit, it abolishes both the selective memory of the past and the anticipation, or apprehension, of the future and places us in an eternal present, from which our time-obsessed conscious life drives us out.

The repair of the incurable defects of human existence by these occasional experiences of self-abandonment to what elicits passion is, however, not for keeps. We do not in fact abolish, by virtue of such experiences, our mortality, our groundlessness, or our insatiability. The sense of overcoming that may attend these activities is in fact a hallucination. Life waits outside, once the passion is spent and the spell is broken, in the prose of reality. It is only on the condition of acknowledging and accepting our mortality and our groundlessness that we can possess it undiminished. What we saw and experienced in the moments of absorption must, to enhance that life, meet the test of transformative vision: it must survive routine and repetition in the experience of the individual, and penetrate and change the arrangements of society.

The course of life: mutilation

The marks of life—surfeit, fecundity, and spontaneity—reveal the indefinite range of experience and initiative of which, barring great misfortune, every individual human being is capable. Part of the condition of embodied spirit is to enjoy such acquaintance with many ways of being and many forms of consciousness.

Each of us must then determine how he is to live in society in such a way that his existence does not come to represent a denial and subversion of his nature as context-transcending spirit. In this pursuit, he faces a third decisive incident in the normal course of existence. He cannot be anything or everything, anyone, or everyone. He must become someone in particular. To become someone in particular, he must renounce many other forms of humanity that might become his. Hegel remarks that the characteristic predicament of the adolescent is “to be lost in particularity,” that is to say, in the formless riches of existence and of society. We might better describe his quandary, however, as being lost in universality: a universality of experience that fails to assume the form of a particular and relatively exclusive direction of activity.

This imperative of ceasing to be many things in order to become one thing, of abandoning many possibilities of existence the better to develop one, is a mutilation. We face this mutilation in two major variations: the need to develop, or to accept, a course of life and the requirement to occupy, or to embrace, a station in society. A course of life and a station in society are so closely linked that it may be hard to distinguish between them. Nevertheless, they present us with the problem of mutilation in different registers. The course of life has to do with the trajectory of an existence, beginning in the dreams of youth and ending in death, and with the relation of that trajectory to our understanding of ourselves and of others. The social station is the position that we assume in the division of labor in society. It raises the problem of our mutilation in the form of the relation between our inner and our outer worlds: between our idea of ourselves as godlike and our continuing experience of belittlement.

It is by a certain response to this conflict that we deal with the mutilation of our many-sidedness. By this response, we affirm our two-sided nature as engaged and resistant. We move closer to living as the embodied spirits that we are.

The radical simplifications and exclusions of a course of life and of a social station threaten to reduce the universal in us to the particular, or to leave the universal as a spirit—of resentment and regret—floating over the unchanged realities of an individual existence and of its place in society. Our mutilation brings us the message and the reality of our

belittlement. It consequently becomes a subject of major interest to the religion of the future.

A course of life results most commonly from the cumulative effects of individual decisions taken against the background of what may be the unforgiving constraints of society. These constraints distribute life chances unequally in every society that has existed up to now. To this day, every society has been a class society, using the family as the instrument for the unequal distribution of economic and educational advantage. In no social order up to now has meritocracy been anything more than a counterweight or a complement to the mechanisms of class advantage. To the extent that meritocracy weakens those mechanisms, it does so only to strengthen the influence of the unequal natural endowments with which each of us is born.

Within these daunting constraints, the individual stumbles, half-consciously, upon a direction, which begins to take shape, and to acquire restrictive force, as he forsakes possibilities of action for the sake of a given path. He may continue to conceive other lives and the possibilities of experience accompanying them. Through heroic will, or by the play of luck and misfortune, he may even occasionally succeed in changing the course of his life.

One day, however, he begins to realize that the life he is living will be the only life he will ever live. He may resign himself to this reality, confirming the reduction of the universal to the particular and the insult to the condition of embodied spirit. He may dignify his course of life through its association with a socially recognized form of labor (a craft or honorable calling) and take delight in whatever opportunities for proficiency or virtuosity it provides. Or, unable to find solace in either of these alternatives, he may feel trapped. The sentiment of entrapment is one of the characteristic experiences attending the mutilation imposed on the self by a course of life.

It may seem at first that there are two activities that rescue us, if any activities can, from mutilation: philosophy and politics. They deal with everything rather than with something in particular: the one, in thought; the other, through action. Their true subject is the structure to which the spirit risks being enslaved: whether it is the institutional order of society (as well as the view of possible and desirable association that this order enacts) or the unacknowledged and unwarranted presuppositions of

thought. They demand, on account of their totalizing ambitions, unrelenting engagement of our faculties and energies.

Philosophy and politics, however, offer no such rescue. In the first place, they deal with everything only in their regulative ideal, not in their historical practice and presence. Those who call themselves philosophers are for the most part professors of philosophy, specialists in an intellectual practice that deals with a path-dependent agenda, shaped by the history of particular philosophical traditions even when it does not abase itself to the work of a thought police. Politicians are generally professional office seekers and office holders, and specialists, for their part, in the representation of particular interests and aspirations, within the conventions of a given political system.

Only a reinvented philosophy, understood and pursued as the mind at war against all disciplinary and methodological restraint, would fulfill that ideal. Today, however, it is an ideal that can be approached, to the extent that it can be approached at all, from the starting point of any discipline or discourse. It cannot be enacted in the form of a philosophical super-science, towering above the specialized modes of inquiry.

Only a transformative politics, free from the illusions of necessitarian social theories and unwilling to accept crisis as the condition of change, could realize this ideal in political life. Such a politics is today a project more than it is a practice. It is a project that we can undertake in every domain of social life, not just in the contest over winning and using governmental power.

In the second place, even when philosophy and politics move toward the ideal of dealing with everything (or with the formative and fundamental) rather than with something in particular, they remain separated from each other. That separation is itself a form of mutilation. Hegel was able to conceive the union of a life of thought (as philosophy) and of action (as politics) only in the dream of the imaginary duo of the philosopher with Napoleon. Thus, the marriage of philosophy to revolutionary tyranny became, as it has so often been in the history of philosophy, the imaginary shortcut to an idealized but unconsummated marriage. The union of philosophy with politics cannot be the source of a greater life. It must at best be one of its many consequences. Its fragmentary realization in the lives of individuals

today depends on extraordinary luck even more than on exceptional gifts.

We must therefore look in another direction for a response faithful to the religion of the future. There are three antidotes to mutilation that reaffirm and strengthen the condition of embodied spirit. Each of them addresses only part of the problem, and even so imperfectly. Each depends on changes in the organization of society and in the direction of culture and of education, over which the individual has no control. The more distant society remains from these changes, the greater the demand that is placed on the self-transformation of the individual. The resistant will, derided by the doctrines of the overcoming of the world and converted to the service of society by the teachings of the humanization of the world, must be acknowledged as the indispensable instrument of our rise.

A first antidote to the belittling effect of mutilation is the acceptance of an idea of work: work as a transformative vocation. Three ideas of work contend for influence today. One idea is that of work as an honorable calling: a recognized place in the division of labor, often organized as a specialty, a trade, or a profession, under the aegis of historically developed group standards and with the benefit of honor given by society. The individual's identity comes to be bound up with the performance of this role. He earns a living in a way that also ennobles him. Here there can be no solution to the problem of the mutilation wrought by a course of life. Society teaches the individual to embrace his contingent and particular position and to define his identity by its measure.

A second idea of work is instrumental. Work loses its sanctity and its charm. The individual works only to earn the means with which to sustain value in another realm: typically, the family. The combination of the profane work role and of the family haven becomes the whole world of the individual. He may hope to sweeten his daily chore, never to transform or transcend it.

A third notion of work is the idea of the transformative vocation. Its hallmark is the relation that it establishes between self-transformation and social reconstruction. We strive to reshape some part of our institutional or conceptual setting, and often fail. Despite our failure, we may succeed in changing ourselves.

We cannot will our self-transformation; we can nevertheless will a change in our relation to the setting that we inhabit, refusing to give it the last word. In this way, we rob the particularity of its sting. We cease to allow it to be the prison-house of the spirit. We resist the temptation to describe the prison-house as a home.

The idea of the transformative vocation has been largely the privilege of an elite of geniuses, heroes, and saints. An aspiration of democracy, embraced and generalized by the religion of the future, is to turn this idea into a common possession of humanity. Its generalization, however, depends on more than the authority of a moral belief. It requires as well the reformation of society. In particular, it presupposes the development of political and economic arrangements that break down the contrast between the ordinary reproduction and the extraordinary revision of a context. A democratized market economy, liberated from a single, exclusive version of itself, and a high-energy democracy that does not require crisis to make change possible are the twin major institutional projects serving this goal. They are the indispensable allies of a practice of education equipping the mind to analyze, to decompose, and to reconstruct, informed and inspired by experience and ideas remote from the present circumstance.

A second antidote to the belittling effect of mutilation is engagement in activities that elicit single-mindedness and wholeheartedness. Their objects and occasions may be disproportionate to their devotions. The gap between intensity and its objects was from the beginning the chief sign of our susceptibility to belittlement. Intensity squandered and misdirected, however, is better than no intensity at all: it affirms and enhances the good of life, in the face of death, and offers us a temporary release from our groundlessness and insatiability. We can enlist, in the service of an effort to fashion worthier objects, the force that it engenders.

Here too, however, the organization of society facilitates or inhibits our self-transformation, placing greater or lesser weight on virtue as a surrogate for politics. The organization of work assists us in our resistance to belittlement to the extent that it conforms to three principles.

The first principle is that it render relative the distinction between supervisory and implementing activities, between making plans and implementing them, as well as among specialized work roles in general.

The extent to which advanced practices of productive experimentalism and cooperation penetrate broad sectors of the economy and society depends on the direction of institutional innovation, initially in the relations between governments and firms and later in the regimes of property and contract.

The second principle is that the use of technology be so arranged that machines do for us everything that we have learned to repeat. We express such discoveries in formulas that we can in turn embody in machines. To the greatest extent possible, society helps us save our time for that which we have not yet learned how to repeat. The non-formulaic activities are both more likely and more worthy to arouse the passionate engagement that provides a temporary reprieve from our mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability. They help ensure that this intensity will remain untainted by the trance of repetition.

The third principle is that economically dependent wage labor gradually give way to cooperation and self-employment as the predominant forms of free labor. The contractual employment relation, with its inbuilt conflation of the requirements of coordination and the prerogatives of property, fails to provide a setting hospitable to either the generalization of experimentalist, flexible production or of non-formulaic work. Only when wage labor gives way to the combination of self-employment and cooperation as the predominant regime of free work can the imagination become more fully and for more people the model on which our practical and productive activities are organized.

In the absence of these changes, our experiences of abandonment to all-absorbing activity risk remaining ecstatic anomalies: escapes and diversions. Their moral and social significance turns on their use as points of departure for revisions of some aspect of the context in which wholehearted and single-minded engagement takes place.

A third antidote to the belittling consequences of mutilation is the development of our ability to imagine the selves that we might have become: not just the selves that might have resulted from paths that we foreswore but also those that, given our genetic constitution or social and historical fate, were always beyond our reach. In choosing a course of life, we renounce many others. In renouncing them, we cease to become the individuals that such courses of life would have shaped. We

can nevertheless cultivate the imagination of forms of experience that we renounced, as if developing the power to feel the ghostly movements of missing limbs.

This power to imagine the experience that we renounced has a history entangled in the histories of the three great spiritual orientations discussed earlier in this book. The religion of the future reaffirms a premise shared by the higher religions: the devaluation of the reality and authority of the divisions within mankind. It gives to the devaluation a more tangible meaning as a result of the importance that it assigns to our mastery over the structures of life and of thought. Those divisions depend for their force on these structures.

A characteristic thesis of the doctrines of the overcoming of the world is that the true foundation of sympathy lies in the unreality of the distinct self, an idea to which Schopenhauer gave systematic expression in the history of Western philosophy. For the philosophies and theologies of the struggle with the world, the self is not only real; it also has unfathomable distinction and depth. This view represents part of the patrimony that the religion of the future inherits from the secular and the sacred versions of that approach to life. It is a premise of the revolt against belittlement and of the attempt to increase our share in the humanly accessible attributes of the divine.

Philosophers like Hume, working in traditions of thought shaped by these beliefs, nevertheless sought to base fellow feeling on the recognition of our kinship with others across the barriers separating individual selves. In this view, sympathy depends on the existence and on the recognition of a shared nature.

The basis of fellow feeling, however, is at once deeper and more active than any such nature of the species. It gains strength from the formative experience of every individual person: that he might have taken another course and become another self and that these other possibilities of experience, which he renounced, are versions of a humanity in which he might have shared. Some of these denied paths of the self may seem inaccessible, on account of class, gender, or any number of other traits inscribed in his body or circumstance. Nevertheless, he has been taught by the response of imagination to mutilation that these other humanities might also have been his, had the biological and social lottery produced another result.

Goethe remarked that there was no crime he might not have committed with slight variations of circumstance. So do we find ourselves all with regard to our fellows once we come to recognize the effect of our inescapable mutilation upon our shared humanity.

Even the answer that the imagination can give to mutilation depends, for its force, on society. It depends, above all, on the success of education in developing our capacity to imagine the subjective experience of other people, in other times and situations. In poetry, in the novel, and in the study of the historical vicissitudes of forms of life and of consciousness, we enhance our capacity to appreciate the diversity of human experience. We come to grasp the truth that mankind develops its powers by developing them in different directions, expressed in distinct institutional regimes.

The course of life: mummification

Another decisive incident in human life is our habitual surrender to the routines of our social circumstance as well as to the hardened version of our self: the character. Character and circumstance come together. As we grow older, they form around each of us a mummy, within which we die many small deaths. To this diminishment of life we may give the name mummification. The threat of this two-sided surrender is so regularly realized that it forms as constant and as decisive an incident in human life as the mutilation I previously discussed. We cannot ascend, affirming the good of life and increasing our share in some of the attributes that we ascribe to the divine, unless we avert this threat.

Mummification has two different sides. It is crucial to understand the relation between them if we are to defeat this evil and come more fully into the possession of life.

One side of mummification is our surrender to routinized role and practice within a particular social circumstance. Within such a circumstance, a person assumes a series of roles. Each role comes complete with a built-in script, instructing him how to speak, feel, and act. He embraces and performs this role within a part of social life that is shaped by a dense net of claims that others make on him and he on others.

The way in which the individual engages the circumstance is shaped according to a series of compromises and restraints that clip the wings of fantasy, including his fantasies of escape and empowerment. He resigns himself to the shell of routine and repetition. At that moment, mutilation turns into mummification. Failing in hope, he wastes life.

There is, however, another side to mummification. The self becomes fixed in habits of mind and behavior. At the limit, this hardened self, just as does a social role, provides a script, instructing the individual how to think, feel, and act. It destroys the spontaneity and surprise that figure among the marks of life. It substitutes for the indefinite self, with its restless longings and non-conformity to circumstance. If it was once only a mask, the mask becomes the face. When Heraclitus said that character is destiny, he described this calamity as an ineradicable part of the human condition. Its place in the experience of life is, however, less an inalterable fate than it is the consequence of a way of living and of a view of our place in the world.

According to an idea that readily occurs to us, there is no calamity. The person may be too rigid (and rigidity may shade into what the psychiatry of the present day calls the obsessive-compulsive disorder), or the personality may be deficient in the integration and ordering of its contrasting impulses (as, at the extreme, in hysteria and schizophrenia). In a mode of thought reminiscent of the ethics of Aristotle, character would be a happy medium between these destructive extremes.

The hardening of the self, however, is already manifest in what this reassuring eudaimonism takes to be a happy medium. No one acquires such an ordering of the self and plays his ordered self as if it were a musical instrument without having surrendered to it—his frozen self, his character—a large part of his humanity. No one achieves this harmony, except by a narrowing of the horizon of experience. The evil of extreme rigidity and compulsion is presaged in the phenomenon that Heraclitus described as the fate of every human being. The question presented in this aspect of the religion of the future is what we are to do about it, other than describe it as the way things are and to accept it as part of our destiny.

The two sides of mummification—resignation to the roles that we perform in a particular social station and surrender to the character as

the fixed version of the self—may seem to be in tension with each other. Rigidity inhibits adaptation. If the self were simply an agent of the social order, and the social order, like God in the theology of predestination, had a plan for each self, then any lack of flexibility would amount to a restraint on the performance of our service. We should, by this account, have only so much rigidity as would allow our actions to be intelligible and predictable to others but as much flexibility as would enable us to change our habits of mind and behavior according to our circumstance. The compromises of society and the compulsions of character seem impossible easily to reconcile.

Yet they are reconciled. Their reconciliation is what forms around each of us the mummy that threatens to deny us the good of life and to prevent us from dying only once. The form in which we act is designed by the compulsions of character. The content of our desires is, however, hardly our own. Our desires, like our beliefs, are largely drawn by imitation from other people. We ordinarily desire what others desire. Our desires, unlike those of the animals, are indeterminate, but their content, rather than being left empty for us to shape, is largely filled up by society. Thus, everything happens as if the mimetic character of desire sufficed to mitigate any tension between the demands of society and the compulsions of character. One man will be an introvert, another an extrovert; one cautious, another impulsive; one easily cast down, another resilient. Each will use and be used according to his circumstance and to his luck, but all will sing a song that they have been taught to sing. They will sing it for society, even when they believe that they have sung it, and even composed it, for themselves.

