

Post-Modernism And The Recovery Of The Philosophical Tradition

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Introduction

As century and millennium draw to a close the paradoxical thought preoccupying philosophers is whether or how philosophy is at an end. According to the now common opinion - among many academic philosophers, indeed, a certainty - the ideal of a universal knowledge through principles, *philosophia*, has long since been exposed as spurious so that no person of right mind would nowadays recognize or indulge in it as a legitimate pursuit. For the new philosophers the fact is that "philosophy" as traditionally understood is a thinking no longer relevant for a post-modern consciousness and world; if it might still have a role it can only be in some radically attenuated sense: as writing its own obituary, clearing away of the rubble of its own ruined foundations, speculating as to what it might now mean to live and think post-philosophically.

That the philosophical legacy has become moribund would certainly appear confirmed in the universities, where the former queen of the faculties has long been deposed and the view of philosophy as an obsolete discipline is so broadly established that even full professors of philosophy are rendered mute by the question as to why it should even be taught at all, much less what its proper curriculum should be. In the general culture too the appeal to rational grounds is viewed as un-chic, if not indecent; a moralistic presumption prevails that equates the naive appeal to principles with allegiance to established religions: as indicative of an atavistic and reactionary turn of mind. In a culture that tolerates the most capricious and absurd superstitions provided they claim no more than a subjective validity, the achievement and the way of philosophy does not even garner that much respect. The popular view accords more with the judgement of Nietzsche that the philosophical outlook and spirit is not merely misguided, it is perverse.

In this light the spirit of the times might, on considerable evidence, be described as a-philosophical through and through. But it can hardly be right to deplore this state of affairs, as traditionalists tend to do, as a kind of Roman degeneration of modern culture into mere thoughtlessness and caprice. For it must also be acknowledged that in consideration of its commitment to subjective freedom and its insistence on open discourse as *sine qua non* for the acceptance of any moral, intellectual or political position - not to mention the unprecedented numbers of philosophers populating

contemporary universities - it could just as well be said that never has there been an age so thoroughly "philosophical" as is our own. Even those writers who would now claim to have at last overcome philosophical culture and its "logocentrism" are far from representing this eventuality as catastrophic; on the contrary, they herald it as the final liberation from an intellectual despotism, the emancipation of thought from all its past delusions.

Indeed it is now *de rigueur* among philosophers themselves to argue that philosophy did in fact end, with Hegel or thereabouts, and that the age when people believed in a universal, absolute knowledge, or that the actual is the rational, is long since over. So has almost everyone from Kierkegaard and Feuerbach to Rorty and Derrida argued (even Auden: "Goodbye, Plato and Hegel/ The shop is closing down..."). Thus it cannot just be a question of philosophy having somehow spontaneously withered away over the past century or so; rather the significant fact is that there has been a deliberate and resolute effort to overthrow it, and that this indeed has been *the principal project of philosophy itself in the ultra-modern era*. Bewailing the "decline" of philosophy is thus not quite to the point; the real challenge is to understand this ultra-modernist legacy of overthrow and the motives for it.

This is not to deny that there is something logically fishy about arguments which claim to set absolute limits to argument or a theory to end all theory, which is what the war over the end of philosophy being waged in the journals is mostly about. No less scrutable are pronouncements that we are now passing from a culture founded on intellectual principle to one that no longer is; especially when this position is argued *intellectually*. It is no doubt the paradox which prompted Lyotard to warn us that we must not view the "post-modern condition" as the dawn of some new culture to supplant the older modern one, for that would require us to give the "rationale" whereby the first is distinguished from the last, which is to contradict just what the step means to be, namely a stepping beyond all rationale-fixated culture. So if it is to be neither the advent of a new culture nor a lunge into the void, the link of post-modernity to modernity must somehow be maintained in stepping beyond it. Thus his formula: post-modernity is modernity itself in its self-negative extension.¹

Attempts to think the end of philosophy share the same difficulty: how it is thinkable to go beyond philosophical reason or set it in abeyance without resorting to arguments that are again philosophical. It is the Cartesian problem of how one is to think beyond thinking. One way is to construct arguments that can claim to be "persuasive" in some para-logical sense; it has become common practice since Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Foucault *et al.* to appeal to poetic, linguistic or coercive "reasons" and even to cite these

¹ Heidegger in *The Question of Being* (New Haven 1958) also recognizes that any simple counter-metaphysical "passing over the line" is problematical, though he does not resolve it. Derrida also has argued that, though known as spurious, it is important the classical philosophical arguments not simply be set aside but continue to be taught and studied since it is only their active deconstruction that sustains a post-philosophical awareness.

as the real hidden force behind the arguments of philosophy itself.² Another way is to abstain from argument altogether, as does Derrida who, when asked what he really means (*vouler dire*) in his books and arguments replies that he means nothing at all,³ which is the right answer if what one in fact "means to say" is precisely that all meaning is undecidable.

The paradox is nothing new. In various forms it has plagued the whole career of anti-philosophical thinking in its rise to predominance over the past two centuries. If that history may be described as the history of attempts to effect the definitive critique of the philosophical tradition, it is also the history of this paradox and of successive attempts to surmount it. It is the purpose hereinafter to explore this distinctively ultra-philosophical spirit and very broadly to sketch the lines of its development from its early nineteenth century origins to its current post-modern denouement. It will be argued that it is precisely the contradiction entailed in the very idea of a philosophical conquest of philosophy that has rendered all attempts to articulate it ambiguous and deficient, and that it is the same ambiguity that has provided the dialectical engine which has driven each interim stage of the argument beyond itself, forcing its restatement at a further level.

For it is only when philosophical movements reach their proper denouement that it first becomes possible to begin to understand and evaluate them within the purview of the wider history of thought. Before that, the dogmatic enthusiasm that is associated with projects still under way and whose aims are as yet unsullied and undoubted makes any real questioning of them virtually impossible. So it has been with Euro-American thought since the eclipse of the great age of modern philosophy in and after Hegel's time and, whose logic and limits only lately have begun to come into view. "*Ultra-philosophy*" would seem the apt term to designate the general form of the thinking peculiar to that era which, in other contexts, is often referred to as "ultra-modernity". The prefix "*ultra-*" has the convenient double sense of "going-beyond" and "taking-to-the-extreme", and ultra-philosophy stands in just such an ambiguous relation to the philosophy of classical modernity which it would at once overthrow, but also drive to its limit.

