Beyond Machines

(but Still within the Phenomenology of Gestures)

Work presumes that the world is not as it should be and that it can be changed. Such hypotheses present problems. Ontology is concerned with problems of the way the world is, deontology with the way it should be, and methodology with the means of changing it. These problems are intertwined. We cannot know that the world is not as it should be without knowing how it is, nor can we know that the world is as it is without knowing how it should be. We cannot know that the world is not as it should be without knowing that it can be changed, nor can we know that it can be changed without knowing how it is. It follows, then, that there can be no ontology without deontology, no deontology without ontology and methodology, and no methodology without ontology and deontology.

In *illo tempore,* at the moment human beings began to work, these three aspects of work were not separated. Ontological, ethical, and technical aspects of magic, although visible to us, were not distinguishable to the magician himself. The exact moment when the tri-partition asserts itself is the moment when history, in the strict sense of the word, emerges. History can be understood as an unfolding of this of this tri-partition. During its first phase (antiquity and the Middle Ages), history emphasizes the way the world should be; that is, people work to realize a value—ethical, political, religious, practical, in short, "in good faith." During its second phase (modernity), it emphasizes the discovery of being in the world; that is, people work epistemologically, scientifically, experimentally, and theoretically, in short, "without faith." During its third phase (the present), it emphasizes methods; that is, people work technically, functionally, efficiently, strategically, and cybernetically, in short, "in great doubt," "in

despair." During the first phase, the prevailing questions are directed toward purpose (for what?); during the second, toward causes (why?); and during the third phase, the prevailing questions are formal (how?). So history offers us three models for work: classical (engaged) work, modern (research) work, and contemporary (functional) work.

Most people don't work. They serve as tools in the work of others. In their alienation, they have no wish to know how the world is or how it should be, and the idea of changing the world does not even occur to them. They participate only passively in history; they put up with it. As far as the working minority is concerned, it is always and everywhere engaged, researching and functional at the same time, for these three moments of work intersect. The three phases of history proposed here are only schematic, and the three models of work are never realized in pure form. But they serve a purpose, and they are adequate models, for they open a perspective on the so-called crisis of values.

Before we analyze this perspective, we need to get one commonsense prejudice out of the way, namely, that people work to "satisfy needs." In this way, we become "animals," and so need certain things to survive. These things can be quantified, for example, in calories. If work were a tendency to strive for the satisfaction of these needs, we could speak of setting goals for work: one works to meet the needs, and after that, no more. But it's not like that. Animals don't work but meet their needs without changing the world. The Swiss, for example, work far beyond the point of satisfying all biological needs and think nothing of excess. Work is, then, a gesture, an unnatural expression of the effort to realize values and to devalue realities.

The three models of work open up the following perspective: in prehistory (magical work), the values were unquestioned; in the classical and medieval periods (engaged work), a decision had to be made between values; in modernity (work as research), the question of values lost its force; in the present (the time of technical work), the question of values has become nonsensical. This is the framework to be analyzed in what follows.

In prehistory, values were unquestioned, because a value is a standard of measure, and to be able to question measurement, one must be able to stand apart from the thing to be measured. Only the thing to be measured

using values is what the world should be, and in magic, people are immersed in the world. Just as the world they engage is full of compulsions ("full of gods"), and their lives are conditioned by the "laws" of taboo and the breaking of taboo, that is, by rules of obligation. The question of values, "What should I do?" cannot be asked. The only question that presents itself, and with great intensity, is, "What happens if I don't do my duty?" Values were unquestionable "givens," for there was no distance between a person and a value. Obligations were not inside, before, or beneath people; rather, people were immersed in their obligations.

The question "What should I do?" first arises for humanity when a human being is "driven" out of his obligations. Now, that is a historical question. Historical existence is problematic, for it has a duty to ask about obligations, to raise the question of values. It has an obligation to formulate laws, imperatives, and legal systems, to live religiously and politically. In short, it is "condemned to work," and it works to do "good."