The emptiness and indeterminacy of our desires, which are, in principle, an expression of our transcendence over all limited context, will thus turn against us. They will be the sieve through which society, or history, seizes us and denies us what we might have hoped to be the silver lining of our rigidity: our autonomy. As society invades the life of desire, we lose any prospect of coming into fuller possession of ourselves.

In this way, the two sides of the mummy—our adaptation to society and our surrender to character—come to coexist and even to converge. Their convergence diminishes us. It denies us the power fully to enter into the possession of life in the present and condemns us to a drowsy

simulacrum of existence. It prepares us for death only by killing us in steps. As a result, we cease as well to increase our share in the marks of divinity. By giving our divinity away to the mummy, we also abandon to the mummy our humanity.

In much of the historical experience of mankind, the force of mummification remains veiled. Economic and cultural oppression overshadows all other constraint, chaining the vast majority of ordinary men and women to the wheel of production and condemning them to repetitious and humiliating work for the sake of sustenance. At the same time, it enlists the authority of religion and philosophy in the acceptance of subjugation.

If only the social order could be turned upside down and expunged of the taint of entrenched social division and hierarchy, then—the critic and the prophet imagine—we would at last be free. Instead of this awaited liberation, we might discover that the weakening of the class structure of society, made possible by the democratization of the market, the deepening of democracy, and the liberating work of education, may nevertheless leave us subject to the mummy. We would then feel cheated of the freedom that we had supposed to be the reward of social reconstruction, and awake from one enslavement only to fall victim to another. This realization provides no reason not to rebel and not to reshape the institutions of society. Instead, it gives us a reason to understand that the reformation of the social order represents an incomplete basis for our rise.

In a society and a culture in which our hopes continue to be influenced by the sacred and profane traditions of the struggle with the world, the sole recourse against mummification may seem to be the good of greater life that we seek from the future: a future of political reconstruction or of God-given salvation. This projection of a greater life onto a historical or trans-historical future represents, however, an acceptance of estrangement from life in the present. Mummification seals this estrangement from the present. It does so in the form of a self-inflicted diminishment of life, to which, in despair, fear, and exhaustion, we surrender.

Thus, life comes to be lived as a movement between two varieties of its diminishment. We conspire against ourselves in the wasting of our highest good. Through mummification, we kill time: the fleeting,

incomparably precious time of our lives. Through the projection of something higher into a future that we are unable to grasp, we transfer the life that we surrender to a time in which we shall never live. Between our somnambulance and our anxiety, we start to bury ourselves alive, all the time nursing the hope of a profane or sacred resurrection in which, in our heart of hearts, we have long stopped believing. Passing between the tropisms of character and conformity to circumstance and seeking consolation in our present-denying fantasies, we collude in the destruction of the good that we would have most reason to prize and to preserve. Shaken by the terrors of death, we anticipate death by the manner in which, as mummies and as fantasists, we continue to live. To rescue us from this condition and to reaffirm our claim to the highest prize, life while we live it, are central concerns of the religion of the future.

The beginning of a response lies in addressing the role of repetition in our experience. To surrender to the compulsions of character and the compromises of circumstance is the hallmark of mummification. The two sides of mummification have in common the ascendancy of repetition over experience. This ascendancy threatens to rob life of its distinctive traits of surfeit, fecundity, and spontaneity.

Yet Kierkegaard was right in seeing an all-out war against repetition as a campaign against existence. Repetitions organized and brought under the light of a conception define the institutional and ideological structure of a society and the habitual dispositions to do the good that we call virtues. There is no life—and no collective existence—without repetition.

An unlimited antipathy to repetition is a feature of what, in an earlier discussion of the relation between spirit and structure, I named the Sartrean heresy. One moment of this heresy was that of the mystical and monistic elements within the Semitic religions of salvation. For these countercurrents to the orthodoxies of the Near Eastern religions, the road to salvation passes through endless negation. Paradoxically, these tendencies also represent the whole world as constitutive, albeit not exhaustive, of God: not, however, the world in tangible and differentiated form, only the world as a unity beyond all differentiation.

A second moment in the war against repetition occurs with the romantic movement of the nineteenth century and its late-romantic sequels. Now all repetition, whether institutional, conceptual, or characterological, is seen as both inevitable and destructive of spirit, if by spirit we mean those of our powers that no such structures of society, thought, or character can exhaust. The romantic is resigned to the recurrent and persistent reaffirmation of the structures. He despairs of our ability permanently to alter our relation to them by changing their quality as well as their content. He nevertheless believes that we can periodically shake their hold—through popular insurrection, irrationalist thought, romantic love, and reckless adventure. It is only in these intervals that, according to the romantic, we truly and fully live.

The existentialist moment arrives when to these themes is added disbelief in the unity of the self or in the value of a unitary self. The agent of the rebellion against structure ceases to be the self as spirit, in the exercise of its structure-defying powers, and becomes instead the person in his temporal situation, identified with his fleeting experience.

In all its three moments, this view betrays its failure to grasp a major aspect of our condition: our ability to turn the tables on the structures not just by rebelling against them but by rendering them more open to the powers by which we resist and reshape them. We can do justice to these powers without subscribing to the Hegelian heresy: belief in the existence of a structure that accommodates all the experience that we have reason to value, whether in society, thought, or character.

Rightly to deal with the pervasive presence of repetition in our experience, we must make explicit and radicalize the suppressed orthodoxy of spirit and structure in the struggle with the world. Three principles reveal the implications of this orthodoxy for our response to the role of repetition in experience.

The first principle is that repetition be used to escape from repetition. Consider two widely contrasting instances of this principle: the desirable relation of the machine to labor and the relation of consonance to dissonance in music.

Whatever we have learned how to repeat we can express in a formula. Whatever we have learned how to express formulaically we can embody in a physical contraption, a machine. The highest use of the

machine in the development of our powers is to undertake on our behalf the work that we have learned how to repeat so that we can preserve our greatest and, in a sense, our sole resource—the time of our lives—for that which we have learned how not to repeat. By increasing the role of the non-repetitious in our experience, we become more human by becoming more godlike. Putting repetition in its place is associated with breaking the spell that condemns us to a smaller life.

A formative feature of music is movement from repetition to novelty. Repetition is heard as consonance and departure from repetition as dissonance. If music were solely or even primarily repetition, it too would be a spell, resembling hypnosis, bewitching us into a dimmed state of awareness as we await death. A style in music, such as the classical style of the period of European music from about 1770 to 1820, is, in the first instance, a particular way of managing the coexistence between consonance and dissonance. The enhancement of our power to appreciate dissonance and to expand our sense of what counts as consonance is, if anything is, the rule of progression in the history of musical style. In this way, the development of our musical faculties joins the project of the divinization of humanity.

So, too, with the virtues: as habitual dispositions, they rely on repetition. Nevertheless, the role of openness to the new among the virtues of divinization and its connection with openness to the other person suggest that repetition acquires its value only through its link with the unrepeated.

The psychological significance of non-repetition is the sharpening of consciousness, including our awareness of the passage of time, in a human life that moves decisively and irreversibly to its end. Repetition is the anticipation of death if it remains in command of experience. It is the friend of life if it lays a basis for the unrepeated.

The second principle is the importance of the effort to change the nature of repetition as well as harnessing it to the aim of widening space for that which we have not yet learned how to repeat readily. I have described what this change in the nature of repetition means for the institutional organization of society: a structure that facilitates its own revision, multiplying occasions and creating instruments for its piecemeal reshaping. Such a way of organizing the market economy, the democratic state, or independent civil society narrows the distance

between our ordinary structure-preserving activities and our exceptional structure-preserving moves. In so doing, it enables us to engage wholeheartedly in a form of life without surrendering to it, thus allowing us to live out more fully the truth of the relation between spirit and structure.

A similar change takes place in the practice of thought when normal science begins to acquire attributes of revolutionary science. The discourse of a particular discipline starts to consider its own presuppositions. It accelerates the dialectic, characteristic of the history of thought, between change of content and change of method. No longer do we need to await rare “paradigm shifts.” They occur piecemeal, in the midst of ordinary attempts to advance our knowledge of the world. The power to generate them ceases to be reserved to a small number of geniuses; it is diffused more widely within the human race.

Such a change in the quality rather than in the substance of an institutional order or of a field of thought amounts to a special case of a more general mode of experience. Not only do we make repetition serve innovation; we also change how repetition works. We reshape its workings so that it leads more readily beyond itself. What such a reshaping means for the conduct of life is a topic to be considered at the next step of this argument. For the moment, it suffices to say that it requires the formation of a character (if character is to the person what the institutional and ideological order is to society and what a comprehensive theory or paradigm is to science) that uses repetition against repetition and habit (even virtuous habit) against habit, to the end of enabling us to possess life more fully in the present.

A third principle holds that an intimate relation, of both reciprocal dependence and partial substitution, exists between our collective advance toward this ideal in politics and in thought and our progress toward it in the way we live. In a society and a culture the institutional and cognitive structures of which have changed in the direction described, to lighten the burden of repetition and to enlist it in the service of the unique and the novel, it will be correspondingly easier for the individual to resist surrendering personality to character and circumstance. The collective achievement will facilitate the liberation of the individual and intensify the experience of life. There will be less of a distance to travel in reorienting existence.

By contrast, the less society and thought have been reformed in this way, the more our moral striving must make up for the deficiencies of the social order. History casts its shadow over biography, but what history has not given us we may nevertheless act to give ourselves. Refusal to give history the last word forms part of the heroic element in moral experience.

The organization of society can immensely strengthen the hand of the individual in his effort to defeat mummification. It can do so by satisfying three sets of demands, each of them an aspect of the conception of deep freedom.

The first demand is that our material life—the everyday world of work—cease to be a realm of humiliation and oppression. To this end, we cannot await (as Marx and Keynes and many others desired and predicted) the overcoming of scarcity, although the fulfillment of our goals depends on the advance of science and the enrichment of society as well as on the institutional arrangements for production and exchange. Every individual must be assured a universal minimum of resources and resource-supported capabilities and opportunities, regardless of the position that he occupies in society. Economically dependent wage labor must gradually cease to be the predominant form of free work. It must gradually give way to the higher varieties of free labor: self-employment and cooperation, whether separately or in combination. No human being must be condemned to do the repetitious work that machines can execute.

The second demand is that the individual receive from society an education freeing him from the tyranny of present beliefs and institutions. Such an education gives priority to the skills that enable us to decompose and reconstruct knowledge. It uses information, deeply and selectively, as a tool for the acquisition of analytic and synthetic capabilities. It combines the goal of strengthening our ability to think and to act in the present context with the effort to gain distance from this context, the better to find inspiration in alien experience. In this way, it seeks double vision: insight with our own eyes as well with the eyes of a form of consciousness removed from our own in time or space. It turns to advantage the contestable and conditional character of all ideas, approaching every subject from contrasting points of view. It works

toward the diffusion of prophetic powers within the mass of ordinary men and women.

A third axis is change in the quality as well as in the content of our institutional arrangements in the direction suggested by the preceding remarks about putting repetition in its place. The most important site of such change is the reorganization of democratic politics: the creation of a high-energy democracy that dissociates the fragmentation of power (the liberal principle) from the slowing down of politics (the conservative principle); increases the level of organized popular engagement in public life; overcomes impasse among branches or powers of government quickly; and favors the creation, in particular parts of a country or parts of a society, of counter models of the future. The institutional arrangements of democracy enjoy a natural priority over other exercises of institutional change because they help set the terms on which we can change all other arrangements.

The heating up of democratic politics and the quickening of its pace help make the social order conform to our idea of democratic politics, as a variety of collective activity in which people are divided and united by opinion as well as by interest, through countless mechanisms of antagonism and union, rather than standing in the shadow of an overweening scheme of social division and hierarchy. What democratic politics is supposed to be, society would become. For such a change to take place, however, democratic politics would have to become something different from what it now is. We would know that we had advanced toward our goal when the life chances of individuals ceased to be shaped by the transmission of educational and economic advantage through the family; the institutional organization of society turned into a central and persistent topic of ordinary politics; and innovation in the established structures of society and of thought became less dependent on crisis than it continues to be.

The principle informing such a direction of change in our political institutions and practices has implications as well for the organization of the economy and of civil society. For the economy, it means that the market should not remain fastened to a single, exclusive legal and institutional version of itself. The decentralized allocation of capital should be arranged through alternative regimes of private and social property, allowed to coexist within the same market economy.

For civil society, it implies that our practices and institutions should enable civil society to organize itself outside the state, and generate from within itself experiments that can serve as points of departure for the reorganization of other areas of social life. The apparatus of traditional private and public law proves inadequate to this task. It does not suffice to develop a third body of social law, or of public non-state law. We need to place alongside a law made by the state, and imposed down upon society, another law, created by society itself, bottom up.

The same impulse and conception animate all these changes: in politics, the economy, and civil society. The task is to narrow the distance between our ordinary structure-preserving activities and our context-changing moves. In this way, we enhance our power to engage a particular historical world without surrendering to it. We preserve and develop our powers in the midst of our engagement.

A society and a culture that move in this direction enhance our ability to resist mummification. They keep us awake, and recall to us at every moment the good that we too readily forget and abandon. However, just as the reconstruction of the social order cannot spare us our moral ordeal, so too our advance toward a higher form of social life cannot exempt us from the imperative of self-transformation. We then come to the central point in our thinking about mummification: how we should act when, as usually happens, culture and society do little to rescue us from our fall or actively conspire in robbing us, before we die, of life.

The way not to surrender life to the mummy is to live life as a search. A search for what? For people to whom and for a task to which we can give ourselves wholeheartedly. Resistance to mummification requires that we grasp the right relation between these answers and orient the conduct of existence accordingly.

It may seem that such an ideal amounts to a luxury, reserved for the small part of humanity that is not ground under by material deprivation and social oppression. The centrality of this concern to all men and women will become clearer as the reign of material scarcity weakens and the bonds of subjugation are loosened. Moreover, even under constraint, a human being in any society is more than what he appears to be. His stratagems of resilience and resistance, driven by the

love of our greatest good, foretell another future. Part of his work is to turn that orientation to the future into a changed way of living in the present.

I now develop, by successive steps, a view of the conduct of life as it may be inspired by the effort to break out of the mummy. I begin by contrasting this view to the moral conceptions that have exercised the greatest influence in the spiritual history of mankind. I then describe the marks of a life that affirms, against the mummy, its own good and power. Finally, I address three objections.

To orient life in the direction that I here defend, we must be willing to subordinate, reinterpret, or reject moral ideas and attitudes that, in varying proportions, have dominated our beliefs about what to do and about how to live. Here is an enumeration offered for the sake of clarity through contrast. I present the contrasts without argument; the argument is the whole of this book.

Consider first a pair of pre-philosophical moral attitudes whose force and attractions are never spent. They recur in countless variations, in all cultures and periods, because they express a plausible (if misguided) response to the tribulations of life.

Fugitive, tormented, and enigmatic, our existence—Schopenhauer wrote—puts us in the position of people caught in a storm-tossed shipwreck. We cling to one another because all we ultimately have, unless and until we receive the light of higher insight (like the insight provided by the overcoming of the world), are one another. When we try to think through to the bottomless ground of our being, we come up short or lose ourselves in confusion. However, we return from our delirium to sanity—Hume taught—when we put aside our speculations, engage with society and custom, and allow ourselves to be rescued by the company of our fellows. The clinging and the engagement are the best for which we can hope.

We should, according to these views, reject every practice or ideal, like the struggle against mummification, that threatens the fulfillment of this hope. Only solidarity, organized as culture and society or spontaneously given as grace among individuals, assuages suffering. The question that this attitude is unable to answer is, on what basis—in what form of life and of thought—shall we cling to one another? Some forms may diminish us; others raise us up. Some may amount to la-

ments; others, to prophecies. A premise of the religion of the future, made explicit in its move against mummification, is that the organization of society and of belief can either settle for less life or make more life possible.

Another pre-philosophical attitude emphasizes the most simple of ideals: keep out of trouble. The best way to keep out of trouble is to stay at home. Home is our limited circumstance, of life and thought, in all its forms. We would suffer much less, and impose much less suffering on others—Voltaire advised—if only we ceased to conceive vainglorious adventures. Such adventures are the large transformative enterprises of politics and thought. They are also the restless striving of the individual for more of anything that others desire, or for some illusory good fabricated in the imagination. The refusal of mummification, however, begins in the disposition to look for trouble. Unless we look for trouble, we cannot come into the fuller possession of life.

Next on the list of the approaches to existence that weaken our resolve to resist the sacrifice of life to the mummy come the different versions of the theoretical altruism that inspires much of modern moral philosophy, secularizing and trivializing the road to salvation marked out by the Semitic monotheisms. One version of this theoretical altruism tells us to seek the greatest happiness of the greatest number. We are to do so either according to circumstantial judgments, unconstrained by stable rules, or according to rules that we evaluate and revise according to a felicific or welfare calculus. A second version instructs us to act according to rules that we have reason to make universal. The universality of the rules enables us to overcome our partiality of view, tainted by interest and appetite, and to treat others, disinterestedly, as ends in themselves. A third version, barely distinct from the second, advises us to adopt those rules and practices to which we would have reason to consent in a circumstance undistorted by ignorance, subjugation, or self-interest. In such a circumstance, magnanimity can be purified and guided by rational deliberation.

All these versions of the theoretical altruism tend to the same emptiness: they give form to a content that they are powerless to create and that they must import from outside. They misrepresent the fundamental problem of our relation to others, which is our need to connect and to engage without the surrender and subjugation of the self, rather than

the inordinate influence of self-interest. They share with Pontius Pilate the desire to be blameless: to tell how we are to pay the bills, acquit ourselves of our obligations, and come out with clean hands. They amount to a shriveled residue of Christianity, not only without the cross but also without the transformation. They are inimical to the enhancement of life, which is the animating goal of the struggle against the mummy.