The common view of post-modern writers that their own perspective owes its origin to very recent insights on the part of a Rorty or Derrida is quite mistaken. The undertaking to emancipate thought from philosophy is already two centuries old and has generated a substantial legacy of its own. The earliest forms of ultra-philosophy are to be found in nineteenth century materialism or evolutionary theory, in Feuerbach's "going-beyond" of Christian theology or Schopenhauer's and Kierkegaard's subordination of speculative reason to specifically contra-rational absolutes. The 20th century saw a return to philosophy in a new key in the form of methodologies whose ostensible aim was the "reform" or "critique" of philosophy, thus again with an essentially ultra-philosophical intent. Its most recent shape is the post-modern scepticism which assumes the whole philosophical legacy to be self-discredited and which would no longer seek to go beyond

² Ironically, the traditional logic has long known just these arguments as modes of informal fallacy e.g. equivocation, amphibole, *ad baculum* etc

³ Madison, J.B. *Working through Derrida* (Evanston, 1993), p.2.

it or reform it, but remain sceptically poised, as it were, on its nether side.

In this its most recent mutation, however, the project of ultra-philosophy has been brought to the brink. In this sceptical form the contradiction inherent from the beginning in the idea of thinking the end of thought is escalated to suicidal intensity. For what would now be accomplished is no longer just the overthrow of philosophy but also the overthrow of the overthrow, the critique of the critique. What has come to light for post-modernism is that there *can* be no decisive argument to put an end to thought since all such arguments are but thinking again. The only option, then, is simply to assume *outright* the nullity of all argument, both philosophical or meta-philosophical, and to sustain this stand through purely sceptical-intellectual activity (which Derrida calls "deconstruction" and Rorty a neo-pragmatic "conversation") engaging extant positions of every kind and seeing them as self-invalidating while conscientiously seeking to remain position-less and inconclusive itself. But with that, the essential project of ultra-philosophy, which was to carry out the final overthrow of the philosophical legacy, is really abandoned. There is now no longer any distinction between what is to be gone beyond and the going beyond it, between the philosophical legacy or its critique. All that remains is philosophy that has become totally and purely academic, a reflection which has no content of its own beyond the endless evocation and subversion of arguments, and which "means to say" nothing beyond this exercise of a wholly negative reason.

The career of ultra-modernist thought may accordingly be delineated in three principal phases. The nineteenth century saw the advent of various doctrines that had as their common distinctive theme the dethronement of the spiritual-speculative outlook of the western tradition and its replacement with distinctly counter-speculative forms of world-explanation: a position to be designated hereinafter as "*counter-philosophy*". At the turn of the century new schools of philosophical inquiry appear which make it their business to disclose and correct, from a second-order, critical standpoint, what are alleged as the fatal fallacies of all western philosophy: thus "*meta-philosophy*". Finally the limit of ultra-philosophy is reached in the post-modernism which declares both the dogmatic and the critical forms of the opposition to philosophy self-defeating, and proposes instead to expose the whole legacy of reasoned discourse as spurious and annulled in itself - "*post-philosophy*". Each successive shape of the ultra-modernist thesis has its own distinctive approach to how the end of philosophy is properly to be thought; each has its unique interpretation - and indeed misinterpretation - of what it is in the speculative tradition that must be rejected; and each, in its own way runs afoul of an ineradicable paradox that plagues every step of the way.

I. Counter-Philosophy: Scientism and Absolutism

What it was that originally provoked the ultra-modernist turn in philosophy is a question that already has too many answers. From Feuerbach to the present the account of what in the older speculative tradition demanded its radical repudiation has been stated and restated in so many conflicting ways that to cleave to one or another version would

be arbitrarily to fall in with some particular school. For to accept Nietzsche's answer or Ayer's or Dewey's is thereby to reject Kierkegaard's or Marx's or Heidegger's for these are wholly contrary accounts of the matter which cannot be reconciled. What is more to the point is to go back to the beginning again to seek to understand the ultra-philosophical project as whole, as a history, and to consider how the argument takes shape, what conflicts arise and develop in it, and what is its final outcome.

The boldest, most straightforward arguments are usually those made at the beginning. The apocalyptic writers of the nineteenth century were the first to challenge the traditional modern-western account of the world and attempt to articulate entirely new perspectives considered appropriate to the emerging ultra-modernist culture with its techno-political humanism and appeal to a radical subjective freedom. There was the sense that history had "broken in two",⁴ and that the history of philosophy in particular had reached an epochal impasse in which its limits had been reached and exposed. The *ancien régime* of thinking reason was summarily jettisoned and new modes of thought proposed whose thrust was distinctively realist, non-conceptual, historical, experiential, humanistic and world-affirmative.

This counter-philosophical spirit took two chief forms: the first would abandon speculative thought altogether for a dogmatic rationalism appealing to positive, atheist and materialistic world-explanations - *scientism*; the second somewhat retained a speculative appearance but such as posited an explicitly counter-rational principle as its object and theme - *absolutism*. Scientism set in opposition to the spiritual-speculative view of the world - to "metaphysics" - another derived from one or other of the finite sciences, elevated to the rank of a philosophy-surrogate; thus sociology (Comte), politics (Feuerbach), psychology (Mill), biology (Spencer) or physics (Mach). Absolutism would still make its case as philosophy, even as metaphysics, though as inverse metaphysics, centring on a notion of being or "ultimate reality" as in itself irrational, self-oppositional and paradoxical, a perpetually self-reflexive "absolute-finite" in principle destructive of every objective stability. In this is expressed again, in another way, the basic thesis of counter-philosophy: namely that it is the finite self-consciousness and world that is really absolute, a view which Schopenhauer, Stirner, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche all champion.

Few any longer question the so-called "scientific view of the world" that once gave fright to kings and popes. Its appeal rests on the claim to have abandoned the vagaries of abstract thinking and to have reestablished science anew on a wholly non-theoretical base, relying exclusively on the brute facts of nature and society as should be obvious to a healthy mind that has given up trying merely to "think" the world and has instead wholly immersed itself in it. Condemning speculative metaphysics as a fraudulent appeal to indemonstrable figments, it promotes in its place a comprehensive, realist, demystified, "metaphysics-free" account of man, nature and history which resolves not to stray from the finite, concrete, immediate and factual human world; an account which,

⁴ Marx and Nietzsche both independently employ this phrase, though their accounts of the old history ending and the new beginning are the exact inverse of one another. The point is elaborated in my "The Revolutionary Origins of Contemporary Philosophy"; *Dionysius*, ix (1985), 129-171.

since "positive" and not theoretical,⁵ is immune to all theoretical doubts and distortions.