One can be seduced into thinking that an assessment of values (practical reason) and an assessment of essence (pure reason) imply one another. In fact, theoretical elements can be distinguished in the work of the Babylonians or Egyptians from the beginning of history, and only a narrow concept of theory supports a claim that Greeks invented theory. But theory in the modern sense, which is to say a gesture that consciously refuses the assessment of values and limits itself to the assessment of essence, first appears in fifteenth-century Italy. It has to do with a gesture that divides practical from theoretical work by freeing epistemology from the tyranny of religion. It sets the "good" in quotation marks and separates it from the "true." And this is the specifically modern occidental theory that cuts history in two.

With this gesture, the world under consideration is divided into two spheres: the sphere of values (society), where the question is "To what purpose?" and the sphere of the given (nature), where the question is "Why?" As a result, there are two cultures, one for each of the world's spheres: the scientific and the culture called humanist. Modern history begins with the separation of what should be from what is, of politics from science. It is characterized by the progression of science toward politics, by progressive invasion of the sphere of values by the sphere of givens. The question "What should I do?" persists in the modern period

in the form of political and religious wars or in the form of ideological disputes. But in the form of sociological, psychological, economic, and political theories, the question "Why do I do what I do?" asserts itself with increasing clarity with respect to the first question. As modernity advances, the more difficult the question "What is the value?" becomes, and the more readily the question "What is a 'value?'" arises. The imperative transforms itself into a function: "Thou shalt not steal!" becomes "If you steal, you will go to prison."

Since the nineteenth century, this sort of methodological schizophrenia, in which one-half of consciousness engulfs the other, in which theoretical and practical work are at odds, has led to a technologizing of work. When politics and science part company, technology holds sway, and when the ontological aspect of work parts company with the deontological, the methodological aspect triumphs. The questions "To what purpose?" and "Why?" shrink to the question "How?" The results of this process remain unforeseeable, despite the triumph of method's self-generated counterresponses: the Industrial Revolution, the bourgeois work ethic, the fascist glorification of action, and the Marxist philosophy of work. For only now is it clear that the victory of method is inevitable.

That is, only now are we beginning to see the results of the "good" and "true" being displaced by the "efficient." It can be seen in brutal forms, such as Auschwitz, atomic weapons, and various technocracies. But it is above all apparent in more subtle forms of thought, such as structural analysis, cybernetics, game theory, and ecology. That is, it is becoming clear that wherever methods, rather than politics or science, are the focus of interest, any question about values becomes "metaphysical" in the discrediting sense of the word, as does any question about the "thing itself." Ethics as well as ontology become meaningless discourses, for the questions they raise do not present any methods that would make answers possible. And where there is no method to ground an answer, the question makes no sense.

Strictly speaking, then, work has become impossible. For if the question "To what purpose?" makes no sense, the gesture of work becomes absurd. In fact, work in the classical and modern sense is being displaced by functions. One no longer works to realize a value, nor to discredit a reality, but rather functions as the functionary of a function. This absurd gesture cannot be grasped without observing machines, for we are actually

functioning as functions of a machine, which functions as the function of a functionary, who in turn functions as the function of an apparatus, which functions as a function of itself.

Machines are objects produced to defeat the world's resistance, the substance of work. That is what machines are "good" for. A Paleolithic arrow is good for killing a reindeer, a Neolithic plow for working the land, and a classical windmill for transforming grain into flour, for the reindeer must be killed, the land worked, and the grain ground into flour. There is no problem with any of it: the machines are made to solve problems, not to create other problems.