A more formidable rival to the ideas underlying resistance to mummification, as well as to the attitudes that this resistance inspires and on which it draws, are the orientations to existence arising out of the overcoming of the world and the humanization of the world. They are not mere philosophical speculations; they remain permanent and dangerous options in the spiritual path of mankind. They bear a closer and more interesting connection with the fight against mummification than the abstractions of the moral philosophers.

The approach to life called in this book the overcoming of the world urges us to disentangle ourselves from the coils of illusion the better to share in the life or being of the underlying, single reality and to recognize our kinship with every part of the manifest world. The point at which this approach overlaps the struggle against mummification is the value that it gives to the virtues of purification: simplicity, enthusiasm, and attentiveness. It provides a metaphysical basis for the requisite *kenosis*: the emptying out by which we distance ourselves from the peripheral the better to grasp the central. The acute awareness of participation in hidden and unified being that it requires offers a good in the present, not just a promise of greater good in the future, even as it tends to deny or diminish the reality of time. The compassionate action that it demands exacts from its adherents a willingness to defy the worldly impediments to our rise to this higher level of existence. In all these ways, the disciplines of the overcoming of the world converge with the campaign against mummification as I here define and defend it.

They part with this campaign, however, in at least two ways crucial to the conduct of life. First, they diverge in the value that they place on the end goal of serenity. There is no life, or no enhancement of life, without turmoil. The reason lies in the implications of some of our most important attributes. We can affirm life only by throwing ourselves into particular social and conceptual contexts. However, we cease to

live, or diminish life, if we fail to fight against the limits of such contexts.

We are condemned to be both insiders and outsiders if we wish to affirm the good of existence. The experience of single-minded engagement in a task, or of wholehearted love for another person who is our equal and who can rebuff as well as accept our love, may make time seem to stop for a while. The normal course of existence, however, requires reckoning with the limits of the circumstance, relentlessly enforced, even upon the most privileged, by the established regime of society or of thought. Only by contending with this confinement, and by doing so under the shadow of mortality, groundlessness, and insatiability, do we awake to life.

The second point at which the disciplines of the overcoming of the world conflict with the demands of resistance to mummification lies in the attitude to the realities of time and distinction, including the distinction among selves, in the real, historical world. We are hostage to our endeavors and connections. They in turn are held ransom to events beyond our control. What may matter most to us, including the fate of the people whom we love most and of the tasks that we most prize, may lie beyond the span of our lives. The view of happiness suggested by the overcoming of the world teaches that these threats are unreal because time, distinction, and independent selfhood are themselves unreal, or less real than hidden and unified being.

For the beliefs that the religion of the future takes over from the struggle with the world, however, the threats are all too real, and it is their denial that represents an illusion inimical to existence. Our overcoming of estrangement from life in the present must not have this illusion as its premise. It must convert living for the future, a real future, in a real world of time and distinction, into a way of living in the present as an agent who can always outreach, in thought and experience, the present circumstances of his existence. These convictions fail to supply our search with a direction, but they make the search possible and endow it with its life-giving importance.

The humanization of the world provides a response of a different order to the evil of mummification. It does so on the basis of its fundamental tenets and commitments: the creation of meaning and order in an otherwise meaningless world, in which nature is alien to our human

concerns and society is always on the verge of descending into anarchy, violence, and oppression; the grounding of social order in a set of obligations that we owe one another by virtue of the roles that we occupy; the hope of improvement through a dialectic between the roles, rules, and rituals of society and the cumulative development of our ability to imagine the experience and the aspirations of other people; and the abandonment of efforts to revolutionize established social regimes in favor of the attempt to purge them of their cruelties. Its crowning ideal, reserved to those who have advanced furthest in self-improvement, is the spontaneous identification of our desires with our obligations. Then all heteronomy disappears.

There is much in this way of thinking that accords with the arguments and proposals of this book: the idea that the central problem of our relation to others is the reconciliation of our need to connect to them with the imperative of escaping the threat of subjugation and loss of self with which every such connection threatens us; the belief that we fail to enhance life and to become free to the extent that we fail to achieve such a reconciliation; and the doctrine that our advance in this direction depends on the reform of our cooperative arrangements as well as on strengthening of our ability to imagine the experience of other people.

There are, however, at least three crucial points at which the ideas justifying the effort to break out of the mummy conflict with those that are central to the humanization of the world. The first point is the imperative of refusing to accept the established social order as the template in which we can hope to achieve connection without subjugation. It will never be enough to moderate the cruelties of inherited and established social regimes through the observance of role-based obligations and reciprocities or the emphasis on merit and capability. It will be necessary to reshape their institutional content. We cannot respect individuals without disrespecting the structures of society and culture.

The second point of conflict is the inadequacy of any role, or any system of roles, even in the freest and most equal society. No role is entirely worthy of any human being. It follows that an individual's performance of any role must be ambivalent. We should perform it and defy it at the same time, converting it to ends for which it was not designed.

The third point of contradiction is the ambivalence shadowing our relations with one another. Love passes into hatred; hatred, into love. The effort to put a fix on this ambivalence, to control it under a formula of character, society, or thought, is an enterprise that can achieve a semblance of serenity and peace only by suppressing the enhancement and the expression of life. The solution, to the extent that a solution exists, is the raising up of the self, through the cumulative effect of the virtues of connection, of purification, and of divinization. This raising up must take place against the background of the higher forms of cooperation, if possible, and without that background, if necessary.

The ideal of a virtuoso of role-based reciprocity who achieves, through self-cultivation and self-restraint, an inclusive benevolence, confident in his own nobility and reconciled both to society and to himself, contradicts the vision inspiring resistance to the mummy in the hope of dying only once.

These arguments about the inadequacy of overcoming the world and of humanizing it as bases for our triumph over mummification lead into a positive view: a view of the characteristics of a life that is able to avert the threat of mummification. A life characterized by the aims invoked by these arguments will have certain marks. These marks are so intimately connected that they are best seen as different aspects of the same way of living. Any one of them taken in isolation invites misinterpretation. Their significance and their reach become clear in the light of their relation to one another. To achieve them is both a goal of our striving and a confirmation of our success.

They fail to yield a system of rules. Then, again, the codification of our moral ideas in a system of rules is an enterprise alien to this way of thinking. When such rules or principles are not empty and powerless to provide guidance in the conduct of life, they have all too much content and stand as surrogates for the tasks of self and social transformation that should lie at the center of our concerns.

A first mark of this way of living is that it manifest a disposition to resist the hardening of the self in the form of character. This disposition can also be described as the effort to form a character that remains to the end open to the possibilities of life and to the promptings of experience. What is such a character, or anti-character, like? It exhibits a

mode of being with the characteristics of surfeit, fecundity, and spontaneity. It works to dissolve the contrast between character and life, and to reinvent in the grown man or woman the charms and the intensity of the child.

For the character, the attribute of surfeit implies availability to the inspirations and possibilities of experience outside the range of the familiar. The adjacent possible must live in the mind as no less real than the examples and models provided by the past of the self. The funnel of the accessible in the course of life must widen rather than narrow, despite the approach of death, with the result that, like the child that he was, the grown man is transfixed, with joy or terror, by the world around him. His arousal from the slumber of a diminished life, given over to routine and repetition, is now sustained by his sense of feasible next steps. He is available as well as attentive because he has awakened more fully to life.

Spontaneity in the character means that the hold of the past over the present, in the development of the self, weakens. What we did before serves less to predict what we shall do next. Path dependency there always is; when we diminish it, however, we become more alive. It is not that existence falls apart into a series of momentary selves, as some of the metaphysical conceptions associated with Buddhism proposed. It is rather that the burden of a formulaic continuity, inscribed in the tropisms of a character, on the continuity of the self, lightens.

Surfeit and spontaneity make possible renewed surprise and fecundity, the perpetual creation of the new—above all, new experience, new connections, new engagements. The significance of the creation of the new is to show and develop our power to exceed all the determinate circumstances of society, thought, and character and, by so doing, to become more lifelike.

A second mark of such a way of living is the refusal to identify the self with any particular role and therefore, as well, the refusal to accept, without resistance and qualification, the rules and expectations associated with the role. What stands behind the system of roles is the marriage of a social regime with a cultural vision. The regime embeds cooperation in hierarchy. The vision translates the abstract idea of society into a series of models of human association: prescriptive views of how people can

and should deal with one another in different domains of social life. The social role contains the regime and the vision within itself. To accept it is to accept them. Such an acceptance represents a denial of the most important fact about our relation to these structures of society and culture: that we exceed, in power and reach, these collective creations of ours and cease to be fully human and alive if we take them as an absolute frame of reference for our striving and thinking.

What this fact implies for our performance of the conventional roles that are available to us is that we can neither disregard the standards with which such roles are associated and the expectations to which they give rise, as if they had no moral weight, nor take those standards and expectations as definitive of our obligations to one another and to ourselves. There is no formula by which to balance these competing considerations. There is, however, a sliding scale. The more the social and cultural regime from which the system of roles emerges expresses the principles of deep freedom and supports the higher forms of cooperation, the greater is the authority that we have reason to give to role-based standards and expectations.

An implication of the falsehood of the Hegelian heresy—belief in a definitive structure able to accommodate all the experience and activity that we have reason to value—is that at no point along this sliding scale should we give in wholly to the script that comes with the role. No social and cultural order deserves unqualified credit. None suppresses the need for prophetic vision—not just for the grand visions of a few inspired and exceptional individuals but also for the small epiphanies of which any reasonably fortunate human life is full. Whether great or small, vision requires defiance, whereas the system of roles exists for the reproduction of an established social world.

To a greater or lesser extent, we must tear up the script. We cannot do so without disappointing others, who rely on that script. With roles, and with the claims that they generate, go loyalties. In defying roles, we signify our intention to put under stress the loyalties with which they are associated. We do so up to the limit of personal betrayal, which we must risk crossing when we set out on a defiant and transformative course.

We must perform the roles that exist while enlisting them in the service of ends that they were never designed to support. We must

maintain an inner distance from them, even as we try in good faith to perform them. We must struggle to reinvent the role the better to enact a vision or to foreshadow another future. By performing them and resisting them at the same time, we become larger and more alive. We cannot do so, however, without causing trouble to others and to ourselves.

A third mark of a life lived under the light of such aspirations generalizes the significance of our two-sided relation to social roles. We must be both insiders and outsiders to the regimes of society and thought in which we participate. To be an insider is to think and feel as if the order of life or of thought in which we engage resembled a natural language suitable to the expression of every thought worth thinking. It is to act as the committed functionaries of that world, taking its assumptions about the valuable and the dangerous, as well as about the real and the possible, as if they were our sole reliable basis for insight and judgment. It is to believe that the only acceptable means with which to revise that world are the practical and conceptual instruments that it supplies. To rely on anything else, it may seem, would be authoritarianism, or metaphysical arrogance, or betrayal. It would be to substitute a false view of reason for a tangible expression of solidarity: its expression in particular societies and cultures and particular groups of people.

To be an outsider is to chafe under the rule of an ordering of life or thought and to experience such a regime as alien: alien because inadequate to what most needs doing, or making, or inventing, or imagining, or experiencing. It is therefore as well to refuse conformity, and to act either to revise or to subvert this order.

Everything said earlier about the imperative of ambivalence to roles applies more generally to being an insider and to being an outsider. Being an insider is the road to engagement. Without engagement we are not free. Neither, however, are we free if we renounce all resistance to the context and conduct ourselves as if it defined our humanity and circumscribed our powers.

All our most important material, moral, and spiritual interests are engaged in the work of creating arrangements that diminish the distance between our ordinary context or structure-preserving moves and our extraordinary structure or context-transforming activities. As we narrow that distance, change ceases to depend on crisis. The opportu-

nity to change the framework of arrangements or assumptions within which we act arises in the midst of our everyday business.

Movement in this direction does not exempt us from the call to be both insiders and outsiders. It is rather that this ideal sets its mark on the arrangements of society and the practices of culture. As a result, we can pursue it non-heroically and all the time.

There are three great forces in the world that favor the spread of the attitudes that press on us the need to be both insiders and outsiders. The first is the message of the divinity or the greatness of the ordinary man and woman, conveyed by the orientation to existence that I have called the struggle with the world. The second is democracy, invoking faith in the constructive genius of ordinary people, even as it begins to create the institutional equipment for the ongoing revision of the terms of social life. The third is the reinvention of the nation, or of the division of humanity into separate states, as a species of moral specialization within humanity, through which we develop our powers by developing them in different directions.

A premise of such a view of the distinct nations and states of the world is that no form of life, expressed in law—the institutional form of the life of a people—can serve as the definitive setting of our humanity. A practical implication is that everyone ought to have the freedom to escape from the country in which he happens to have been born, and to join another one as well as to be a voice of criticism and resistance if he remains.

By virtue of the influence of these three forces, our consciousness and activity as outsiders lose any sharp contrast to our consciousness and activity as insiders. In a world, however, in which those forces remain inhibited in their transformative work, the insider remains clearly distinct from the outsider, and both of them must live within each of us. The person who becomes both insider and outsider gives profane meaning to the biblical injunction to be in the world without being of it. He can engage wholeheartedly and single-mindedly in particular activities that absorb him to the point of seeming to suspend the passage of time: a passion, for example, that has turned into a craft. However, he must never allow himself to devote such single-mindedness and wholeheartedness to the regimes of society or of thought that he finds established in his circumstance. Toward those regimes his loyalties must remain conflicted. He sees their shared or implicit standards

of value and reality as at best incomplete and disputable. His actions and associations foreshadow, within the present institutional and conceptual context of his activity, not just a different order but also a different kind of order. They are a practical prophecy.

In his manner of being both insider and outsider, he shows how living for the future can become a way of living in the present, as a being for whom circumstance can never have the final say. Life then becomes prophetic without ceasing to be ordinary. It is the type of prophecy suitable to democracy.

The tension between being an insider and being an outsider helps undermine any equilibrium in the self that has as its requirement the containment or suppression of vitality. It works to enhance life, and to dissolve the mummy.

A fourth mark of a life lived so that death happens only once is the way in which such a life addresses the relation between the formulaic and the anti-formulaic elements in our activity. The central problem lies in the two-sidedness of the formulaic: it is both friendly and unfriendly to life. The consequences of this two-sidedness are apparent in the relation between the two sides of the mind: the formulaic machine and the non-formulaic anti-machine. In the workings of the mind, as in all other aspects of our experience, repetition need not be deadweight.

The imagination works in two steps: by distancing from immediate experience (perception recalled as image) and by subsuming a state of affairs under a larger range of transformative variations, the proximate possible as a wedge into the understanding of the actual. If there were no structure of recurrent perception and reasoning, the imagination would have no place to begin. It would be like the dove mentioned in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The dove thought that if only it did not need to contend with the resistance of the air, it would fly even faster.

The same duality recurs in the character of work. Labor is the embodiment of our mental life in production and cooperation. It, too, can be either formulaic or anti-formulaic. To the extent that it is formulaic, we act as if we were machines. For a machine is nothing other than the physical embodiment of formulaic activity. Whatever we have learned how to repeat we can express in a formula. Whatever we can express in

a formula we can materialize in a machine. Countless millions remain condemned to do the work that machines could perform. The most important use of the machine, however, is to save our time for that which we have not yet learned how to repeat.

The life of the virtues shows a similar dialectic. The virtues are habitual predispositions to do the good. If, however, the virtues were no more than habits, even if directed to right ends, they would signal the surrender of experience to routine. They would serve mummification rather than acting to dissolve the mummy. In the religion of the future, we come to see these habitual predispositions as means by which to affirm in daily life the truth that there is more in each of us than there is in the structures of society and of thought that we inhabit.

The virtues of connection take on a preparatory meaning and cease to be the centerpiece of the moral life. As they dethrone us from our self-centeredness, they prepare us for a life of searching, in which we are rescued, rather than doomed, by our dependence on other people. The virtues of purification draw us to the parts of our experience that are least susceptible to being made formulaic; by disengaging us from the peripheral, they equip us to resist the context. The virtues of divinization are habits against habits and against structures.

These last virtues present the most difficult problem in the vision animating the campaign against mummification: the relation of transcendence to solidarity, of greatness to love. We must defy structures to respect people and to make ourselves more fully into the structure-transcending agents that, in our actual historical circumstance, we only dimly are. However, no defiance of structure is achieved without a threat to solidarity (although muffled in the higher forms of cooperation), and no greatness is a substitute for love.

In all these domains, the task is to change the nature and place of routine and repetition in our experience. Routine—expressed in the part of the mind that has not yet become imagination, in machines that do for us what we have already learned how to repeat, and in virtues that turn strivings and ideals into habits—comes to serve our raising up to a higher state of vision and being. To make war against repetition, as romanticism desires, is to reject life, for there is no life without repetition. Nevertheless, to abdicate resistance to the influence of repetition in our experience is to accept a diminished life. The solution to this

contradiction is not to devise another theory; it is to live in a different way and to organize society and culture on different terms.

The more distant we remain from the social and cultural ideal of structures that multiply occasions for their revision and allow engagement without surrender, the greater the weight that is placed on the moral ambition of the individual, who must prefigure in his own mode of life what the species or the nation has so far failed to achieve in its history. The prize is life—more life, not just later, but also right now.