It is just this anti-intellectual bias, however, which renders scientism un-scientific in practice. For its appeal to evidence is at bottom dogmatic: some "general fact" is postulated and then ordinary facts conscripted in "confirmation" - thus that the progressive evolution of species is the brute fact of nature is demonstrated by the existence of certain frogs, or the actual policies of Napoleon are evinced as "proof" of the class struggle as the brute fact of history. But such a verification is wholly circular and the notion that there are primordial general facts is in any case clearly a fiction whose real function is to substitute for the appeal to reasoned principle. As the theory of evolution, physicalism, mechanistic psychology, historicism and other such doctrines demonstrate, what scientism actually produces are crypto-metaphysical doctrines⁶ which deal in postulates no less figmentary than those they mean to replace. In short, scientific positivism is just metaphysics again in another form, a metaphysics of the finite or factual world posited as absolute, that is, as "unconditionally given".

Though with similar roots and intent, absolutism stands utterly opposed to scientific positivism; the two wage continuous war throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. "The Absolute" in its ultra-modern meaning embodies a distinctly contra-speculative reference, a radical affirmation of the finite-as-absolute similar to scientism's, though now *from the side of the absolute*. Typically characterised as what exists in itself before all consciousness of it, thus in principle opaque and impenetrable to reason, it is only the Absolute's own self-disclosure which make its apprehension even possible, an apprehension that is for this reason pre-rational or aesthetic. Schopenhauer's Will and the Kierkegaardian inwardness provide early examples of this absolutist reference which appears in other guises throughout the century: "the Unknowable", "the Incomprehensible", "Will to Power" and so forth.⁷ nineteenth century absolutism generated a whole legacy of popular imagery - "ultimate reality" as Life, Self, Cosmos, Energy, the Unconscious etc. - while the literary tradition was also much given over to

⁵ The key to "positivism" lies in the claim that objectivity and self-consciousness are not two realities but one, and that this is revealed in the simple intuition of fact. The proof is said to be directly witnessed in the "absolute fact" of self-feeling, the immediate givenness of oneself to oneself. Comte makes self-feeling, as opposed to the dualistic theoretical and practical perspectives, the basis of an identification of the objective with the phenomenal, and Mill and Russell likewise cite "feeling" as the final test of the certainty of fact, in ordinary parlance, the criterion of "obviousness".

⁶ Hegel, on the other hand, (*Enc. 249. Zus.*) makes the provocative suggestion that both evolution and emanation (the fundamentalist "creationism") are *metaphysical* schematizations of nature which begin at one extreme (proto-biological or ultra-biological) and deduce the whole of the order of species from it as an abstract series; neither of which really grasp the dynamic of the totality nature as one that is objectively concrete

⁷ The absolute is no less Anglo-American than it is European - cf. Spencer, Bradley, Whitehead or Royce. It has its political expression in nineteenth century imperialism with its reverence for Queen or Kaiser as an "absolute individual", *Der Allerhochster*.

the same romantic-absolutist language of inscrutables and ineffables.⁸ What Heidegger, playing Parmenides to ultra-modernist Milesians, later will simply call *Sein*, springs from the same ancestry.

There thus exists from the beginnings of counter-philosophy a profound revolutionary-reactionary division that stems from a fundamental ambiguity as to how the *reality* of a wholly finite, natural-historical human existence might be comprehended and affirmed over against the *ideality* of the world as it is for traditional philosophical thought. At this point the goal is not conceived as one of bringing thinking itself to an end but rather as discovering a distinctly counter-conceptual mode of thinking: thus "science" (in this corrupted sense) or "subjectivity". For in its innermost soul the intent of the ultra-modernist spirit is not to repudiate modernity, but only to overcome what is still mediated in it, to affirm its core principle of a concrete human freedom in the world as an actually or virtually realized condition. And this is precisely its ambiguity: it would go beyond modernity and its tradition and not go beyond it; it would extend it to its most extreme form and yet withdraw from that. Accordingly, both scientific positivism or absolutist nihilism would affirm a finite reason in place of a universal and deny the idea of freedom for the sake of an actual one conceived in social terms or as a self-affirmative life. A most intense debate develops as to precisely how the "overthrow of idealism" is to be appropriately effected and what a new, ultra-modern thinking-in-the-world would be; whether the revolutionary repudiation of thought altogether or its reactionary reconstitution in a self-negative form; whether simply to step beyond reason or turn it against itself.⁹

This intense controversy within counter-philosophy embodies the paradox intrinsic in the ultra-modern ideal of a purely finite reason and freedom and the corresponding overthrow of the philosophical spirit from this radical human standpoint. The counter-philosophers could only solve the dilemma by sundering the classical modern idea of freedom, the unity of reason and being, into its constitutive elements, and playing these off against one another such that what one specifies as the epitome of the metaphysical and abstract the other advances as the essence of the this-worldly and concrete. Thus positivism and its variants abrogate universal being in the name of the world as it is for a finite human reason, while absolutism abrogates universal reason in the name of being as it is for the finite existent. The one indicates as the key metaphysical superstition it would repudiate precisely that which the other affirms as the truth to be rescued from it; and *vice versa*. The great debate between moralism and romanticism affords the popular paradigm: both affirmed a radical finite freedom as the unity of self-consciousness with nature. But for moralism freedom is preeminently realized in the human-practical

⁸ Hardy's *The Dynasts* features a whole Greek chorus of "absolute spirits" declaiming about the fatality of human history. Like many of his contemporaries Yeats' weakness was for occultism and its political expression, the cult of nationalism.

⁹ The starkest *intellectual* forms of the great revolutionary-reactionary debate were those of the nineteenth century, whose paradigms spilled over to fuel 20th century social, cultural and political tensions. The dilemma is still the subject of learned (though tamer) debates among prominent contemporary philosophers: see *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?* (Cambridge, 1987).

overcoming of nature so that nothing is so morally abhorrent as the doctrine that freedom is something instinctive. But for romanticism it is just in the natural immediacy of individual self-feeling that freedom is aesthetically given, and nothing is thought to pervert this instinctive identity of freedom with "life" so much as the divorce of reason from nature which moralism promotes.¹⁰ In this manner the modern principle of the unity of reason and being would be at once subverted and conserved.