Machines become problematical in the modern period, which is to say they become the opposite of what they should be, and that is the reason they attract interest to themselves (by way of definition, an interesting machine cannot be a good one, for by definition, interest in a good machine is in the thing for which it is good). Machines actually cause problems for two different reasons. The first reason is bound up with the sudden interest in questions of causality, that is, with research. Theoretical work in the modern sense (the gesture of evaluating essence) results in machines such as a telescope (so-called observational instruments), which are problematical. They are good for something (e.g., for seeing the mountains on the moon), only the word *good* has shifted meaning: no one can claim that the mountains on the moon need to be seen in the same sense that grain needs to be ground into flour. The second reason that modern machines are problematical is bound up with their being themselves objects of research. The question becomes "Why does a machine function?" rather than just "What is it good for?" This reversal in the relationship to the machine has a double result: the machine is perceived, for one thing, as a system that may serve as a model for the world, and for another, the machine's theoretical principles of construction are revealed. The first result, diverse mechanistic perspectives on the cosmos, makes machines problematic because it is difficult to ask the question "What is it good for?" about a world-machine. The second result, the theoretical relations to machines, makes machines problematic by making them increasingly interesting. In short, machines become problematic in modernity because they raise the question of values instead of realizing a value.

With regard to the separation between science and politics that is

characteristic of modernity, there are two faces to the problems machines present. Science is concerned with legitimizing work by discovering the impetus for it and so with creating machines capable of doing any sort of work at all. Politics is concerned with the question "Who should own the machines?" These two sides to the problems raised by machines explain the optimism—very strange, from our standpoint—that is characteristic of modernity. It is the time of a "belief in progress." It will ultimately be possible to build machines that will replace human work in all fields, and people will be "free." Machines will be the slaves of the future, and all human beings will become subjects of history, as they are freed from alienated labor. Machines will be the property of the whole of humanity, and each individual will be equal to others. The "classes," that is, the division of humanity into those who do and those who do not possess machines, will die out, and there will then be a classless society. This optimism appears strange from our point of view, for to those who have lived in the late twentieth century, with automation, it seems obvious that the questions of value posed by modern machines rule out any optimistic interpretation, and have done so since the Industrial Revolution in the late eighteenth century.

For it had to have become clear, at the latest with the Industrial Revolution, that the program of "freeing oneself from work" made the question "For what?" unavoidable and that the question "Who should own the machines?" carried with it the question "To do what?"—and that these two questions were therefore not good questions. In fact, the Industrial Revolution accumulated machines very quickly, synchronized them with complex switching mechanisms, and so turned them into "apparatuses," and the apparatus quickly made it clear that machines would have to be rethought. The nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century were optimistic, for they put off any radical rethinking of machines in terms of apparatus, with the sole exception of that technology that passed through the conveyor belt and rationalization of labor to full automation.

Under preindustrial conditions, machines stand between people and the world on which they work. They are "attributes" of human beings in a juridical but also in a logical sense. A person can replace one machine with another while he is working. That is, under preindustrial conditions, a human being is the constant and the machine is the variable. Under

industrial conditions, a person stands inside the machine as he is working, and the world on which he is working lies beyond his horizon (in the "metaphysical"). In a logical sense, the human being is an attribute of the apparatus, for someone else can replace him as the work proceeds, although the machine still retains human properties in a juridical sense. In the "man–machine" relationship, the machine is the constant and the human being the variable, which in itself renders the concept of "property" problematic: capitalists as well as proletarians become the property of machines, although in different ways. Freeing themselves should therefore mean a freeing from, and not by means of, machines, and the question "Who should own the machines?" therefore means "Is there anyone or anything beyond machines?" This really should have been understood immediately after the Industrial Revolution.

Of course, such a Kafkaesque understanding of the apparatus has now become obvious, and the persistence of modern and progressive optimism (whether in the form of liberalism or socialism) has taken on a poignant quality. For we have existentially experienced a reversal of the preindustrial relation "man–machine": in our activities ("work"), we function just as we do at leisure ("consuming"), as functions of many apparatuses. We know from painful experience that a change in the legal status of an apparatus does not change its ontological status (a state or party apparatus occupies the same position with respect to human beings as a legally "private" industrial apparatus), and we know, too, that being freed from work by machines does not mean becoming the subject of history; rather, it means functioning as a consumer as a function of the apparatus. But that is not all: we have learned other, far more unsettling lessons about the apparatus.