A fifth mark of a human existence escaping the mummy is that it be inclined to conceive, and determined to pursue, large projects—indeed, the largest project in which the individual, given his situation, his gifts, and his beliefs, can imagine himself passionately engaged. Such a project may be individual or collective. It may be capable of fulfillment in biographical or only in historical time. If it is a collective endeavor that can be achieved only in historical time, the individual may play only a small part in its progress. Nevertheless, that part must be large for him: it must provide him with a task and a struggle that engage him wholly, and speak with an authority that no preset social role can possess.

The largeness that matters here is therefore not measured on the scale of power and influence. If it were, success in the campaign against mummification would be vouchsafed only to a few, who are in fact no less susceptible to mummification than the many. An aim related to our most intimate and paramount concerns—the possession of life—would then remain dependent on fortune and success in the distribution of natural endowments as well as in the allocation of social place.

A large undertaking, the largest to which a person can devote himself, is distinguished by the impalpable measure of its relation to the self: in embracing it, an individual at last stops acting as the functionary of a society, a culture, or an age. He acts as a person who is able to see himself as uncontained by his circumstance and who has found a light and a passion. He comes to life, and experiences, in the service of this light and this passion, the life-revealing traits of surfeit, fecundity, and spontaneity or surprise. The task that he has embraced is not life-giving because it is grand by the standards of the bitch goddess Success. Rather it is large because it is life-giving.

An endeavor that is small by the standards of the world, and affords no power or honor, may seem to resemble the three-foot pyramid that Thomas Carlyle viewed as so pathetic. To the agent, however, it is not three-foot if it frees him from the bondage of alien routine and gives him the keys to a more vibrant state of being. It is this reversal that matters in the avoidance of the mummy.

The clearest instance of such a project arises, in modern experience, in the context of a view of work that is characteristic of the freest and most innovative societies in the last few centuries: the idea of the transformative vocation. According to this idea, we are most fully ourselves when we seek to change some part of the world. World transformation, always piecemeal and fragmentary, and always subject to the adventures of unintended consequences, may succeed or fail. In seeking to change the world, we change ourselves. The most important change is that we break the spell of the routinized existence that was willed on us by the alliance between chance and society. We live as if the new were not only feasible but also in our power to make.

The institutions and the culture of deep freedom, designed to make good on the moral promise of democracy, create the conditions in which the transformative vocation can cease to be the prerogative of a small band of visionaries and become instead the common possession of ordinary men and women. In the organization of production, many goals contribute to the same end: the effort to detach the market economy from any single, dogmatic version of itself and to allow different regimes of property and contract to coexist within the same economic order; the progressive substitution of wage labor by the combination of self-employment and cooperation as the predominant form of free labor; the use of machines to save people from having to work as if they were machines and the consequent redirection of labor time to activities that we have not yet learned to repeat; and the reformation of the world order so as not to impose submission to a formula of coercive institutional convergence as the condition of access to the global public goods of political security and economic openness. In the organization of democratic politics, the creation of a high-energy democracy—one that raises the temperature and hastens the pace of politics, even as it facilitates, in particular places and sectors, the creation of counter-models of the national future—advances the same purpose. It does so

by giving practical efficacy to the democratic ideal of choosing, in the light of experience, the terms of social organization rather than having them imposed by the influence of powerful interests or the rule of the dead over the living.

To understand the transformative vocation as the sole road to the large endeavors that help bring us to life is too narrow and restrictive a view of our access to this benefit. A craft, developed and practiced with no thought to the transformation of the world but also little care for the approbation of society, seized on as a world unto itself with demands almost unlimited and seemingly disproportional to their tangible outcome, may produce a similar effect in the experience of the self and in its relation to the good of life. It hardly matters, in this regard, whether the domain of the craft is physical or conceptual. What matters is its relative intimacy to the self and its relative recalcitrance to the dictates of society.

It may be objected that an insistence on the cultivation of the largest projects to which we can devote ourselves, as expressions of our most passionate concerns rather than as subjection to a power external to ourselves, is an aim that no one need defend. It is what a human being will naturally do, within the limits traced by his circumstance, his gifts, and his beliefs. The truth, however, is that even those on whom fortune has most smiled often choose, out of fear for themselves and disrespect for life, undertakings that are too small. They prefer to shine and prosper in a smaller world than to struggle and risk failing in a bigger one. In this fashion, they settle for a lesser version of the greatest good, and go to their deaths having denied themselves a better chance to become more godlike and human.

A sixth mark of a life graced with the power to break out of the mummy is that it show an acceptance of a heightened vulnerability for the sake of dying only once. Two issues arise. The first is the nature of the greater vulnerability that we need to accept (vulnerability to what?) as well as the basis and significance of its relation to the goal of coming into the possession of a fuller life. The second is the part that is properly played by the will in the campaign against mummification and in the acceptance of enhanced vulnerability as a condition of its pursuit.

The two large families of experiences serving this purpose are love and work: especially love among equals, freely given and freely rebuffed,

and work, looming large in the consciousness of the self because eliciting its capacity for more intense experience and driving a person to more exertion and greater struggle than any cold calculus of advantage can justify. These two sets of experiences subject us to disappointment, defeat, and derision. We cannot give ourselves to them without at least partly lifting our defenses against other people, despite our ambivalence to them. The cost of entry into these experiences is to tolerate a greater vulnerability to other people.

This price is evident in love: in the love among people who stand, with respect to the experience of love, on an equal plane, no matter how differently the world may view them. The imposition of this tariff represents a sign of the superiority of such love to the disinterested benevolence, given from a distance and from on high, that the most influential traditions of moral thought throughout world history have generally and falsely regarded as the gold standard of human relations. In a more subtle form, the price is charged as well in all the experiences attending the higher forms of cooperation. The most promising cooperative practices are the ones that require us to work together without a rigid allocation of role and responsibility or a stark contrast between supervision and implementation. They impose greater vulnerability because they require higher trust. What counteracts this exposure is the assurance of rights and endowments not dependent upon keeping any particular job.

In the work that matters most to the individual, if not to the society, an increased vulnerability to other people is no less indispensable. A man who devotes himself to an ambitious task has not simply given hostages to fortune. He has increased the power of others over him, although he has done so, by an apparent paradox, at the behest of an assertion of freedom. His work is his self made external; others can defeat or destroy it.

Such love and work supply antidotes to the mummy. They require that we lower our defenses. A state of greater vulnerability plays an even larger part in our arousal to a larger life than this requirement may suggest. To experience such an ascent we must be ready for it: we must make ourselves patiently and hopefully available to new engagements and new connections. This patient and hopeful availability draws a broad penumbra of accessible engagement and attachment around our core experiences of work and love. Like those core experiences, it opens

us to disappointment. It is nevertheless indispensable because it enables us to change, and to escape the hold of the character on the self.

If the self remains in its citadel, anxious to control and heavily defended, it declines in the sources of vitality. To lay the citadel open, however, is to court danger: a danger inseparable from the enhancement of life.

Here the will has a role. We cannot simply will our self-transformation. However, we can by acts of will throw ourselves into situations that deny us some of our protections and that render us more accessible to the testimony of experience and to the voices of others. Such situations make it easier for the self to escape the mummy. The task of the will in the overcoming of mummification is therefore powerful although it is oblique. A man holds up a shield against the world and his fellows. He may find it too frightening to cast the shield down. He may nevertheless contrive to put himself in circumstances in which his shield is taken away from him.

The fulfillment of this task raises the most delicate problem in the moral psychology of our response to the perils of mummification. We are right to fear the guarded self as an anticipation of the corpse and to lift our defenses the better to enhance life. We must, however, diminish these defenses in steps, so as not to be overwhelmed by fear and helplessness and thus led to retreat back into the fortified self.

Yet if we seek relative danger and defenselessness for their own sake, we succumb to an adventurism that cannot in the end provide the escape that it promised. The adventurer sets out to lose himself in the titillating world. However, he may find in that world, at every turn, his unchanged self. Only the association of such risk taking and striving with the virtues of divinization—openness to the new and openness to the other person—endows the move beyond the guarded self with the power to enhance life.

The view of the conduct of life sketched in the preceding pages as a cure for mummification may give cause for three major objections. I address them in the apparent order of their apparent force but in the inverse order of their real importance. The first two objections result chiefly from misinterpretations of the argument. The third, however, goes to a real problem for which there can never be a completely adequate solution.

The most likely misinterpretation of this view is also the one that has least justification. It is that this proposal suffers from the romantic an-

tipathy to the role of structure and repetition in human life and invites us to undertake a perpetual quest that has no goal or ground other than its own pursuit. The campaign against mummification would then be tainted by what I earlier called the Sartrean heresy.

In fact, this view recognizes the indispensable character of the interplay between routine and innovation in every department of our experience. The aim is not to escape repetition; to do so would be to make war on life. It is to change both the nature of repetition and its relation to innovation: to make the machine within serve the spirit within.

The moral conception, correctly understood, is equidistant from the Sartrean and the Hegelian heresies. It is not their synthesis; it denounces both. It seeks to create a setting for human life less inimical to the enhancement of life and to the exercise of our powers of transcendence than the regimes of society and of thought that we find all around us.

There is more cause for a second misinterpretation. The campaign against mummification has an unmistakable heroic aspect. It does not simply promise an enhancement of life at the end; it also requires an arousal of hope and effort at its outset. It calls for the cultivation of large projects: the largest to which we can see ourselves as standing in an intimate relation.

Does it not then express disdain for ordinary existence and common humanity? After all, weakness, failure, constraint, dependence, and humiliation are among our most widespread experiences. The move against mummification then seems to be an exalting of power and of the powerful, under the guise of an exulting at life. As in Nietzsche's philosophy, the few will then find, in their distinction from the many, reasons to believe that they have in fact gained the keys to the enhancement of life. In this conceit, however, they will delude themselves. Their lordship over their fellows will be a weakness rather than a strength, subordinating their empowerment to the anxious search for preeminence and misrepresenting the relation of self-construction to solidarity.

Life is our shared treasure. We all are more than we seem to be. The power to outreach circumstance, in feeling, thought, action, and connection, is universal in humanity; it is not confined to an elite of visionaries and power seekers. Its worth cannot be measured by the standards of worldly influence but only by each man's relation to himself.

The confusion of an intangible and vital empowerment with the prizes of the world remains, however, a permanent danger in the interpretation and enactment of any such view, threatening to corrupt it. The safeguards against this corruption are both political and imaginative: the political and economic institutions that engage us—all of us—in the revision of the regime of society; the dissemination of a way of teaching and learning that gives access to alien experience and the tools with which to engage it; and the influence in the public culture of democracy of an idea about who we are acknowledging the condition of situated and embodied spirit.

A third objection to the view of the conduct of life, proposed under the aegis of the struggle against mummification, is no mere misunderstanding. It presents the major difficulty in this approach to the pursuit of our overriding good: the relation of greatness to love, of transcendence to connection.

The requirements of the struggle against mummification and mutilation fail to define a comprehensive ideal for the conduct of life. They are incomplete in at least one crucial respect: they speak to our greatness, or to the increase of our share in some of the attributes of divinity. They do so without addressing our relations to one another. The task is to view our connections with others in a way that does not begin and end in the theoretical altruism of the moral philosophers and does justice to the possibilities and the dangers of life in society. As we set out to perform this task, we come to recognize that the move toward reconciliation with others, through love, difference-based community, and the higher forms of cooperation, forms part of our ascent. An intractable tension nevertheless persists between the aim of greatness and the goal of reconciliation.

Consider the sources of the problem in the enabling conditions of self-assertion, as they are represented in the twin orthodoxies about spirit and structure, as well about self and others, that represent part of the enduring legacy of the struggle with the world.

To become a self and to enter more fully into the possession of life, each of us must find a way of living in the world that honors the truth about spirit and structure. He must engage in particular social and conceptual orders and acknowledge that they shape him. He must also, however, recognize that there is more in him than there is in them: a

surplus of experience and of power that they can never either accept or entirely suppress.

It is therefore in our interest to change the character of these structures and of our relation to them, so that we not be faced with a stark choice between disengagement and surrender. We want regimes of life and thought so to facilitate their own correction in the light of experience that the difference between being inside them and being outside them diminishes, and the distance between the activities that take them for granted and the activities that revise them narrows. Such a change is both a collective project advanced in historical time and a personal endeavor pursued in biographical time.

As a collective effort, it requires changes in the institutions and practices of society as well as in the methods of every department of thought. As a personal endeavor, it demands a way of living: the way of living marked by the characteristics explored in these pages. The less we have advanced in the collective project, the greater is the burden placed on the personal endeavor.

This, however, is not the whole story of the conditions of our upward movement. It is a lopsided version of that story in which our dependence upon other people and the ties of solidarity and of ambivalence that bind us to them appear only incidentally. As the criticism of moral vision in the tradition of the struggle with the world has shown, the problem of self and others lies at the same level of importance and centrality as the problem of spirit and structure. The adequacy of our response to one turns, in part, on the adequacy of our response to the other, through collective undertakings in historical time and personal endeavors in biographical time.

Here is where the break with the theoretical altruism of the moral philosophers becomes decisive and where the kinship of the religion of the future with the sacred and profane variants of the struggle with the world becomes most palpable. To make a self, the individual must come to terms with others. In every domain of experience, from practice to passion to knowledge, there is no self-construction without personal connection but no personal connection that is not beset by the ever-present risk of injury to self-construction.

This injury takes two main forms. The first is our entanglement in a structure of power and subjugation. The second is the conformity of the

self to the opinions and desires of others: the derivative character of desire and opinion, robbing us of a self in the very process of creating a self through personal connection. The pervasiveness of this taint on our relations to one another becomes clear in the ambivalence that accompanies, as a shadow, the whole life of personal encounter.

To build a self, and to be freer and greater, is in part to diminish the price that we must pay for connection. Once again, we must pursue the goal both as collective project and as personal striving. As collective project, it takes the form of the development of the institutions and practices that favor deep freedom and the higher forms of cooperation. As personal striving, it requires the pursuit of love, especially the highest form of love, love among equals, as well as the development of communities of difference and the practice of kindness to strangers as the outer circle of love. Both the inner and the outer circles depend on the same requirements: the progress of our ability to imagine the experience of other people and the acceptance of heightened vulnerability.

The relation between these two sets of conditions of self-construction is both intimate and conflicted. We must act on that relation if we are to preserve and to use the legacy of the struggle with the world in the service of the religion of the future.

In principle and over biographical as well as historical time, these two sets of conditions of self-assertion support each other. By making ourselves bigger, as we change both the structures of society and of thought and the nature of our engagement in them, we turn ourselves, ever more, into the context-transcendent individuals that we imperfectly, incompletely, and disguisedly are. We are then able more fully to recognize one another as the originals we both know ourselves to be and desire to become. Strength—the strength that comes with the exercise of the power of transcendence—may make us more able to give ourselves to one another in personal love, in communities that do not require sameness as their cement, and in the higher forms of cooperation, which dispense with rigid hierarchy and specialization in the shaping of our cooperative activities.

Conversely, each of these ways of attenuating the conflict between our need to connect and our desire to escape the dangers of connection, thus weakening, as well, the reasons for our ambivalence to one another, may help inspire us to resist the context and equip us to change

it. Our experiences may serve as both epiphanies and prophecies, presaging, in the fluid medium of personal encounter, the social ideal that we wish to see expressed in our practices and institutions.

In the short term of biographical and historical time, however, the effort at mastery of the context is just as likely to contradict the attempt at reconciliation. Each step toward more mastery may be expressed as a triumph over a lesser humanity. Each moment of fuller reconciliation may be lived as a haven from the cruelty of society and culture.

In the history of the high culture of the West, this clash was sometimes described as the conflict between a pagan ideal of greatness and a Christian ideal of love. It was one of the great merits of the romantic movement, in both its original form and its later popular sequel, to have helped dissolve this conflict. It did so, however, in ways that were limiting and on the basis of beliefs that were misguided. The early romantic hero or heroine searched for the worthy task by confronting an ordeal that typically included the pursuit of the beloved, undertaken in the face of the obstacles imposed by the established regime of society.

Because romanticism was misled by its war against repetition and its despair about our power to change the relation of spirit to structure, it could not work to soften the clash between greatness and love in ways that do justice to who we are and to what we can become. Its half-truths corrupted its vision and distorted its program.

It falls to the religion of the future to accomplish what romanticism failed, in this respect, to achieve: to help teach us how we can make ourselves both greater and sweeter. In this endeavor, it has a formidable ally: democracy, understood as a set of institutions and as a system of belief. For democracy, allied with the imagination, can help accomplish what Christianity and romanticism have left undone. Both as an institutional order and as a public culture, democracy enables us to turn the tables on structure, to give practical effect to faith in the constructive genius of ordinary men and women, and to lay the groundwork for the higher forms of cooperation.

The response to the formative incidents of mutilation and mummification discussed earlier in this chapter tells the story of our ascent, through change in the conduct of life, chiefly from the perspective of our greatness rather than from the standpoint of our reconciliation. But just

as these two sides of the ideal are combined politically in the conception of deep freedom, so too they must be combined morally in a view of the conduct of life. To the extent that they are so combined, in both politics and morals, we will be justifiably encouraged. We will recognize the reasonableness of our hope to become more human and godlike, to enter more fully into the possession of life, and to be restored to our selves.

The reward

In the end, all we have is life right now. The roots of a human being, according to the religion of the future, lie in the future more than they do in the past. Prophecy counts for more than memory, hope for more than experience, surprise for more than repetition. Time matters more than eternity.

We live for the future, in the light of the future. However, a formative paradox of the religion of the future is that living for the future amounts to a way of living in the present as a being who is more, and who is capable of more, than his situation countenances or reveals.