The same opposition pervades the thinking of the whole era.¹¹ Strauss and Kierkegaard debated the revolutionary sense of the modern-Christian principle of divine-human identity, the former representing it as commitment to an objective human self-making to which subjective faith is to be given over, the latter as precisely the subjective passion of faith which leaps beyond all humanistic moralism and rationalism. Counter-metaphysics similarly divided into polar arguments of positivism and nihilism: Comte would seek a new ultra-rationalist basis for science and social morality in a being-for-man of the world to which the traditional transhuman visions of philosophy and religion are to be assimilated. But it is just the relentless in-itself-being of reality, the utter unreason of the absolute, which for Schopenhauer annihilated everything that is merely positive or objective in human existence. What is remarkable is how the one view negatively mirrors the other and precisely and utterly abrogates just what the other asserts.

Counter-ethical thought had among its chief representatives Feuerbach and Stirner in Germany, Mill and Spencer in England and James and Royce in America. The same mutually oppositional relation of affirmation/abrogation is manifest. Feuerbach, for example, describes speculative philosophy as intellectualized Christian theology; its image of the God-man prefigures freedom as the finite individual's immediate sense of his own human species-being. The setting aside of the alienated spiritual-intellectual form in which religion and philosophy represent this relation is a political emancipation (Feuerbach: "politics is our religion"¹²) in which a subjective, un-humanized individuality is awakened to the consciousness of its essential humanity. To Stirner, nothing could be more alien than the notion of an objective human essence. The belonging-to-self of individuality is an ethical absolute and everything stands in relation to it as "its own". All objective ethical "causes" dissolve in the infinite reciprocity of *Der Einsige und sein Eigenheit*, of singularity and ownership,¹³ and the "spirit", whether of liberalism, humanism or moralism, is only the moribund after-life of a religious-philosophical

¹⁰ That the notion of an actual freedom underlies the romantic identity of self and reality in self-feeling is exemplified in Nietzsche's definition of will to power as the "instinct to freedom", which he everywhere opposes to the unreality of a merely moral freedom

¹¹ A more extended account in Jackson, F.L., "The New Faith: Strauss, Kierkegaard and the Theological Revolution" (*Dionysius*, xii, 1988) and "The Beginning of the End of Metaphysics" (*Dionysius*, xv, 1991).

¹² The thesis of his *Principles of Philosophy*. Feuerbach also describes as his first principle "not the substance of Spinoza..the ego of Kant [or] the absolute spirit of Hegel, but the true *ens realissimum* - man." (*Essence of Christianity*, tr. Eliot p.xxxv).

¹³ Stirner, M. *The Ego and His Own* tr. Byington, (Sun City 1982).

unfreedom - a "spook".

These are the same positions Marx and Nietzsche later refined into doctrines that became enormously consequential for later ultra-modern thought, culture and political life. Both were aware of the limits of earlier counter-philosophical arguments which, continuing to play on the same field they would abandon, were in the end self-defeating. Marx, recognizing Feuerbach as mentor, complained that his overthrow of theology was still theological,¹⁴ while Nietzsche, acknowledging Schopenhauer as teacher, faulted him for refuting morality only to advance a more decadent form of the same.¹⁵ The trouble with the arguments of their predecessors, both concluded, was their one-sided dismissal of counter-positions had taken insufficient account of the force of those positions, a defect Marx and Nietzsche would remedy by seeking more definitely to identify their own specific counter-thesis and negatively to comprehend it within their argument. Nietzsche's work is wholly addressed to morality, the humanistic will-not-to-will as the antithesis of will-to-power; he questions how it could even arise in the first place - "how the saint is possible" - and how it has come to contaminate the whole of historical culture. Marx on the contrary would account for radical individualism and its anti-humanist ethic, which he saw as thwarting man's natural species-life; he offered a logic of ideological power and class dialectic to explain what he saw as the cruel anomaly of the rise of bourgeois societies founded on a spurious subjective freedom. Thus humanism becomes decadent individualism and individualism alienated humanism.

The appeal to totalistic, ideologically inspired theories of human history to justify some one-sided repudiation of western philosophical culture as a whole began in earnest with Marx and Nietzsche and established violent prejudices which provided the fuel, first for the class struggle and then the 20th century wars. For Marx, the revolutionary humanist, the engine that impels history is the contradiction embodied in autocratic individualism; for Nietzsche, the aesthetic autocrat, it is the apotheosis of the life-denying, humanistic spirit. What again is remarkable is the *mutually*contradictory character of these accounts; how they *explicitly* cite one another as opposites. But of course the same human history cannot be both the tale of how objective social freedom was ever frustrated by the oppressive power of the absolute individual will, and also the progressive perversion of authentic subjective life at the hands of a repressive political-technological idealism.

It is clear that the polar-opposite Marxist-Nietzschean accounts of the past are pure concoctions whose real purpose is to substantiate arguments which of their nature shun all appeal to rational grounds. It is history that becomes the medium in which the contrariety between positivist and absolutist accounts of freedom is sustained, and in such a manner that each side declares itself to be the liberation from its own counter-thesis, construed as having dominated the human past up to now. What is called history becomes the chronicle of the progress of a spirit each would now overthrow: for Nietzsche the

¹⁴ Marx: *Theses on Feuerbach*, I.

¹⁵ For example, *Beyond Good and Evil*, ss. 47, 56

apotheosis of the nihilistic human will against which the new philosopher would now dare reaffirm "Life"; for Marx an epic of ideological oppression on the part of the ruling classes, now at last overthrown. Both the specific account of present cultural crisis and the specific caricature of the past from which it is alleged to spring, belong together as reciprocal facets of one argument, whose interest is not really in world history but in reconstructing it to generate counterfoils to what are essentially ultra-modernist positions. It is inevitable that history itself, especially the history of philosophy, is barbarized in the process, and the legacy of this barbarization is everywhere still evident and has indeed become the accepted view of the past.