We have learned that we cannot live without the apparatus or outside the apparatus. Not only does the apparatus provide us with our bodily and "intellectual" means of survival, without which we are lost, because we have forgotten how to live without them, and not only because it protects us from the world it obscures. It is primarily because the apparatus has become the only justification and the only meaning of our lives. There is nothing beyond the apparatus, and any ontological or ethical speculation that goes beyond it, any questioning of its function and functioning, has become "metaphysical" and lost its meaning (that was what I meant when I spoke of "despair" earlier).

Our dependence on the apparatus keeps us from posing questions of cause or purpose with respect to apparatuses. "What is the purpose of France?" or "Why industrialize?" (to take just two very typical examples of apparatuses) are theoretically possible but existentially false questions, for they assume a transcendence of apparatuses that we do not have. We are limited to functional questions only, for to us, "living" is functioning in and as a function of an apparatus. So it makes no sense to "free ourselves from the apparatus." Beyond the apparatus, there is nothing to do. To formulate it as a thesis, the apparatus can do everything; everything human beings can do without it, it can do better. Optimists with a faith in progress paint a picture of machines as slaves that will free human beings' freedom for creative achievements. Only thanks to cybernetic apparatuses, "creation" is a concept quantifiable by means of information theory. Machines can be shown to be potentially far more creative than any human beings, if they are appropriately programmed by a human being or by another machine.

If, by "getting free of machines," we mean doing something or other in a space beyond machines, we are challenged by insufficiency. And if by "getting free of machines," we mean not doing anything anymore, we are challenged by consumption, which is contained in the programs of the apparatuses. This second interpretation is synonymous with "getting free by means of machines." In short, beyond machines, there is nothing to do, for work in the classical and modern sense has become absurd. Where apparatuses prevail, there is nothing left to do but function.

There are various ways of functioning. With personal commitment, one loves the apparatus for whose function one is functioning (that is the good, career functionary). In despair, one turns in circles within the apparatus, until he withdraws (that is the man of mass culture). With a method, one continues to function within the apparatus, even if those functions change as a result of internal back-switching and merging with other apparatuses (that is the technocrat). In protest, one despises the apparatus and tries to destroy it, an effort the apparatus recuperates and transforms into its own functions (that is the terrorist). In hope, one tries gradually to dismantle the apparatus, to make it permeable, that is, one tries to reduce the quantity of functioning, to raise the "standard of living," which automatically becomes another of the apparatus's functions (those are environmentalists, hippies, etc.). There are more ways in

which to function. But none escapes the fact that, because the question of value has sacrificed its meaning, the gesture of work beyond machines has become absurd.

At the outset, this essay claimed that there could be no methodology without ontology and deontology. This is to say that there can be no technology (no art in the broad sense) without science and politics. But the history of mankind (and specifically of the West) first separated the three aspects of work and then established a division between science and politics. The result was that technology became embedded in science and politics, and methodology engulfed both being and obligation. All the nostalgic objections in the world are not enough to restore "reality" and "value" after the triumph of function. Relations, fields, the ecosystem, gestalt, and structure are replacing object and process, dialectic and project, once and for all. The concept of the "true" as well as that of the "good" have finally been packed away into the black box of "nonsense." Epistemological and ethical thought has been replaced once and for all by cybernetic, strategic thought and by program analysis. History is over.

For when methods infiltrate being and obligation, and technology infiltrates science and politics, the absurd eats its way in. Method for method's sake, technology as a goal in itself, and *"l'art pour l'art,"* that is, function as the function of a function—that is the posthistorical life without work. It is posthistorical because history is a process in which people change the world so that it is as it should be, and when work stops, history, too, is still. And work stops when it no longer makes sense to ask how the world should be. It stops when the apparatus determines itself. Not because the apparatus "works for us," but because the apparatus changes the world in a way that makes the question impossible. The apparatus is the end of history, an end that was always already foreseen by all utopias. It is existence without work, an existence given over to art for art's sake, it is the consuming and contemplative existence. The fullness of time. We live in it. Or just about. But we don't recognize our situation as utopia. For although we are already beyond machines, we remain incapable of imagining life without work and without meaning. Beyond machines, we are in an unimaginable situation.