By so reorienting our lives, we are rewarded. Our reward does not rescue us from either mortality or groundlessness. It does not console us for death. It fails even to prepare us for death, as the *Phaedo* wanted philosophy to do. It cannot overcome, or diminish, the unfathomable and dreamlike character of our existence.

What then, within these limits, is our reward for reorienting in the direction that I have described, the conduct of life, against the background of an effort to secure in society the conditions for deep freedom?

Our reward is to be better able to act, single-mindedly and wholeheartedly, in the world without giving in to the world. Engagement forms part of freedom: we make ourselves by moving in a particular social and cultural order. Resistance also enters into freedom: we form ourselves by resisting such an order. Insofar as the requirements of engagement and resistance contradict each other, we are not free. To the extent that we can reconcile these requirements, we become freer and greater. We gain a better chance of acting as the context-transcendent originals, the sharers in some of the attributes of divinity, that this path in the evolution of our beliefs recommends as the most reliable route to self-revelation and self-construction.

Our reward is a better chance to connect with other people. Our reward is recognizing and accepting others as the context-shaped and context-transcending individuals that we are—the class-, race-, gender-, role-transcending individuals that we are—without forfeiting our separateness and our hiddenness. It is also to enlarge the invisible circle of love by which we are all bound, even when we fail to love beyond the closed horizon of our acquaintances.

Our reward is life, death-bound but brought to a higher level of intensity so long as we live. It is the chance to die only once. To possess life, right now, wide awake, in the moment, is the overriding aim of our self-transformation, achieved through a self-imposed overthrow of the self. To this end, however, we need to reject the ideal of serenity through invulnerability that shaped the moral philosophy of the ancients and, through that ideal, penetrated the moral beliefs that have prevailed in much of the world over the last few centuries. We must replace it with a view that accepts a heightened vulnerability as the condition of a greater self.

Our reward is the manifest and manifold world, to which, as established society and culture, we would not surrender, but which, as nature and cosmos, we would possess more fully. Possessing the world more fully means lightening the weight of the categorical schemes through which we see and interpret it. It means affirming our powers of transcendence in our relation to our methods and presuppositions as well as to our institutions and practices. It means hoping that humanity will have a wider part in the experience of genius, which is a power of vision more than it is a capability of reasoning.

Such results will be both causes and consequences of the intensification of experience, of the concentration of life, right now, that is the only response to mortality and groundlessness for which, by the light of the religion of the future, we are entitled to hope.

Countercurrents

The moral and political direction for which I have argued has four elements. I now represent them in a different order from the order in which I presented them earlier in this and in the preceding chapters.

The first element is confrontation with the unavoidable hurts in the human condition. We acknowledge them and face them to the end of

living for real in the moment. By this turn, religion becomes something different from what it has usually been in the history of humanity: an effort to console us for our death and groundlessness, if not to explain them away, and an attempt to quiet insatiable desire by fixing it on an object—God, being, or the sacrosanct experience of personality—representing the absolute for which the self longs.

This reckoning with the reality of our situation is the turn of pure terror, by which we put away religion as consolation to seek religion as a response to existence informed by a more comprehensive view of reality. The terror amounts to an overthrow of the guarded and resigned self by itself. Call this part of the proposal the overthrow.

A second element in this view of a future religion is the reorientation of the conduct of life. This part of the argument is the heart of the message, presented here in two of its many possible forms: a conception of the virtues and a response to certain formative incidents in an ordinary human life. Both versions of the message are animated by the same idea of the person as embodied spirit. Both remain faithful to the view of spirit and structure and of self and others for which I have argued: the suppressed and truncated orthodoxies that the religion of the future inherits from the salvation religions as well as from democracy, romanticism, and the other secular projects of political and personal liberation.

This view is a moral conception, but not an ethical theory in the conventional sense of academic moral philosophy. It deviates from the path of that philosophy in form as well as in substance. Its aim is not to lay down rules, or to show how we can acquit ourselves of our obligations to others the better to appear blameless before the tribunal of conscience. It refuses to take as its guiding concern the taming of our selfishness, although it does assign a central place to the relation between vitality and solidarity. Its attention is focused first and foremost on the enhancement of life, so much so that it may seem not to be a moral view at all. Nevertheless, its implications for our beliefs about how to live soon become apparent. Call this part of the proposal the transformation of the self, or simply the transformation.

A third element in this account of the teachings of a future religious revolution is its proposal for the reformation of society: a direction, not a blueprint, described here in the vocabulary of the present and with

regard to the institutional materials and ideas that are currently available or accessible, through a discernible succession of steps, given the place at which we now find ourselves. This is the doctrine for which I have argued under the name deep freedom. In opposition to the political ideas that have most recently guided ideological controversy around the world, but similarly to those that used to influence such debate in the nineteenth century, it combines a devotion to the empowerment of the ordinary person—a raising up of ordinary life to a higher plane of intensity, scope, and capability—with a disposition to reshape the institutional arrangements of society in the service of such empowerment.

This view denies that the cause of economic, political, and social pluralism is adequately served by the institutions that now stand as expressions of the market economy, of representative democracy, and of independent civil society. It proposes a trajectory of institutional change designed to support what it describes as the higher forms of cooperation. More than any particular way of organizing society, what it wants is to establish a structure that redeems its unavoidable partiality—its tilting toward some forms of experience and against others—through its strengthened corrigibility. It does not try to describe a definitive structure; it proposes movement toward a structure that organizes its own revision. It does not demand surrender as the price of engagement or turn crisis into the condition of change. It provides us with a secular approximation to the ideal of being in the world without being of it.

The reshaping of society amounts to an indispensable part of the program of a religion of the future because history matters. Whatever our view of the road to our ascent may be, it must be expressed in the terms of our relations to one another, not just the way in which we choose to deal with other people in the small coin of personal encounter but also the way in which society is organized in the large currency of its institutions and practices. All our conceptions of who we are and of what we can become remain fastened to those practices and institutions. It is only by ambitious and persistent striving and with the guidance of a view opposing the enacted images of human association that we manage to make up, in personal experience, for the limitations of the social regime. That is what each of us must seek to do, according to his circumstance, given the discrepancy between the span of our lives

and the historical time in which any effort to change the social order succeeds or fails. Call this third part of the proposal the reconstruction of society, or just the reconstruction.

The fourth element in this argument about the content of a future spiritual revolution has to do with what it promises. At many moments in this argument, I have described this promise in different but equivalent words: the enhancement of life, or possessing it more fully; living for the future in a way that overcomes our estrangement from the present; broadening our share in some of the attributes that we ascribe to God; enacting the truth of embodied spirit as transcendent over the contexts of life and thought that it builds and inhabits; and dying only once.

In the previous section of this chapter, I offered a summary view of this promise as it is expressed in four domains of existence: our response to the institutional and conceptual structures that we ordinarily take for granted; our dealings with one another; the relation of each of us to the settled form of his own self—to his character; and our way of the seeing the world around us and of answering the prompts of perception and experience. It was no more than a summary; the vision of this promise runs through the entire argument of this book. Call this fourth part of the proposal the reward.

No simple combination exists among the four elements of the proposal: the overthrow, the transformation, the reconstruction, and the reward. There are disharmonies among them. From the disharmonies, risk and suffering result. These disharmonies and their consequent risks and sufferings have to do with the nature of our existence. The irreparable flaws in the human condition are their ultimate basis. We should recognize them for what they are and refuse the theoretical sleights of hand that would explain them away. In so doing, we renew the marriage of vision and realism on which any religion of the future must draw.

The contradictions—if so we can call them—have a pragmatic residue: they ensure that our spiritual future, like all other aspects of our personal and collective experience, is open. In denying us harmony, they also rescue us from closure.

First, there is a clash between the reward and the overthrow. The unending confrontation with the certainty of death and with the truth

of groundlessness and the rejection of any story, sacred or secular, that would dispose of their terrors seem to cast a shadow on the reward.

Indeed, they do. The conflict lies in the world, not in the argument. The overthrow is the requirement of both the transformation and the reconstruction. Together, they form the gateway to the reward. The shadow and the gateway are inseparable in the shape of our experience.

If, as a result of the overthrow, of the transformation, and of the reconstruction, we come to have more life right now, we may be more at risk of being overtaken and paralyzed by the sentiment of life than we have been, or could be, by the fear of death and the vertigo of groundlessness.

There also appears to be a conflict between the reward, on one side, and the transformation and reconstruction, on the other. The transformation sets us on a course of endless searching. The reconstruction seeks institutions and practices that turn us toward such a quest rather than, as institutions and practices historically have, away from it.

Are we then to be chained, in the manner from which the philosophers of the overcoming of the world wanted to free us, to the wheel of desire, to the treadmill of longing, satiation, boredom, restlessness, and further striving and, in the realm of perception of the manifest world, to the swing between seeing and staring?

Indeed, we are. Or at least we are except to the extent that the enhancement of our experience of life, and of our awareness of others and of the world, changes a dialectic inscribed in our constitution. It can change this dialectic by turning the treadmill into an ascent with respect to the only good we really have, life lived right now, although viewed in the light of the future.

Life itself

We live in an age of disillusionment. We may fail to become disillusioned with disillusionment. Political and religious prophets will nevertheless arise. They will undertake what we failed to accomplish.

I have suggested what I believe to be not the doctrine but the direction of the revolution of which we now stand in need. I have described

it here chiefly from the standpoint of religion, and only secondarily from the perspective of politics, or of politics only insofar as it forms part of religion. I know, however, that this distinction makes sense only from a vantage point that is foreign to the aims and the methods of such an upheaval.

The expressions that this change may take, on its distinctively religious side, are likely to have in common with the forms of past religious revolution only the combination of visionary teaching and exemplary action. Everything else is bound to be different, so different that it may at first be unrecognizable as the revolution that it is.

The simple, central teaching of the revolutionaries will, nevertheless, be one that we can already hear and heed.

We shall soon die and waste away and be forgotten, although we feel that we should not. We shall die without having understood what this indecipherable world and our brief time within it signify.

Our religion should begin in the acknowledgement of these terrifying facts rather than in their denial, as religion traditionally has. It should arouse us to change society, culture, and ourselves so that we become—all of us, not just a happy few—bigger as well as more equal, and take for ourselves a larger share in powers that we have assigned to God. It should therefore, as well, make us more willing to unprotected ourselves for the sake of bigness and of love. It should convince us to exchange serenity for searching.

Then, so long as we live, we shall have a greater life, and draw farther away from the idols but closer to one another, and be deathless, temporarily.

A Note on the Three Orientations and the Idea of the Axial Age

In the early parts of this book, I explored three major spiritual orientations exemplified by the world religions. I did so for the purpose of preparing the ground for the defense of a way of thinking that goes beyond what these orientations have in common.

My argument can be read as an essay in the philosophy of religion, except that it is itself religious, and not simply an inquiry undertaken from the safe distance of uncommitted speculative thought. It might also be viewed as a theological text, except that it is a kind of anti-theology.

It is in no way a comparative and historical study of religion. I take some of the major world religions as prime instances of each of the three spiritual orientations that I consider: early Buddhism for overcoming the world, early Confucianism for humanizing the world, and the Semitic monotheisms, especially Christianity, for struggling with the world. My interest in this preliminary part of the argument is not, however, in the doctrinal content or the historical development of these religions. It is in the internal architecture of each of these spiritual orientations: its presuppositions, its core vision, and its approach to existence. Each of them, although primarily associated with certain religious traditions, remains a living spiritual option for any man or woman, anywhere and anytime.

Nevertheless, these contrasting spiritual orientations are not simply theories living in the minds of a few thinkers. They have been embodied in communities of faith and in forms of life. They have changed the experience of vast numbers of people. They have a history.

They arose from a series of spiritual innovations or revolutions that occurred across more than a thousand years, from the beginnings of prophetic Judaism in the eighth century B.C. to the rise of Islam in the seventh century A.D. They diverged radically from one another. Nevertheless, they shared important common ground: the commonalities are all the more striking in light of the depth of the divergence. I have emphasized these shared elements for a polemical and programmatic reason as well as for their intrinsic importance. The direction for which I have argued breaks with this common ground in some ways while clinging to it in others.

In the presentation of these views, I have thus repeatedly referred to the religious revolutions of the past, or to the turn to transcendence that they brought about, and contrasted them, in practice and doctrine, with a religious revolution of the future. These claims and proposals will naturally evoke, in anyone familiar with the contemporary literature on the history of religion, the idea of the Axial Age.

The purpose of this note is twofold. First, I seek to compare and contrast my argument about three major orientations to existence with the ideas associated with the concept of an Axial Age. In this respect, my aim is to prevent the misunderstandings that would result if my treatment of the three orientations were to be read in the context of the notion of the Axial Age. Second, this note uses the contrast with the Axial Age thesis to sketch the relation of my account of the three orientations to the history of ideas about world religions. By addressing these two goals here, in a separate note, rather than in the main body of the work, I avoid interrupting the flow of an argument that is meant to be philosophical and theological rather than historical and comparative.

The contemporary use of the idea of an Axial Age begins in Karl Jaspers's *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte* (On the Origins and Goal of History), published in 1949. He argued that a particular historical period, extending from about 800 B.C. to 300 B.C. but chiefly concentrated around 500 B.C., saw the emergence of a view of the world that has shaped our most general religious and philosophical ideas ever since. This view stood in sharp contrast to earlier forms of religion and of speculative thought. It was not simply a turn to transcendence—to a higher realm of reality, regulative of our thought and conduct. It was

also and above all an affirmation of the power of thought to make sense of the established order of the world as a whole and to pass judgment on it. For thought to pass judgment on the world, it had first, according to the defenders of the conception of the Axial Age, to assess its own presuppositions and procedures: it had to become reflexive.

The relatively simultaneous emergence of these ideas in Europe, India, and China took place in the setting of social events that brought civilizations into often violent contact with one another. These events also opened space for intellectual and spiritual authorities who could hold the wielders of temporal power to account in the name of a higher standard.

A controversy between believers in this comparative-historical conception and doubters has ensued. The skeptics, often specialists in the study of a particular civilization, have usually dissented from the application of the Axial Age thesis to one or another religion. They have often done so, however, from a position of sympathy with the larger objectives of the Axial Age discourse, which I discuss below. They often share with the believers attitudes and assumptions that conflict with the approach taken in this book to religious divergence in history.*

I now explain how and why the comparative-historical aspect of my argument (and it is no more than an aspect) differs from the assumptions of many of these writings. My view is closer in spirit to Hegel (in his *Lectures on the History of Religion*); to eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and twentieth-century comparativists, from Anquetil-Duperron to Georges Dumézil; and to Arnold Toynbee's treatment of the world religions in the later parts of *A Study of History*. To prevent misunderstanding, I have therefore avoided in this work the use of the terms Axial Age and Axial Age breakthroughs.

*A growing literature, mostly in German and in English, has developed in recent decades taking the Axial Age thesis as its centerpiece. There are three milestones in the development of this literature. The first is the *Daedalus* issue, edited by Benjamin Schwartz, "Wisdom, Revelation and Doubt: Perspectives on the First Millennium, B.C.," 1975. The second consists of writings of Shmuel N. Eisenstadt and of his associates, *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations*, edited by Eisenstadt and published in 1986, and the subsequent volumes published from 1987 to 1992 under the general title *Kulturen der Achsenzeit*. The third is presented in the volume edited by Robert Bellah and Hans Joas, *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, 2012.

The contrast between my view and the assumptions of the Axial Age discourse can be stated at three levels: (1) the motivations and intentions of that discourse and of mine in their respective approaches to the history of religion and of philosophy; (2) the content of the transformation that was brought about by the spiritual innovations addressed in these two distinct discourses; (3) the claims that these contrasting accounts make about the social and cultural contexts that were hospitable or inimical to the innovations that they emphasize.

1. *Motivations and Intentions.* Jaspers's presentation of the idea of the Axial Age was explicitly driven by a philosophical and political concern. In *On the Origins and Goal of History*, as in much of his work, Jaspers sought to split the difference between rationalism and historicism—or, more precisely, to find a way of reckoning with the diversity of religious and philosophical traditions that would resist the fall into a historicizing relativism. The historical claims, albeit independently defended, were secondary to this program. In the subsequent literature that has taken off from Jaspers's conception, the situation has been reversed. A particular family of views about the history of certain beliefs and of their relation to the history of society is now in the forefront. The philosophical and political intention has become largely implicit. From time to time, it comes into the open.

The key to understanding the thesis of the Axial transformation is the connection that it tried to establish between the turn to transcendence, most explicitly affirmed in the radical monotheism of the Jews, and the emergence of speculative and critical thought. Athens and Jerusalem were united in this thesis, as they were in many of the attempts of the European intelligentsia to invent a coherent and reassuring genealogy for itself.

The flowering of philosophy from the Ionian pre-Socratics to Plato and Aristotle played a star role in the Axial Age notion. The speculative metaphysics of ancient India could be made to join this parade, with Buddhism represented as a culminating expression of this achievement. In pre-imperial and early imperial China, Taoism could easily be enlisted in the same cause, but early Confucianism was an uncomfortable presence because of its relentlessly anti-metaphysical and even anti-speculative stance. Christianity as well as Islam remained far out-

side the chronological and analytic scope of the Axial Age category, because they arose later. Everything in these world-shaping religions that was recalcitrant to the supposed alliance between reflexive reason and religious vision could be easily disregarded.

There were two central pieces in the idea of the Axial upheaval. The first was the break with cosmotheism: the identification of the divine with the world. The second was the development of the use of human reason to form a general account of the world and of society and to criticize established regimes of thought and of society in the name of such an account. The central claim in the idea of the Axial period was, and ever since has been, that there is an affinity between these two parts of the idea.