What scientism's atheistic, a-logistic positivism would defend is objective progress toward a fully actual human world, a condition of finite and tangible freedom such as traditional spirituality is said to have written off as impossible and unworthy. Absolutism would similarly affirm a radically finite freedom, the freedom of authentically subjective individual life whose repression is alleged to have constituted the burden and theme of traditional culture. These ultra-modernist forms of extreme humanism and extreme individualism appear to themselves as if pitted against a common enemy, the tradition of reason and its "idealism", but in reality they are pitted against each other and with an intensity which, when translated into political action, was to become fanatical.

The response of the philosophical tradition to nineteenth century ultra-modernism was to attempt to erect bulwarks; the later part of the century sees a rash of "neo-idealisms" - neo-Platonism, neo-Thomism, neo-Kantism etc. - which were not true reversions to these earlier positions but exploited them to fashion *anti-anti-idealist* weapons with which to go to war with materialism. But doing battle on fields and with arms chosen by the enemy, they succeeded only in further distorting the very sources they would invoke - Plato became a Victorian moralist, Hegel a Prussian nationalist or British imperialist. In the subsequent stand-off between ultra-modernism and neo-idealism it became clear to the former that its fuller conquest of the tradition of reason required that the attack be taken into the precincts of philosophy itself, there to repudiate it on its own turf. Accordingly, 20th century critical thought is more than merely counter-philosophical; it carries out its subversion of reason from a standpoint that claims to be at once beyond philosophy and itself philosophical: meta-philosophy.¹⁶

II. Meta-Philosophy: the 20th Century Schools

¹⁶ "Meta-philosophy" in its ultra-modern sense is ambiguous, since the "beyond" it refers to is not the "meta-" of traditional "meta-physics", thinking that goes beyond the finite, but the reverse. Meta-philosophy's "beyond" would leave the thought-world behind for a here-and-now defined in specifically counter-metaphysical terms of language, temporality, the fact-world, *Dasein* etc. Its appropriate image is Nietzsche's Zarathustra who climbs *down* the mountain into wisdom. The "going-beyond" is thus really "meta-meta-physical"; a drawing-back from first-order contexts of thinking (ethics, logic, ontology) into a second-order counter-thinking: (meta-ethic, meta-logic, meta-ontology).

The general standpoint and presumption of 20th century thought is of self-consciously free, contemporary individuals existing in immediate relation to a finite world they directly know as their own. All notions of reality beyond this world are ruled false or "metaphysical". Scientism and absolutism have so far become second nature that the thought-world appears to have entirely receded into the past: a "traditional philosophy" that can be no longer relevant for a confident individuality that has become wholly attached to what is distinctly and concretely there and possible for finite human practice and life. Schools of analytical and existential philosophy arose to articulate this position. They would aggressively seek to occupy the intellectual territory on the hither side of an epochal break with the old world of reason, taken as a *fait accompli*, and would rise to the adequate thought of a brave new world of subjective freedom which is sustained through the definitive critique of the standpoint of traditional philosophy: definitive since itself philosophical. Philosophy is to carry out its own refutation.

From this standpoint the whole of traditional thought is taken as vitiated through its habit of transcending limits now declared insuperable. It has been guilty of ignoring the perspectival limits of consciousness, for example, of thinking beyond time, of "forgetting" the radical finiteness of being, of uncritically accepting non-factual statements as true, of failing to realize "thinking" is only linguistic activity and so on - to all of which offenses traditional philosophy itself would of course readily confess. The new philosophy on the contrary will make no claim to any first-order knowledge; it will constitute itself solely as the second-order reflection whose only aim is to legislate against such transgressions and to get investigations under way designed to expose, arrest, curb and correct the perennial pretensions of rational thought in its misguided aspiration to an impossible universal knowledge.

As logic and ontology are foundational in philosophy, the new meta-philosophy initially took shape as attempts to establish a new logic and ontology of the finite to supersede their traditional foundation in thinking reason. Accordingly, a number of nineteenth century experiments in mathematics and psychology paved the way for later reconstructions of logic along essentially extra-logical lines: Brentano, Boole, Frege, Peirce and others. The inward motivation of this revolution was not at all to advance logical science itself but to bring logic as a whole under what are essential *ultra*-logical criteria, drawn from mathematics, semiotics or psychology. The analytical and phenomenological schools trace their roots to such meta-logical and meta-ontological "investigations" of the first decades of the 20th century: Husserl's *Logical Investigations*, *Principia Mathematica*, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, *Being and Time*.

The aim of the new methods was completely to undermine the traditional philosophy through methodical "clarifications" of all its alleged obfuscations and fallacies. That such a meta-analysis of philosophy is the only legitimate task of philosophy itself was to become the conventional wisdom by mid-century. Ironically, "philosophy" appeared suddenly reborn; for several generations the works of the grand masters of meta-philosophy - Frege, Dewey, Russell, Husserl, Wittgenstein, Heidegger - became virtually scriptural, the required class-texts of vast academic schools whose scholars produced mountains of research aimed at completing the final critique of traditional philosophy.

The whole legacy from Plato and Kant was read and taught again on a mass level, not on its own terms, but so as to provide grist for the meta-philosophical mill to grind into fine critical dust, or as a source of interesting themes to be suitably transposed into the new key. Meta-logic and meta-ontology came to dominate academic philosophy through the century; it precisely expresses the spirit of the ultra-modernist heyday, the era of final solutions, whose art, popular culture and philosophy, no less than its politics, affirmed as absolute the finite will to overthrow all absolutes.

The claim of the new analysis to put philosophy on the side of science did not mean philosophy was itself to become science but that since knowledge is assumed exclusively to be the positive-scientific account of the fact-world, the true role of philosophy must be to establish and defend the rules of such scientific verification meta-scientifically.¹⁷ Though Russell's logical atomism looks much like a rehash of classical British empiricism (for simple and complex ideas read atomic or molecular facts; for laws of induction read truth-functions etc.) the difference is that for Russell there no longer are any empirical things-in-themselves; no ideas, no thinking subjects, no reasoned empirical inferences, in short, no philosophical knowledge. There is only the positive "fact-world" and individuals who use language to mirror it. Logic is not thought reflecting on its own inward structure - there are no "thinking beings", only brain-equipped linguistic animals. Logic is meta-logic, the second-order system of rules, themselves wholly factual, for the correct formulation of positive statements. The realm of propositionally pictured fact is for Russell the only real world there is, the radically finite here-and-now world which analytical philosophy would oppose to the thought-world of traditional metaphysics.