The chief good to be defended was not the disruptive vision of the troublesome founders of the world religions. It was the legacy of the European Enlightenment, seen through the eyes of its belated, self-appointed defenders in the immediate aftermath of the calamities of twentieth-century European and particularly German history. On this basis, philosophy held out its hand to religion, but only to the parts of religion that could plausibly be represented as friendly to the party of Enlightenment. No wonder the putative nascent intelligentsias of the Axial Age, not isolated claimants to divinity or divine inspiration, were given the starring role.

This intellectual move had precedents in the period before the Second World War. For example, the decisive conceit in Max Weber's essays on the comparative-historical sociology of religion (published in 1921–1922) was the notion of an affinity between prophetic Judaism and the array of ideological and institutional tendencies that Weber brought under the heading "rationalization." A similar connection between transcendence and reason was established by Simmel in his analysis of the idea of transcendence and of its meaning in history (*Lebensanschauung*, 1918).

The same emphasis on the link between the turn to transcendence in the history of religion and the commitment to systematic and critical thought, exemplified by the work of an independent intelligentsia, has ever since marked writings about the idea of the Axial Age. Some of its contemporary exponents have drawn the natural conclusion, insisting that reflexive thought, individual agency, and historical consciousness,

rather than any change in the content of religious beliefs, were the decisive attributes of the Axial innovations.*

The Axial Age thesis has thus been in part inspired by the desire of the self-professed party of Enlightenment in the North Atlantic world, from the Second World War to today, always ready to see itself as the beleaguered friends of reason, to invent a genealogy for itself. A major feature of this endeavor has been to find a modus vivendi with religion—religion insofar as it can be understood, or made to remain, “within the bounds of pure reason” and brought into league with secular humanists and critical thinkers. One might be forgiven for recalling Whitehead’s definition of a Unitarian as a man who believes that there is no more than one God and for suspecting that in the eyes of the proponents of the Axial Age thesis the heroes of the story have always been people such as themselves.

Like Jaspers, I have philosophical and practical aims in my discussion of major orientations to existence. These goals differ in spirit from those that have driven the campaign for the Axial Age idea. I have refused to view religion, in the inclusive sense in which I have defined it, as the hazy penumbra and occasional ally of philosophy. A vital part of the world religions is the contention over the nature, or the inscrutable character, of ultimate reality as the setting in which we define an approach to life and to society. We must choose without ever having adequate grounds for choice. In a sense, the task of religion begins where the instruments of the party of Enlightenment lose their efficacy. To think otherwise is to assign the criticism and revision of religion to those whom Max Weber (writing about himself) described as “religiously unmusical.”

When Hegel speaks of the doctrine of the Trinity as the hinge on which world history turns, he has in mind a sectarian understanding of a view that can be stated much more broadly. The dialectic between

*See, for example, Bjorn Wittrock, “The Axial Age in Global History: Cultural Crystallizations and Societal Transformations,” in Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and Its Consequences*, 2012. In the same volume, reflecting on the contributions of his colleagues, Bellah concludes that the production of theory, as both utopian vision and disinterested inquiry, was the chief achievement of the Axial period. Along similar lines, see Arnaldo Momigliano, “The Fault of the Greeks” in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography*, 1947, pp. 1–23.

transcendence and immanence, expressed in the Christian mystery of the Trinity, represents a turning point in the spiritual experience of humanity. This dialectic took divergent forms in Buddhism and Confucianism. Everywhere, however, it was marked in the first instance not by the development of systematic and discursive abstractions (almost always spurned by the founders of these religions) but by an attempt to come to terms with our condition of mortality, groundlessness, insatiability, and susceptibility to belittlement.

When nineteenth-century comparative students of religion like Victor von Strauss and Ernst von Lasaulx, following the lead of their eighteenth-century predecessors, marveled at the parallels among the teachings of religious visionaries in different ancient civilizations (before the rise of an academic culture chiefly concerned to show that everything is different from everything else), they gave voice to the same belief in a momentous, overlapping series of changes in our understanding of ourselves. This belief is the legitimate element in the conception of the Axial Age. The development of this insight, however, requires a substance and a scope, as well as a spirit, at odds with those that have done much to shape work written under the Axial Age banner.

2. *The Axial Age and the three orientations: emphasis and content.* The content of the common ground of the three orientations explored early in this book differs significantly from the content attributed by the proponents of the Axial Age thesis to the innovations that they highlight.

There is, of course, no single vision of the substance of these spiritual inventions in the writings about the Axial Age. Nevertheless, with varying degrees of emphasis, the focus in much of this literature falls on four sets of changes and on the relations among them. The first theme is the turn to transcendence: the distinction between a mundane and extra-mundane order of reality, a distinction thought to be radicalized both by the intransigent monotheism of the ancient Jews and by some of the philosophizing of the ancient Greeks, Indians, and Chinese. The second theme is a series of related forms of disembedding: of the individual from his ascriptive social relations (those set by birth rather than by choice), of society from nature, and of nature itself from the higher order of reality. The third theme is the development of a complex of forms of consciousness focused on the power of thought to address and revise its own

procedures, on the value accorded to the agency of the individual, and on the conviction that our most important endeavors have a history, succeeding or failing in historical time. It is an image, *avant la lettre*, of post-Enlightenment modernity, looking for its ancient roots even in the troubled wilds of the religious consciousness. The second theme represents, in this construction, an indispensable bridge between the first and the third. The fourth theme spells out the political implications of the other three: the dialectic between worldly and priestly or philosophical authority in the contest to influence the direction of society.

The application of this scheme to the orientations that I have called the overcoming of the world and the humanizing of the world can be achieved only through a forceful stretch. The core intended instances of the Axial Age scheme are the religion of the ancient Jews, purged of its sacrificial-cultic parts; the philosophical and scientific speculations of the ancient Greeks; and the tendencies in ancient Indian and Chinese philosophy offering the most plausible counterparts to these presentable ancestors of the European Enlightenment. The varieties of Christianity relatively less offensive to reason could then figure among the worthy heirs of the Axial Age.

If this approach were to be accepted as a guide to the understanding and criticism of the history of Christianity, the nominalist or dualist theology of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, with its fateful disjunction between the realms of grace and of nature, would amount to a consummation of Christian insight. It was in fact the beginning of some of the tendencies that culminated in the secularizing naturalism of the early modern period in Europe.

The view of the common ground of the three orientations in this book has a different focus. The contrast with the Axial Age conception is complicated because in my account the protagonists and historical periods also differ from those that mark the thesis of the Axial Age. Ancient Greek philosophy appears only through its contribution to the overcoming of the world (in Plato, the Stoics, and Plotinus). Confucianism represents the most important instance of the humanizing of the world, aided in the performance of this role by its relentlessly anti-metaphysical metaphysics, in contrast to many of the other schools of speculative philosophy that flourished during and after the Warring States period in proto-imperial China. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam matter most, as

sources of the orientation that I call the struggle with the world, when they were what they were, rather than metaphorical or allegorical scouts for the ancient or modern enemies of obscurantism and despotism.

The historical period of the relevant changes, although it begins at the same time with the rise of the Jewish prophets, has no clear end, or an end that takes place much later than the closure of the Axial Age. When I refer to the religious revolutions of the past, I have in mind the spiritual innovations generated over the more than one thousand years from the formation of prophetic Judaism to the prophetic activity of Muhammad. The gates of prophecy, however, have never been closed: the dynamic of innovation continues to this day within each of these orientations. The most important instance of such innovation has been the development, in the last few centuries, of the revolutionary, secular projects of emancipation, both political and personal, within the broad tradition of the struggle with the world.

The picture of the common ground of the three orientations, formed against the background of these criteria of selection, differs from the one suggested by the four themes that are central to the argument about the Axial Age. It shares with that argument the emphasis on the turn to transcendence, or rather to the dialectic between transcendence and immanence, and on the radical novelty of the forms of consciousness that arose on this basis. The revolutionary monotheism of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, for example, does not qualify because it was asserted in the context of a reaffirmation of the theology of integration (*Ma'at*) of man in the cosmic order.* On the other hand, many a failed religion, like Manichaeism, not only exemplified the turn to transcendence but also associated it with all the features characterizing the shared agenda of these spiritual innovations.

The joint patrimony of the three orientations lay in the combination of a dialectic between transcendence and immanence with the devaluation of divisions within society—divisions that had become extreme in the agrarian-bureaucratic empires in which, with the partial exception of ancient Judaism, these religious inventions first emerged; with the rejection of the predominant ethic of manly valor in favor of an ethic of

*See Jan Assmann, *Ma'at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im Alten Agypten*, 1990.

sacrificial empathy; and, above all, with the effort either to deny the ineradicable defects in the human condition or to provide reprieve from their sorrows. The substitution of one ethic (of inclusive fellow-feeling) for another (of masterful self-assertion) represented the advanced front of a larger change: the ascent of human life to a higher plane, our enhanced sharing in the life of God or in the nature of that which is most real and sacred. Such participation could be achieved only by a break with the established way of living and of organizing society. It was, for example, incompatible with the parallel ordering of castes or classes in society, as well as of faculties in the self or the soul, that Dumézil found to be widespread among the Indo-European peoples. It required a profound transformation in practice as well as in belief.

In the argument about the three orientations, however, the differences among them are at least as important as their common ground. Because my discussion emphasizes distinctions among the orientations even more than their commonalities and accords priority to the logic of these spiritual options, rather than to the historical development of any particular instance of them, it should give no offense to the historian of religion.

The commonalities gain significance in light of the differences. The historical examples are secondary to the philosophical and theological argument, the aims of which are wholly foreign to the Axial Age campaign. My argument about these past religious revolutions, about what they had in common as well as about the contrasting directions that they set, is motivated, directly and transparently, by a single purpose: the defense of another direction for the future. To take this direction, we must break with that common ground, undertaking religious revolution with new content and in new form. Nothing could be further from the intentions of the proponents of the Axial Age thesis.

3. *The historical contexts and agents of past religious revolution.* The difference in motivation and substance between my view of the religious revolutions of the past and the conception of the Axial Age is manifest as well in assumptions and claims about historical contexts and agents.

Two aspects of this difference suffice to suggest the broader meaning of what may appear at first to be no more than a historical quibble, con-

fused by a discrepancy in the range of the events that form the subject matters of these two approaches.

A common proposition in the writing about the Axial Age is that the Axial changes occurred only in circumstances of disruption of an imperial order or prior to its imposition, and were regularly brought to an end by the consolidation of empire. Jaspers emphasized the destabilizing and globalizing significance of the interactions between sedentary states and nomadic peoples in Eurasia, a suggestion containing more insight than most of the literature that followed.* Eisenstadt and his school focused, instead, on internal pluralism and conflict, highlighting the way in which ideas associated with the Axial revolutions helped produce a contest between secular and sacred sources of authority.

The religions and philosophies that pioneered the formulation of each of the three orientations addressed in the initial parts of this book began in the imperial regimes of Eurasia. They almost invariably arose at the periphery, not in the heart or in the formative moments, of the agrarian-bureaucratic states that, until recently, have been the major protagonists in world history. For them, empire, although it may have been the enemy, was also the condition of emergence and diffusion.

In this respect, the historical presuppositions of my account are closer to the views of the anathematized and incomparable universal historian Arnold Toynbee about the “higher religions” and their relation to “universal states” than they are to the foundational writings of the Axial Age thesis. In Toynbee’s narrative (*A Study of History*, vol. 6, part 2, 1954, and *An Historian’s Approach to Religion*, 1979), an “internal proletariat,” trapped in the oppressive structures of a universal state and resistant to its self-idolizing rulers, finds inspiration in a message of ascent to a life closer to the divine. It looks beyond the recurrent perversions of “archaism,” “futurism,” and “detachment” to “transcendence.” It is not the nascent universal churches that are instruments of these states or “chrysalises” of new civilization. It is rather these states that are, as Hegel had already suggested, the prison-houses within which humanity achieved deeper spiritual insight.

*On the significance of these interactions, see my book *Plasticity into Power: Comparative-Historical Studies on the Institutional Conditions of Economic and Military Success*, 1987, pp. 70–80, 110–112.

The point about context goes together with a thesis about agents. The writing about the Axial Age innovations assigns the leading role to a collective agent: the creators, compilers, and masters of a scriptural canon, following close on the heels of heroic intellectual innovators. Such a canon records and develops the new ideas. It also provides a basis on which to claim worldly as well as spiritual influence.

The truth, inconvenient to our preferences and preconceptions, is that, for the making of religion, the marriage of visionary teaching to exemplary action in the life of a single individual has always been worth countless thousands of intellectuals. Suffering humanity heard the message of such visionaries, codified and conveyed, and often bled of much of its vitality and meaning, by bookish men. No priest or scribe has ever founded a religion.

The commanding purpose of the religious revolutions of the past was not to advance a disinterested view of the world. It was to rescue mankind from its lack of imagination and of love.

Proper Name Index

- Akhenaten, 453
Anaximander, 10, 13, 144, 280
Anselm of Canterbury, 229
Aquinas, Thomas, 144, 253, 285, 286, 287
Aristotle, 144, 145, 146, 147, 406, 448
Assmann, Jan, 453
Athanasius of Alexandria, 285
Augustine of Hippo, 28, 281
Averroes, 144, 147
- Barth, Karl, 281
Bellah, Robert, 447, 450
Bentham, Jeremy, 174
Bergson, Henri, 31, 160, 227, 280
Blondel, Maurice, 280
Buddha, 12, 45, 217, 245, 247. *See also* Buddhism
- Calvin, John, 52, 281
Carlyle, Thomas, 429
Comte, Auguste, 27, 28, 256
Confucius, 14, 94, 106, 110, 116–117, 206, 217, 245, 250, 395. *See also* Confucianism
- Democritus, 144
Descartes, René, 148–149, 189
Dumézil, Georges, 454
Durkheim, Émile, 110
- Eisenstadt, Shmuel, 447
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 24, 31, 286, 342
Feuerbach, Ludwig, 228, 262, 286
- Galileo Galilei, 8, 9, 66, 139, 140, 152, 345
Girard, René, 19
Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, 405
- Harnack, Adolph von, 145
Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, 162–166, 219, 398, 450–451. *See also* Hegelian heresy
Heidegger, Martin, 191, 213, 220, 221, 361–363, 365, 381
Heraclitus, 144, 406
Hobbes, Thomas, 301
Hume, David, 117, 345, 404, 416
- Jaspers, Karl, 38, 446, 448, 450
Jesus Christ, 262, 268, 279, 281, 287, 288–289
Joas, Hans, 447, 450
- Kant, Immanuel, 53, 83, 149–150, 152–153, 174, 253, 426
Keynes, John Maynard, 413
Kierkegaard, Søren, 145, 280, 281, 409
- Lasaulx, Ernst von, 451
Lavoisier, Antoine, 225
Lawrence, D. H., 177
Leibniz, Gottfried Wilhelm, 62, 70, 71, 184
Levinas, Emmanuel, 280
Luther, Martin, 52, 258, 272, 281
- Machiavelli, Niccolò, 301
Madison, James, 53, 334
Maimonides, 144
Mao Zedong, 319

- Marx, Karl, 27, 28, 132, 168, 193, 318, 325, 413.
See also Marxism
- Maximus the Confessor, 286
- Mill, John Stuart, 168
- Momigliano, Arnaldo, 450
- Moses, 239
- Muhammad, 453
- Nagarjuna, 62
- Napoleon, 225, 400
- Newton, Isaac, 8, 9, 66, 71, 139, 140, 152, 345
- Nicholas of Cusa, 286
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 31, 46, 136, 213
- Parmenides, 62
- Pascal, Blaise, 5, 59, 145, 220, 221, 280,
361–362
- Paul the Apostle, 281, 288
- Plato, 62, 69, 79, 144–145, 394, 448, 451–456.
See also Platonism
- Plotinus, 62, 69, 144, 174, 451–456
- Pontius Pilate, 417–418
- Prometheus, 31, 194. *See also* Prometheanism
- Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph, 318
- Rahner, Karl, 19, 287
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 31, 174
- Sartre, Jean-Paul, 162–163, 165–167. *See also*
Sartrean heresy
- Savonarola, Girolamo, 249
- Schelling, Friedrich, 227
- Schlegel, Friedrich, 367
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich, 53, 281
- Schopenhauer, Arthur, 2, 62, 63, 64, 74, 170,
217, 218, 240, 247, 252, 390, 394, 404, 416
- Schwartz, Benjamin, 447
- Shakespeare, William, 135
- Simmel, Georg, 449
- Smith, Adam, 325
- Spinoza, Baruch, 62, 146, 159, 219, 227,
388, 395
- Stalin, Joseph, 319
- Strauss, Victor von, 451
- Tillich, Paul, 229
- Toynbee, Arnold, 224, 455
- Vico, Giambattista, 150
- Voltaire, 417
- Weber, Max, 92, 449, 450
- Whitehead, Alfred North, 160, 227, 450
- Wittrock, Bjorn, 450
- Wordsworth, William, 23