The commencement is thus decidedly not with any appeal to a rational basis but to a series of dogmas which simply declare how things stand with finite individuals fashioning statements about their equally finite world. Among these dogmas: only the fact-world exists and nothing else does; to "know" is correctly to state facts through propositions; only propositions referring to empirical facts are true or false, all others merely formal or empty expressions; empirical science alone judges as to what the facts are and metaphysical or ethical statements are nonsense; the exclusive business of logic (hence philosophy) is so to clarify the rules of propositional statement that all non-factual claims can finally be put to rest. These same positions are repeated in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* which more decisively makes it the sole business of philosophy, not to frame propositions of its own, but only "to make propositions clear". The work makes a beginning toward ridding the Russellian formulae of their crypto-metaphysical residue, establishing more strictly the rule that of what would lie beyond the facts and their verbal picturing "nothing can be said" and so we should remain silent.

Later positivists develop the same emphasis in attempts to formulate a "principle of verification"¹⁸ through whose relentless application every temptation to metaphysical

¹⁷Russell's *The Scientific Outlook* (1931) and Ayer's *Language Truth and Logic* (1936, c.2.) are typical manifestos of this fundamental collusion of analysis with empirical science.

judgement might be arrested. Through a generation of analytical literature, however, the limits of the verification criterion worked their way to the fore: it is impotent respecting scientific generalities like $E=MC^2$; it cannot explained why only physics-like statements are factual without invoking empiricist metaphysics; the ghost of an ultra-factual "world-out-there" always seems presupposed; its restriction of meaningfulness to factual utterance in any case stretches credulity. Moreover, its essential dogmatism is exposed in that its criterion cannot apply to itself without self-destructing. It becomes apparent that the regime that allows only factual statements to be meaningful is itself wholly metaphysical and does not square with the intent of the new philosophy which was to establish a meta-metaphysical beach-head in the everyday world in such way as to demystify it of all metaphysical prejudices. The need is felt for a less theory-laded approach to analytical investigation such as would comprehend a multitude of meaningful ways in which individuals use language to address and express their immediate world.

The later Wittgenstein will thus speak of propositional logic as only one use of language which it is presumptuous to rank above others. His analysis asks that we avoid assumptions as to what may or may not be meaningful or true and which privileges some particular use of language, a step which can only be justified extra-linguistically, that is metaphysically. The more adequate inoculation against metaphysics is the recognition that the problems of traditional philosophy are really linguistic neuroses and bottlenecks and true philosophy the analytical therapy which liberates language from these fixations and shows "the fly the way out of the fly-bottle".¹⁹ Such analysis will avoid explicit counter-metaphysical refutations like that of logical positivism; it will simply unravel the linguistic tangles that constitute the knotty problems and puzzles, including positivist ones, that engender what has been called "philosophy". The standard of normality for this therapy is the everyday, spontaneous use of language as the "common behaviour of mankind".²⁰ It is no longer a question of uncovering hidden realities or even of comprehending or changing obvious ones; the simple task of a linguistic philosophy is to bear witness to ordinary language-behaviour and thus to "leave everything as it is". Thus would Wittgenstein affirm the preeminence of the immediate, quotidian world of everyday talk over the alleged tortured perspectives of reason. It is no longer a question of a pre-given fact-world pictured in static empirical propositions, but of a contextual, behavioural world of common linguistic usage, seen as absolute since nothing whatever can be uttered or understood except in its terms.

Wittgenstein's linguistic positivism sent everyone into the cultural byways looking, "not for the meaning, but the use". With Austin the everyday dictionary and thesaurus were elevated to the rank of philosophical texts. The rule was to treat all instances of linguistic behaviour as differing "language-games", each with its peculiar rules, each

¹⁸ Given the ultra-rational stand of Carnap and others it would have been more proper to speak of a verification *criterion* rather than *arché*; a "criterion" is a dogmatic device, a "principle" implies a reason.

¹⁹ Wittgenstein's specific views on philosophy are found in *Philosophical Investigations*, ss. 89-133.

²⁰ *Philosophical Investigations*, s.206.

appropriate to its context, and none, not even empirical propositions, affording privileged access to extra-linguistic truth. It was now even possible to turn again to religious "god-talk" or ethical or metaphysical pronouncements so long as the same non-committal interest was maintained as would apply to the analysis of the rules of the lingo that builders use on the job; that is, without making any commitment whatever to what the language of theology, ethics or science actually said. This studied reduction of every content to the form of the language used to communicate it became one of the most powerful paradigms of all 20th century academic teaching and research. In philosophy it was thought a great liberation to be released from grappling with first-order problems which one could now feel satisfied were in any case bogus and easily resolved simply by reference to the ordinary language one ordinarily spoke and in which one could presume to be already somewhat expert. Philosophy of language provided a solid, readily available and democratic vantage-point from which almost anyone could effect the summary overthrow of philosophy and be instantly emancipated from all the illusions, as well as the hard labour, of rational thought.

Husserl makes essentially the same commencement as Russell with researches into mathematical foundations. His is also a revolt against traditional metaphysics and "unscientific" ways of thinking.²¹ He too appeals to the immediate, temporal life-world as it is for existing individuals, with stress on the subjective aspect of its givenness. His understanding of the role of a new logic and ontology is the mirror-complement of Russell's: what is important is not the fact but the facticity of the fact, not the fact-world as objective but as a system of meaning. Scientific philosophy will be the eidetic analysis of the modes of the "being-there" of the world for the "consciousness-of" it, to which access is gained by suspension of every thesis and inference that would go beyond the "things themselves" in their primordial givenness. This *epoché* sets all appeal to metaphysics, including empiricist metaphysics, in abeyance; in one para-Cartesian stroke the world for thinking reason is summarily suspended and all that remains is phenomenologically to describe the pre-reflexive being-for-consciousness-of-the-world which is thereby revealed.