Thematic Index

- Addiction, 17, 20, 82, 358, 391
Agape, 45, 174, 376, 382
Agrarian-bureaucratic states, 43–44, 100, 111, 169, 240, 318, 324, 453–455
Altruism: love vs., 46, 172–174, 180, 351; resisting mummification, 417–418; in self-others relationships, 155–156, 170–175, 371, 392
Altruism principle, 155–156
Analects, 45, 94, 110
Antinomianism, 277
Apostasy, right of, 299
Apostasy principle, 303–310
Apostolic succession doctrine, 52
Aristotelian Averroists, 147
Art as substitute for religion, 60–61
Aspiration, morality of, 31
Attentiveness virtue of purification, 381–382, 387
Averroism, 147
Axial Age and Its Consequences, *The* (Bellah and Joas, eds.), 447, 450
“The Axial Age in Global History” (Wittrock), 450
Axial Age thesis, 38, 445–456
Being and Time (Heidegger), 220, 362, 365
Belated paganism, 191–193, 195
Belief-disbelief halfway house, 123–125, 261–264
Belittlement: acceptance, consequences of, 376; antidotes to, 26–27, 29–30, 401–404; deep freedom and, 29–30; as defect, rejection of, 223, 253, 279, 363–364; divinization virtues and, 382–387; empowerment and, 26–27; facing the trials of, 23–25; as fate, rejection of, 356; humanization of the world approach, 117–118, 120; institutional arrangements overcoming, 297, 401–404; overcoming, hope of, 35; overcoming of the world approach, 76–77; political transformation of society to escape, 292–293; responses to, false forms of, 26–34; sources of, 355; susceptibility to, repairing, 26–27, 210
Benevolence: humanization of the world approach, 115–116; love vs., 46, 431; overcoming of the world approach, 63, 68, 74–77; selfless, ethic of, 63; in self-others relationships, 171, 174–175
Body as corpse, the, 2
Buddhism: Axial transformation thesis and, 448; denial of mortality, 216; the divine in, 52, 227, 254; ethical universalism, 352; exemplary of overcoming the world, 40, 41, 48, 62, 197, 236, 394, 445; personal deity in, 49; the self in, 422; success, characteristics of, 237, 246–247; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 451; transcendence in, 107, 206. *See also* Buddha
Caste system, 102, 330
Change, crisis as the condition for, 86, 313, 338
Change of change, 66, 161, 265
Character, 421–422

- Character as destiny, 406
- Character-defying character, 367–368, 377
- Christianity: antinomian element, 277; Axial Age thesis and, 448–449; ethical universalism, 352; exemplary of salvation religions, 52, 183, 236, 258; fossilization of, 186–187; God in, 52, 108; love vs. altruism in, 174–175, 180; mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, 173–174, 227, 272, 279, 288; mystical tradition in, 62, 167; orientation to the future good, 189; success, characteristics of, 246, 248; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 147
- Christianity as a point of departure for revolution, obstacles to: belief, family as reason for, 273–275; doctrine formulated within Greek philosophy, 126, 143–145, 276, 279–280; exclusivity, claim to, 284–285; faith over reason, 282–284; God, dependence on, 282–287; grace over work, 286; salvation, terror of, 282; scandals of reason, 264–273; society, compromises made with, 276–279; summary, 287–289
- Church, the, 52
- Circumstance-transcendence dialectic, 164, 167
- Classical ontology project, 143–146, 159–160, 208, 279–280
- Class society: cooperative regimes and, 327–328, 336–337; deep freedom, consequences for, 321–322; disrupting the insulation of, 169–170; ethic of the ruling and fighting classes, 44–46; free society, implications for, 296; hierarchical segmentation, 43–46, 100–102; justification for, 318, 322, 325; mummification and, 408
- Commitment without grounds, 58–60, 124, 203, 251, 272, 298–299, 383–384
- Community of belief, 246–247, 283
- Compassion, 13–14, 78, 206, 375, 387, 418
- Competition: basis for, 19; cooperative, 331–334
- Conduct of life in the religion of the future: concept, 440; enhancement of life and, 341–344, 379; the reward, 438–439; self-others relationships in, 343–344, 370–378; sharing in the divine through, 341–344; societal constraints, 383. *See also* Self-transformation
- Conduct of life virtues: of connection, 370–378, 387, 427; of divinization, 382–387, 427, 432; of purification, 378–382, 387, 418, 427
- Confucianism: altruism in, 171, 173; cosmotheism, rejection of, 52; the divine in, 107, 198, 254; ethical universalism, 352; ethic of roles, 105; exemplary of humanizing the world, 40, 41, 47, 49, 107, 197, 236, 445; groundlessness, response to, 14; revolution, limitations for, 204; self-others relationships, 107–108; success, characteristics of, 237, 247; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 206, 448, 451. *See also* Confucius
- Connection, virtues of, 370–378, 387, 427. *See also* Self-others relationships
- Consciousness: boundary experience of, 388–390; Cartesian, 148; death of, 3–5; individuated, the self as, 148; mark of, 3; the mind as, 98, 154, 161; mindfulness aspect of, 388; paradox of, 98; selfhood and, 3–4; time and, 161
- Conservatives, commitment to shallow freedom, 315–316, 320
- Consonance-dissonance relation in music, 410–411
- Converts/conversion experience, 202, 273, 283
- Cooperation: basis for, 19; in a free society, 297; higher forms of, 324–340, 393; institutional redesign and, 326–328; love vs., 324; roles and conventions of, 92–93, 97, 100–101; transcendence through, 343–344
- Cooperative regime: class society in a, 327–328, 336–337; deep freedom and, 327–338; imagination in reshaping, 335–340; innovation in a, 244, 324–331, 337; novelty and competitive selection in a, 331–334
- Corpus Christi sermon (Aquinas), 286, 287
- Cosmotheism, 38, 40–41, 43, 449
- Courage virtue of connection, 375–378
- Course of life, consequence of the particularity of, 24–25
- Course of life, formative incidents in the: decentering, 387–393; downfall, 393–397; mummification, 405–438; mutilation, 397–405
- Crisis, change dependent on, 86, 186, 313
- Crisis without crisis, 338
- Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant), 152, 426
- Daoism, 62
- Death: compensation for, 28–29, 31; consolations promised, 4; groundlessness

- relation to, 16; redemption from, 11–13; as sacrifice, purpose of, 3; terribleness of, 2–4
- Death, terror of: acknowledging, 393–397; confronting, 4–5, 33, 356–357, 361–362; effect on conscious life lived, 3–5, 220; the fall toward, 1–5; insatiability of desire and, 18, 21, 391; overcoming of the world approach, 76, 88; suppressing, methods of, 361–362
- Deep freedom: belittlement and, 29–30; consequences of, 34; elements of, 29–30, 440–442; equality of respect and opportunity, 296–297, 314–323; features of a cooperative regime for, 327–336; ideal of, 34. *See also* Social framework, revising the
- Defects in the human condition: acceptance, benefits of, 210; acknowledging, for the religion of the future, 216–221, 393–397; concept, 439–440; denial of, consequences, 25–26, 33–34, 179, 218–219, 252–253, 256, 359–361; engagement as response to, 396–397; function of, 33–34; humanization of the world approach, 117–118; overcoming, 88–89, 216–217; Prometheanism's response to, 31, 33, 142, 256, 343; religion and the, 35–39, 55–58; self-transformation through confronting, 356–365; struggle with the world approach, 180–181. *See also specific defects*
- Democracy: criticism of religion in a, 259–261; ideal of genius of ordinary persons, 222, 437. *See also* Free society
- Desire: ambivalence toward, 20; emptiness of, 18, 19, 32; mimetic character of, 19–20, 32, 407; projected quality of, 20–21, 407. *See also* Insatiability of desire
- Despair, sin of, 166–167
- Divinization, virtues of, 382–387, 427, 432
- Dying only once, 368, 407, 421, 430, 442
- Education: empowerment and, 307–308; in a free society, 295–296; future-enabling, 311; imagination and, 241; mummification resistance through, 413–414; revising, methods for, 212
- Educational innovation, lack of, 223
- Empowerment: belittlement and, 26–27; economic and educational means for, 307–308; false forms of, 26–27; fantasy of, 214, 224; institutional reconstruction and, 293–294, 440–442; liberalism's commitment to, 314–315; Prometheanism and, 256
- Emptiness doctrine (*sunyata*), 62
- Engagement: defects in the human condition repaired, 396–397; mummification resistance through, 428–430; mutilation, rescue from, 402–403; overcoming of the world approach, 80–84; revolution and, 243–244; struggle with the world orientation to, 188–195, 213, 215; virtues supporting, 379–382. *See also* Estrangement from life, overcoming
- Engagement-transcendence dialectic, 142, 181, 193–194
- Enlightenment, the, 449
- Enthusiasm virtue of purification, 379–381, 387
- Equality-freedom relationship, 314–323
- Equality of respect and opportunity, 296–297, 314–323
- Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Momigliano), 450
- Estrangement from life, overcoming: defects in the human condition, recognizing for, 219–221; false forms of, 396; political transformation of society and, 292–293; possibility of, 5; Prometheanism and, 193–194, 221; reward of, 439; threats to, 396. *See also* Engagement
- Eternity, aspiration of, 343
- Ethical universalism, 344–352, 370
- Ethic of honor and dominion, 79–80
- Ethic of inclusive solidarity and fellow feeling, 376, 454
- Ethic of martial valor, 32, 44–46, 79–80, 376
- Eudaimonism, 96
- Existential groundlessness, 6–7, 10–16
- Existentialism, 167
- Fairness virtue of connection, 374–375, 387
- Faith: belief-disbelief halfway house, 123–125, 261–264; commitment without grounds concept, 58–60, 124, 203, 251, 272, 383–384; family and community as basis of, 283; psychology and sociology of, 273–275; reasons for, 283–284; scandals of reason and the difficulty of, 225–231; supernaturalism and, 225–226; as wager, 59
- Faithful, requirements of the, 48
- Fecundity, 342, 422
- Federalism, 305

- Forbearance virtue of connection, 374, 387
- Freedom, safeguards for, 305
- Freedom-equality relationship, 314–323
- Free society: apostasy principle, 303–310; conception of a, 293–300; deep freedom principle, 314–323; higher cooperation principle, 297; plurality principle, 308–314; principles informing the organization of, 300–303. *See also* Social framework, revising the
- God: embodied, 24, 135–143, 209, 213–216, 222–224, 285–287, 341–344; existence of, 8; a friend in charge of the universe, 10–12; and humanity, relationship with, 174–175; the impersonal, rejection of, 213–216; incoherence/unintelligibility of the idea of, 227–230, 264–266, 268–272; insatiable longing for, 178, 181, 391; scandal of particularity of, 226–227, 264, 266–268
- Grace and nature divergent, 147–148
- Greek philosophy of being, 126, 143–145, 208, 276, 279–280, 344, 352, 452
- Groundlessness: acknowledging, 393–397; confronting the terror of, 357–358, 362; defined, 178–179; doctrine of two regimes, 158–159; engagement and, 397; existential, 6–7, 10–16; insatiable desire and, 21; love imagined as a release from, 178–180, 181; mortality's relation to, 16; overcoming of the world approach, 77, 88; philosophy as denial of, 252; Prometheanism's remedy for, 33; redemption from, belief in, 12–13; responses to, theoretical deficiencies, 12–16; root experience of, 6; satisfaction of desire as response to, 18; speculative, 6–10, 14–16
- Halfway house between belief and disbelief, 123–125, 261–264
- Hegelian heresy, 162–166, 219, 304, 400, 410, 423, 433. *See also* Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich
- Hellenistic metaphysics of self-help, 94, 96
- Higher cooperation principle. *See* Cooperation
- Higher religions: commonalities, 39–42, 197–198; success, formula for, 239, 245. *See also* specific religions
- Hinayana Buddhism, 236
- Hinduism, 79, 102
- Historian's Approach to Religion, An* (Toynbee), 455
- History, openness of, 130–134, 201, 209
- Humanity, romance of the ascent of, 27–30
- Humanization of the world: altruism ideal, 171–172; anti-metaphysical metaphysic, 113, 117; cosmotheism, rejection of, 40–41; death, denial of, 395; ethic of roles, 103–106; the faithful, requirements of, 48; goal of, 119; innovation in, 453; meaninglessness, approach to, 90–92, 96–98, 102–103; metaphysical vision, 90–96; moral psychology, failure of, 113–117; mummification resistance and, 419–421; nihilism, response to, 41–42; promises of, 48; revolution, realizing common goals of, 93–94, 106–113, 117–120; self-others relationships, 98–106, 108–109, 115–116, 145; serenity and, 172; social reform framework, 90–96, 110–113; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 94–96, 106–110
- Humans, ordinary: divinity of, 24, 135–143, 213–216, 222–224, 285–287, 341–344; empowerment of, 26–27, 214, 224, 256, 293–294, 307–308, 314–315, 440–442; prophetic powers recognized in, 241–242. *See also* Self, the
- Hysteresis principle, 65
- Idolatry, 158, 164, 166–167
- Imagination: distancing-transformation process, 83, 140–141, 192, 337, 426; education and the, 241, 347; of institutional alternatives, 168, 311, 338; lack of, rescuing mankind from, 456; the mind as, 109, 130, 140–141, 295, 311, 336, 347–348; mutilation, response to, 403–405; of otherness, 14–15, 46, 87, 92–93, 98–99, 108, 110, 173, 372–376, 393; of the possible, 133; power of, 109; reshaping the cooperative regime, 335–340
- Imaginative insight, paradox of, 192
- Immanence theology, 21–23, 306–307
- Immortality, promise of, 28–29, 31, 33
- Impermanence thesis, 10, 13
- Incarnation theology, 173–174, 227, 272, 279, 285–286, 288, 450–451
- Indian tribes of the Brazilian Amazon, 306–308
- Individuality, illusion of, 62–71, 82, 88, 388–390, 404

- Innovation: cooperative practices of, 244, 324–331, 337; economic growth and, 169; educational, lack of, 223; institutional, 311–312, 403; repetition serving, 412; revolution and, 211–212
- Insatiability of desire: basis for/sources of, 17–19; confronting the terror of, 358–359; depth of the self in the, 135; elements of, 390–391; engagement and, 396–397; freedom from, possibility of, 18–19, 390; groundlessness relation to, 21; humanization of the world approach, 117–118; longing for the absolute in, 178, 181, 391; mortality and, 18, 21, 391; overcoming, possibility of, 21–23; overcoming of the world approach, 77, 88; Prometheanism's remedy for, 33; for unconditional acceptance, 358–359, 390–391. *See also* Desire
- Institutional design, in the development of productivity, 324–326
- Institutional redesign: belittlement and, 311–312, 403; compensatory redistribution in the absence of, 294, 314–318; cooperation and, 326–328; deep freedom and, 314–323; free society, implications for, 308–314; revolution and failure in, 223, 231–236. *See also* Social framework, revising the
- Invulnerability: promise of, 69; search for, 194; serenity through, 68–69, 74, 82–84
- Islam: Axial Age thesis and, 448–449; compromised message of, 248; ethical universalism, 352; exemplary of struggle with the world, 40, 52, 183, 236, 258; fossilization of, 186–187; God in, 52, 108, 270; love vs. altruism in, 175; mystical tradition in, 62, 167, 218, 248, 270; religion as concept and term, rejection of, 49, 51; religion of the future, role in, 258–259, 273, 280; success, characteristics of, 246; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 147; veneration for the law, 163–164, 182, 200, 233, 248, 276. *See also* Salvation religions
- Jansenism, 59
- Jen* in Confucianism, 45
- Judaism: compromised message of, 248; ethical universalism, 352; exemplary of struggle with the world, 183, 236, 258; fossilization of, 186–187; God in, 52, 108, 270; love vs. altruism in, 175; mystical tradition in, 62, 167, 218, 248, 270; religion as concept and term, rejection of, 49, 51; religion of the future, role in, 258–259, 273, 280; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 147; veneration for the law, 164, 182, 200, 233, 235–236, 276. *See also* Salvation religions
- as concept and term, rejection of, 49, 51; religion of the future, role in, 258–259, 273, 280; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 147; veneration for the law, 164, 182, 200, 233, 235–236, 276. *See also* Salvation religions
- Kaballah, 248
- Kenosis*, 379, 418
- Labor: cooperation as a division in, 93, 324–325; productivity through institutional design, 324–326. *See also* Wage labor giving way to free labor
- Law, the: private and public, 104; religion of, 233–235, 248; veneration of, 163–164, 182, 200, 233, 248, 276
- Laws of nature, 8–10, 65–67, 127–129, 139–140, 225, 264–266, 389. *See also* Nature
- Lebensanschauung* (Simmel), 449
- Left and Right, distinction between: inadequate, 314–317; redrawn, 320–323
- Legalism, 205
- Liberalism: classical, 293–294; deep equality, commitment to, 315, 319–321; empowerment, commitment to, 314–315; institutional dogma, 182; institutional formula, 309; politics and religious conviction separated, 259–260; of the religious individualist, 234; religious revolution, failure to incite, 222
- Love: altruism vs., 46, 172–174, 180, 351; cooperation vs., 324; cost of, 431; defining attribute of, 392; freedom from desire through, 18; greatness relation to, 376, 434, 437; lack of, rescuing mankind from, 456; longing and, 173, 178–179, 181; mummification resistance and, 430–432; organizing role in moral experience, 178–179; requirements for, 377; romantic distortion of, 175–183; transcendence through, 343–344
- Lutheran Reformed Church, 145
- Ma'at* (Assmann), 453
- Madhyamaka Buddhism, 62
- Mahayana Buddhism, 79, 170, 206
- Manichaeism, 453
- Market economy, 137–138, 169, 312–313
- Marriage, 177
- Martial heroic ethic, 32, 44–46, 79–80, 376

- Marxism, 360. *See also* Marx, Karl
- Meaninglessness of the world, humanization of the world approach to, 90–92, 96–98, 102–103
- Mind, the: dominant ideas, limitations of, 184; as imagination, 109, 140–141, 295, 311, 336, 347–348
- Mind-body distinction, 148
- Mindfulness, 173, 388. *See also* Engagement
- Miracles, 225
- Monism, 62
- Monistic pantheism, 269
- Moral perfectionism, 31
- Moral philosophy, 350–351, 367, 370
- Mormonism, 233
- Mummification: characteristics of a life averting threat of, 416–432; fixed habits of mind and behavior in, 406–408; heroic aspect of resistance to, 433; humanization of the world approach and, 419–421; overcoming of the world approach and, 418–419; repetition's role in, 405–411, 427–428; revising the social framework in defeating, 408, 413–415, 434–435; virtues in resisting, 427
- Music, consonance-dissonance relation in, 410–411
- Mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, 173–174, 227, 272, 279, 288, 450–451
- Mysticism, 62, 167, 218, 248, 270, 281
- Nature, 6, 8–10, 90, 147–148, 160–162. *See also* Laws of nature
- Navya-Niyaya, 144
- Near death experiences, 2
- Neo-Confucianism, 94, 96, 250
- Neo-Platonism, 62, 69, 286
- Nestorian heresy, 148
- New, possibility of the, 129–130, 160, 184, 201, 209, 385–387. *See also* Novelty
- Newtonian paradigm, 8–9, 139, 346
- Nihilism, 41–42, 67–68, 102–103, 252
- Nominalism/nominalist theology, 147–148, 151–152, 154
- Novelty, 331–334. *See also* New, possibility of the
- Novelty-repetition dialectic, 177–181, 411–412
- Obligation, morality of, 31
- Obsession, 17, 20, 358, 391
- Omniscience, aspiration of, 343
- One regime doctrine, 143–146, 159–162
- On the Origins and Goal of History (Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte)* (Jasper), 446, 448
- Openness virtue of divinization, 383–387
- Oppression, revolutionary influence of, 223
- Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilizations, The (Kulturen der Achsenzeit)* (Eisenstadt et al.), 447
- Overcoming of the world: altruism ideal, 171; conscious life, relation to, 72–73; cosmotheism, rejection of, 40; defects in the human condition, approach to, 216–217, 394–395; engagement, failure in, 80–84; the faithful, requirements of, 48; forces inspiring the effort of, 72–74; individuality, illusion of, 404; innovation in, 453; mathematics in expressing doctrine, 71–72; modern science, affinity with, 65–66; mummification resistance and, 418–419; nihilism, response to, 41–42, 67–68; promises of, 48, 69, 82; revolution, realizing common goals of, 77–80, 84–89; serenity and benevolence, 63, 68, 74–77, 172; time, illusion of, 62–71, 82; transcendent divine in, 94–96, 391; universal mind/being, affirmation of, 62–71, 82; virtues of purification, 418; will, denial of, 68–70
- Pagan greatness, 353, 376, 437
- Paganism, 306–307
- Panentheism, 159, 269
- Pantheism, 159, 269
- Particularity: consequence to the course of life, 24–25; scandal of reason, 226–227, 264, 266–268; universality as lost to, 397–405
- Path dependency, principles of, 65
- Pelagianism, 123
- Perfectionism, 96, 119
- Philosophy: mutilation, rescue from, 399–401; religion and, 60, 237, 250–255
- Platonism, 279. *See also* Plato
- Pluralism, 244–245, 259–261
- Plurality principle, 308–314
- Political enthusiasm, 380–381
- Politics: mutilation, rescue from, 399–401; religion of the future, 290–293, 414; as religious, 291–292; as substitute for religion, 61. *See also* Free society
- Poverty experience, revolutionary influence of, 223

- Prejudice, fight against, 382
- Progressives, reasons to embrace deep freedom, 320–323; reasons to reject deep equality, 317–320; and shallow equality, 314–316
- Projects, conceiving and pursuing large, 428–430
- Prometheanism: avoiding/remedies against, 221, 360–361; belittlement and, 27, 31–34; defects in the human condition and, 31, 33, 142; engagement without, 193–194; religion of the future and, 256; struggle with the world without, 213–216, 343. *See also Prometheus*
- Protestant Christianity, 51–52
- Purification, virtues of, 378–382, 387, 418, 427
- Reason, development of the use of, 449. *See also Scandals of reason*
- Reconciliation, requirements for, 392–393
- Relationalism, 62
- Religion: characteristics defining, 55–58, 124, 236, 257–258, 272; as concept, 49–55, 61, 236–237; contradictions in the history of, 245–250; defects in the human condition, approach to, 35–39, 55–58; function of, 1, 16, 19, 36–37; philosophy and, 60, 237, 250–255; privatization of, 51, 244; substitutes for, limitations in, 60–61; success, price of, 247–248; success formula of, 236–238, 239, 245–247, 456; as term, rejection of, 49, 50, 53
- Religion of the future: basis of, 208, 210–211, 238, 255–257; characteristics, 200–201, 285–287; countercurrents, 439–443; elements of the proposal, 440–443; escape-transformation ambivalence, 204–207; false paths to, 255–257; promises of, 442; as religion, question of, 236–238, 257–258; replacements for, 257; requirements for, 54–56, 261–264; as revolution, determinants of, 236–237; struggle with the world, unique relation to, 199–204, 207–212, 258–259; summary, 443–444. *See also specific elements*
- Religion of the heart, 234–235
- Religion of the law, 233–235, 248
- Religious revolution: innovation and, 211–212; models for, 239–240; present-day, reasons for, 196–199; purpose of, 456; romanticism and, 222, 224, 281, 360
- Religious revolution of the future, points of departure: greatness of ordinary people recognized, 223–224; humanization of the world, 93–94, 106–113, 117–120; institutional redesign, 223, 231–236; lack of belief in salvation narratives, 224–231; overcoming of the world, 77–80, 84–89. *See also Christianity as a point of departure for revolution*, obstacles to
- Religious revolution of the future, practices: decentralized prophetic power, 241–242, 249; historical religions vs., 249–250; personal and political combined, 242–244, 249; visionary teaching with exemplary action, 240–241, 243
- Religious revolution of the past: Axial Age thesis and, 451–456; common elements in, 40–48, 446, 453; differences, 454–455; formulation of, 453–455; introduction, 38–39; program and practices, relation of, 239–245; themes, 451–452. *See also specific orientations*
- Repetition: mummification in the surrender to, 405–411, 427–428; nature of, changing the, 409–413, 433; romantic opposition to, 176–177, 368–369, 410, 432–433; routine of, breaking out of, 359–361, 364–368; transcendence and, 367
- Repetition-novelty dialectic, 177–181, 411–412
- Respect and opportunity equality, 296–297, 314–323
- Respect virtue of connection, 372–374, 387
- Ressentiment, 136
- Revelation experience, 283
- Right and Left, distinction between: inadequate, 314–317; redrawn, 320–323
- Romance of the ascent of humanity, 27–30
- Romantic imagination, 165–166, 179, 362, 368–369
- Romanticism: greatness of the ordinary and, 437; heresy of, 165–167, 207; legalism, alternative to, 205; life, conception of, 214; love, conception of, 175–183, 214; repetition, opposition to, 176–177, 368–369, 410, 432–433; revolution and, 222, 224, 281, 360
- Sacred law, 276–278
- Sacrificial ethic, 44–46, 75–76
- Salvation, 123–124, 218–219, 233–235

- Salvation religions: belief-disbelief halfway house, 224–226; core theology, 222; defects in the human condition, approach to, 359, 394; fossilized forms of, 186–187; promises of, 4, 10–12, 216; redemption/salvation narrative, 267–270; reformation, possibility of, 231; revolutionary influence of, 231–236; shared elements, 122–123; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 206; the transcendent divine in, 391; veneration for the law, 163, 235–236. *See also specific religions*
- Salvation religions scandals of reason: particularity, 226–227, 264, 266–268; response to, 271–272; supernaturalism, 225–226, 264–266; unintelligibility of the idea of God, 227–230, 264, 268–272
- Sartrean heresy, 162–163, 281, 409, 433. *See also Sartre, Jean-Paul*
- Scandals of reason: particularity, 226–227, 264, 266–268; response to, 271–272; supernaturalism, 225–226, 264–266; unintelligibility of the idea of God, 227–230, 264, 268–272
- Secular humanism: defects in the human condition and, 217; existential groundlessness and, 14; obstacle of, 125, 136; religion of the future and, 202, 236, 258, 261, 287, 301. *See also Struggle with the world*
- Secularization, meaning of, 52–53
- Self, the: definition of, 3; as individuated consciousness, 148; struggle with the world vision of, 132–135, 201, 209; theomorphic conception of, 222, 227–229. *See also Humans, ordinary*
- Self-assertion, 85, 434, 436; ethic of, 32, 454
- Self-construction, 214, 356–366, 434–436
- Self-grounding, 158–159, 179–180
- Self-help, 69, 94, 96, 252–253
- Selfhood, 3–4, 62–71, 172–173
- Selfless benevolence ethic, 63
- Self-others relationships: acceptance in, longing for, 368, 370–372, 390–391; altruism in, 155–156, 170–172, 371, 392; ambivalence in, 19–20, 32, 85, 155–156, 343–344, 371–373, 390–392, 436–437; benevolence standard in, 171; boundary experience in, 388–390; in Christianity, 174–175; conduct of, in the religion of the future, 343–344, 370–378; experience of the divine in, 343–344; free society concept, implications for, 294–298, 312–313; humanization of the world approach, 98–106, 108–109, 115–116, 145; imagination of otherness in, 14–15, 46, 87, 92–93, 98–99, 108, 110, 173, 372–376, 393; love, role of, 156, 172–174, 181–182; in present-day society, 185; reward of, 439; self-construction and, 32, 434–436; struggle with the world approach, 144–145, 155–157, 170–180, 209; virtues of connection, 370–378, 387; vulnerability in, 60
- Self-possession, ideal of, 75
- Self-structure relationship, 176–178, 294–295
- Self-transformation: assumptions for, 347–350; defects in the human condition and, 356–365; engagement for, 354–355; is-ought/description-prescription distinction, 344–347; obstacles to, 352–353; orientation to the future for, 354–355; purpose of, 341–344; remaking society and culture through, 353–354; self-others relationships in, 343–344, 352–353; from self-subversion to, 355–366; virtue as, 366–369; as vision for the conduct of life, 350–352
- Semitic monotheisms: commitment without grounds, 124; core theology, 222; God in, 10–12, 222; promises of, 10–12, 216; shared elements, 122–123; veneration for the law, 235–236. *See also Salvation religions*
- Serenity, 68–69, 74–77, 82–84, 173–174
- Shallow equality, 294, 314, 316–320
- Shallow freedom, 314, 316–320
- Simplicity virtue of purification, 379, 387
- Sleepwalking, breaking the spell of, 5, 13, 25, 219–221, 359–361, 364–368
- Social democrats, 183, 309
- Social framework: alterability, possibility of, 25–26; overcoming the insatiability of desire, 21–23; partial and defective character, 291–292; political content, forces working toward, 292–293; present-day, failure of, 185–187; sacred law in shaping, 163; self-grounding humanity, 15; state imposed limits on the, 292
- Social framework, revising the: empowerment and, 29–34, 440–442; humanization of the world approach, 90–96, 98–103, 110–113; the law in, 97–98; mummification, defeating through, 405–407, 408, 413–415, 422–425, 428–430, 434–435; mutilation,

- rescue from, 397–405; overcoming of the world approach, 78–80; revolution and, 231–236, 242–243; self-others relationships, 170–180; self-structure relationship, 162–170; struggle with the world approach, 130–134; without surrender, 85–87
- Socialism, 182–183, 222, 293–294, 309, 314–315
- Social roles, mummification through embracing, 405–407, 422–425
- Social station, occupying or embracing a, 397–405
- Somnambulant life, the. *See* Sleepwalking, breaking the spell of
- Soul, hierarchical ordering of the, 43
- Speculative groundlessness, 6–10, 14–16
- Spirit-structure relationship, 157–158, 162–170, 209
- Spontaneity, 342, 406, 422
- State, the, 312–313, 334
- State socialism, 182–183, 223, 315–316, 319
- Stoics/stoicism, 62, 198, 451–456
- Struggle with the world: belief-disbelief halfway house, 123–125, 224–226; beliefs inspired by, 141; central idea, 121–125; classical ontology project, effect on, 143–146, 159–160; cosmotheism, rejection of, 41; defects in the human condition, approach to, 180–181; doctrine of one regime, 143–146, 159–162; engagement-transcendence dialectic, 142; estrangement and, 188–195, 213, 215; ethical universalism replaced, 352; the faithful, requirements of, 48; illusion in arousal of the will, 359–360; innovation in, 453; nihilism, response to, 41–42; orthodoxy, implications of, 167–169; promises of, 48, 121–122, 185–187; radical reconstruction of, results from, 183–185, 187–188; religion of the future, unique relation to, 199–204, 207–212, 258–259; revolutionary influence of, 202–203, 298; sacred-profane common ground, 180–181, 208–209, 263; the self as embodied spirit, 136–143, 209; self-others relationships, 144–145, 155–157, 170–180, 209; spirit-structure relationship, 157–158, 162–170, 209; strengths and weaknesses, 182–188, 201; transcendence-immanence dialectic, 209–210; universal theme of, 189; values, inversion of, 201; without Prometheanism, 213–216, 343. *See also* sacred and profane versions
- Struggle with the world doctrine of two regimes: arbitrariness and anti-naturalism argument against, 151–155, 162; Cartesian movement, 148–149, 151; classical ontology project and, 208–209; core idea, 146–147; historicist conception, 149–151, 155, 156–158; Kantian version, 149–150, 151–153, 155, 157–158; near emptiness and false content argument against, 155–159; nominalist movement in the, 147–148, 151–152, 154
- Struggle with the world metaphysical vision: beliefs incompatible with, 183–184; depth of the self, 132–136, 201, 209; inclusive reality of time, 127–129, 144–145, 160–161, 184, 201, 209; the new, possibility of, 129–130, 160, 184, 201, 209; openness of history, 130–134, 201, 209; the ordinary in, 135–136, 209; transgressing powers of the mind, 209; unique existence of the universe, 126–127, 184, 201, 209
- Study of History, A* (Toynbee), 455
- Sufficiency, pragmatics of, 21–23, 306–307
- Sufism, 248
- Supernaturalism, 154–155, 162, 225–226
- Supernaturalism scandal of reason, 225–226, 264–266
- Surfeit, 342, 406, 422
- Surprise, ability for, 129–130, 160, 184, 201, 209, 342, 368, 422
- Sympathy, foundation of, 404
- Symposium* (Plato), 145
- Taoism, 448
- Theological virtues doctrine, 369, 383
- Time: changing the experience of, 31, 33, 397; consciousness and, 161; as fundamental vs. emergent, 140; illusion of, 13, 62–71, 82; inclusive reality of, 127–129, 144–145, 160–161, 184, 201, 209, 280
- Timelessness, experiencing, 33, 397
- Toleration, 244–245
- Transcendence: acceptance of others and, 368; escaping from the burden of, 191; over circumstance, 367; repetition and routine in the service of, 367
- Transcendence-circumstance dialectic, 164, 167
- Transcendence-engagement dialectic, 142, 181, 193–194

- Transcendence-immanence dialectic: belief in, 53; Buddhism, 451; Confucianism, 206, 448, 451; humanization of the world, 94–96, 106–110; in politics of religion, 292; revolution and, 40–41; salvation and, 219; salvation religions, 147, 206; self-exclusion from, 233–234; sources of, 205–207; struggle with the world, 209–210; the three orientations and, 453–454
- Transcendence religions, 52–53, 206
- Transcendent monotheisms, 284
- Trinity doctrine, 173–174, 227, 272, 279, 288, 450–451
- Two regimes doctrine: arbitrariness and anti-naturalism argument against, 151–155, 162; Cartesian wave, 148–149, 151; classical ontology project and, 208–209; core idea, 146–147; four waves, 147–155; historicist wave, 149–151, 155, 156–158; Kantian wave, 149–150, 151–153, 155, 157–158; near emptiness and false content argument against, 155–159; nominalist wave, 147–148, 151–152, 154
- Unity of mankind, 42–46
- Universal being and mind, 62–71, 82, 88, 388–390, 405
- Universalism, ethical, 344–352, 370
- Universality, mutilation of, 397–405
- Universe, the: a friend in charge of, 10–12; history of, explaining the, 139–140; understanding, 8–10; unique existence of, 7–9, 126–127, 184, 201, 209
- Upanishads, 62
- Vaisesika school of thought, 144
- Vedas, 41, 62, 63, 107, 216, 394
- Virtue as self-transformation, 366–369
- Virtue ethics, 367
- Virtues, the: of connection, 370–378, 387, 427; of divinization, 382–387, 427, 432; of purification, 378–382, 387, 418, 427
- Vitalism, 167
- Vitality, 83, 130, 136, 342, 379
- Vulnerability, 377, 383–384, 393, 430–432
- Wage labor giving way to free labor: class society and, 100–102, 185, 322, 325, 336–337; cooperative regime, influence on, 338–340; processes of, 211; respect and opportunity equality, 296–297, 314–323; transformation through work as vocation, 398, 401–403, 413, 429–432. *See also Labor*
- “Wisdom, Revelation and Doubt” (*Daedalus*, Schwartz, ed.), 447
- Work. *See Labor*
- World, the: of the conscious self, illusion of, 3–4; historicist conception, 149–151, 155, 156–158; meaninglessness of, 90–92, 96–98, 102–103; understanding, possibility of, 6–10