Heidegger's inspiration for *Sein und Zeit* was the same intentional relation of existential consciousness to its own pre-reflexive world. *Dasein*, as "the being for whom being itself is a question", is quite the same "I" as Husserl's phenomenological subject

²¹Though he thinks of it very differently; see for example *Cartesian Meditations* (The Hague, 1960) ss. 3-7, where scientific evidence is spoken of, not in Russellian terms of factuality, but in terms of "apodeictic certainty" or "givenness". "The evidence for the factual existence of the world [is] not apodeictic" and is thus to be included in the "Cartesian overthrow" (p.17). Husserl's narrow ties are with nineteenth century psychologism (Brentano) and historicism (Dilthey). Like Russell he betrays a notorious naivety respecting the actual history of philosophy, blaming Hegelian metaphysics, for example, for the degeneration of the idea of a "philosophical science" - a charge that would mystify Hegel who speaks of little else. But it is not really naivety that renders meta-philosophical accounts of the tradition characteristically cavalier and skewed but the deliberate intent negatively to reconstruct it to suit the ultra-modernist thesis. This is evidenced by the simple fact that the manner in which phenomenology and analytical philosophy understood the history of metaphysics are not just different; they are mirror images of one another.

though analyzed rather in ontological terms of the modes of this finite-being (being-in-the-world, fallen-ness, being-with, *Angst*) as also the modes in which being stands related to it (available, useful, present or absent, disclosed, concealed). Time is revealed as the essence of being; it is in its various ecstatic modes that being presents and absents itself. Thus would Heidegger express how things stand for the finite individual who affirms a radically temporal, conditional and contingent world as his own. A whole mid-century culture of popular existentialism took its cue from this kind of reflection and developed it in all sorts of directions, particularly in the arts.

But like Wittgenstein, and for analogous reasons, the later Heidegger drew away from the quasi-psychological approach of phenomenology²² into a more direct ontological format. For if access to being is sought through analysis of the special case of *Dasein*, as *Sein u. Zeit* proposed, it must remain problematical whether what is disclosed thereby applies only to the special case, or to being itself; whether temporality, for example, is a dimension peculiar to human being only or to Being as such and on the whole.²³ Playing Spinoza to Husserl's Descartes, Heidegger gave himself wholly over to the "question of being" as such and to the thinking that might think it in this negative-ontological sense. His later essays are thus occupied with giving an account of being *qua*being in the classical Thomistic-Aristotelian manner, except that instead of the eternal, unitary, universal categories of being in the traditional account, it now discloses itself through radically contrary, this-worldly categories of particularity, temporality, fatality, difference, contingency, eventuality, fortuity and so on. In short, Heidegger's is an inverse metaphysics, a meta-metaphysics of the finite, which is to say a doctrine of being as time.²⁴

In so seeking an account of being as it would be for a wholly finite subject and renouncing the conceptual thinking that would "transgress" this limit, Heidegger resorts to more and more recondite neologisms, questionable etymology and unhistorical histories, couched in a counter-conceptual, quasi-theological and poetizing language that speaks in earthy woodland metaphors of paths, turnings, inns, clearings, backtracking, harkening and so forth, just as Nietzsche liked to speak of mountains and clear air. The result is an arcane language that the most practised academics learn to speak only with difficulty with ceaseless debate over lexical nuances even then. This abstruseness is not just a weakness, however, but deliberate on the part of the author who explicitly pronounces conceptual language to be inappropriate to the standpoint of the finite

²² Phenomenology had indeed a strong impact on 20th century psychology. Not only had Sartre, Jaspers and many others written extensively on psychological subjects, but "phenomenological psychology", owing much to Merleau-Ponty's seminal work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, became for a time in universities everywhere the chief rival to the Skinnerian behaviourism which tended to be the model championed in analytical circles.

²³ A Heideggerean account of Heidegger's "turn" is found in Nicholson, G., *Illustrations of Being* (Toronto 1992), c.4.4.

²⁴ A clear forerunner of Heideggerean being is "the world as will" as Schopenhauer described it: the wholly inscrutable manifestation of an absolute being-in-self that is directly the annihilation of what is so manifest.

subjectivity he would establish and articulate. As what he means to say is thus intentionally and in itself contrary to thought and cannot in principle be articulated in any clear way, it can be grasped only aesthetically, or better, subjective-existentially, which is of course the whole point.

The aim of the 20th century schools was to avoid the paradox entailed in direct confrontations with philosophical reason by developing meta-philosophical disciplines that could claim to be independent of it while setting its limits and effecting its decisive critique - and doing so philosophically. It would be a thinking-beyond-thinking, a radical thinking; "ultra-philosophy" in the proper sense of the term. In an inverted replay of the stoic and epicurean dogmatisms which sought a philosophical freedom in but not of the world, the meta-philosophers of Language and Existence promised disengagement from the thought-world of traditional morality and metaphysics and triumphant return to the human here-and-now world of positive fact and authentic existence.²⁵ This they would accomplish through new ways of thinking that dissociate themselves from the philosophical legacy while remaining critically engaged with it. Linguistic analysis allows weighty issues of philosophy to continue to be addressed, while at the same time assuring a complete and utter detachment from them. So also existential ontology, which represents being as what is forever concealed in every attempt to comprehend it in thought, but which declares itself nonetheless in poetic intuitions which not only supersede thinking but claim to be thinking itself at its deepest and most penetrating.

The more these ultra-philosophical programmes came to dominate 20th century inquiry the more professionalised and esoteric they became. From the original revolutionary enthusiasm of a decisive redirecting of thought to the human world and an absolute individual freedom within it, philosophy withdrew into a nether-world of industrious paper-work, of interminable critique-ing of critiques and circular interpretation of interpretation addressed to the so-called "literature", that is, chiefly to its own journalistic productions. Drawn into this purely intellectual process, the ordinary issues and ideas that might spontaneously occur to a genuinely philosophical spirit are institutionalized and dissipated in highly specialized forms of argumentation. What passed for the teaching of philosophy became largely a matter of the inculcation of the orthodox watchwords, formulae and conventions required of any who might elect to participate in the esoteric business of academic seminars and research, so that the meta-philosophical schools tended finally to degenerate into a kind of scholasticism.

The reason for this lies in the way the ambivalence of the ultra-modernist project recurs in the case of meta-philosophy. Its very idea depends on assuming a double-tiered

²⁵ Captivated by the Platonic vision of an oasis of reasonable life removed from the shifting sands of world-bound opinion, stoicism and epicureanism were able to attain to such only in the limited form of an inward, detached self-consciousness to which an ineradicable outwardness and arbitrariness still clung. (See Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* {New York, 1974}, v.2 sect.2.) Ultra-modern dogmatism takes a reverse course. Its vision is a modern-Christian one of a divine-human reconciliation whereby a free, rational, human spirit has reengaged the world to redeem it. But though it is just this concrete spirit that ultra-modernism would get hold of it only does so in a partial and one-sided way, such as loses hold of the universal aspect of reason and freedom and sinks itself entirely into their finite and existential expressions.

thinking: a division between a first-order, uncritical thinking that in the case of philosophy spawns illusory knowledge, and a second-order thinking which knows nothing itself but is purely critical. Everything depends on keeping these two strictly separated: second-order critique must not be confused with a first-order knowledge - the axioms of logic are not facts, the *epoché* is not a psychological event, linguistic analysis is not a Cambridge language-game. And likewise, the basis of first-order knowledge must not be the product of second-order reflection but be given independently - facts are just there, language is ordinary behaviour, the encounter with being is prereflexive. Yet the nature and limit of first-order knowledge is precisely what second-order critique claims the right to dictate, though it can never say where it gets its criterion for so doing. If it simply asserts it, that is arbitrary; if it appeals to some theoretical justification it becomes itself a first-order knowledge; if it applies the same criterion to itself - as if linguistic analysis were itself a language-game, or Heideggerean being another way being is present - then it becomes reflexively circular.²⁶

The fate of meta-philosophy is thus that the need to hold these two sides apart keeps foundering on their incipient reciprocity and *vice versa*. The objective of a final and decisive meta-philosophical critique fades as argument and meta-argument pass inexorably over into one another and as critique inevitably becomes theory and theory evokes the need of new critique. This inevitable collapse into a vortex of mutual contradiction may appear to be somewhat arrested by stop-gap measures, such as Gadamer's hermeneutical circle which would artificially hold the moments of this reflexivity apart and set them into an endless series. But as Kant pointed out, a series with no beginning or end has no decidable interim locus either, so that in truth *no* interpretation of an interpretation can be significant and is in fact meaningless precisely so far as circular. Reflexivity is thus the reef upon which the whole meta-philosophical ideal is bound to founder.²⁷

III. Post-Philosophy: the Sceptical Result

Post-modernism springs from recognition of the insufficiency of earlier, dogmatic forms of ultra-modernism. Though frequently presented as a new and original view, it does not really take thinking in any new directions but continues the directions of ultra-modern thought a further stage. It sees that liberation is not achieved through meta-

²⁶ Logical positivism was never able successfully to come to grips with paradoxes of self-reference, to formalize the reference of propositions to what they denote, or to avoid an empiricist metaphysics without lapsing into solipsism. Likewise, in insisting that thinking is just language, later analysis could sustain itself as philosophy only by turning into a metaphysics of words. Again, the ontological reflection that would repudiate any universal account of things by dint of the sheer finitude of existence, is forced to exempt its own account from the same ban or else risk collapse into a banal absurdism. And the argument in its later form could never complete its turn to a stable thought of being as time, since this would contradict what being is said to be, namely temporal, self-differential.

²⁷ An example of the emerging consciousness of this fact in Hilary Lawson, *Reflexivity, the Post-Modern Predicament* (LaSalle 1985).

arguments that, in seeking to limit the standpoint of philosophical reason, only tacitly recognize it, thereby reinstating the same issues and conundrums of traditional thought in another form. Post-philosophy will go further to affirm the bankruptcy of all principle-centred thought as such, "logocentrism", whether traditional, counter-traditional or meta-traditional. It will no longer even pretend to bring philosophy to an end (though it may abandon it) for that is to assume there is such a thing and that it somewhat makes sense to end it; and this is just what must be denied. To aspire to a final solution in philosophy, even one that would eradicate it altogether, is in any case only to establish some further regime in its place.

By sceptically suspending, not only first-order thought, but also the search for immaculate second-order critical conceptions, post-philosophy would seem to realize the essential aims of an ultra-modern overthrow without falling into the trap of simply reinstating philosophy again on the other side of the critical boundary-line. For even a negative ontology is still about being, symbolic logic still has rules and axioms, a strict science is envisaged beyond the epoché, and some semiotic theory or other is inevitably invoked in defense of the appeal to a pre-theoretical standard of words. If both counter- and meta-philosophical critiques only resurrect philosophy again, then how might the ultra-modernist project be refashioned such as successfully to accomplish its aim of a radical overthrow of the traditional thinking spirit of philosophy?

The post-modern answer is that we ought to resolve to rid ourselves from the very outset of the "prejudice" that there are such things as philosophical positions and arguments and that they make any sense; a prejudice which leads to another, namely that it is up to us to expose them as false by carrying out their decisive critique and declaring an end to philosophy. The new scepticism will suspend all such assumptions outright; it will not seek to promote any new first-order insights but neither will it advance any new critical methodology, for that too becomes irrelevant once the illusion that there are philosophical positions, correct arguments, true judgements and so on have all been put to rest. Its sole object will be to point out how all discourses of the kind which pretend to a privileged viewpoint from which to execute true judgements of universal accounts of the world are spurious; and not spurious from the point of view of some alternative, more "correct" account, but *spurious in themselves*. It follows that all attempts to carry out a critique of such accounts participate in that discourse and so are equally to be judged spurious.

Post-modern thought thus represents the sceptical turn which no longer seeks either the dogmatic or critical repudiation of philosophy because it has come to the view that all argument for or against rational foundations are in themselves pointless. If it remains "philosophy" at all it is only as *post-philosophy*, the reflection which seeks no more than to convince the philosophical legacy of its own self-defeated irrelevance. This it might do in a number of ways: by juxtaposing or recontextualizing fragments of texts drawn from the literature to expose the alleged self-conflictual nature of philosophical arguments - that they flout their own rules, contravene the very axioms they disavow and even

conflict with the philosopher's personal character.²⁸ Or, it might redefine philosophy as nothing more than a type of cultural narrative, specifically "meta-narrative", and then argue on grounds of the relativity of culture the illegitimacy of that genre. Or it might commence with the pragmatic requirements of the extant democratic societies showing how their interests and advancement must take precedence over philosophical rumination which, if it might have once had a value, now only deflects and confuses the commitment of progressive individuals to the open society.²⁹

Though post-philosophy takes many forms the common theme is *sceptical* in the broadest sense. For the perspective for which the futility of all reasoned argument has become axiomatic, after all, there can be no longer be talk of positions or critical refutations thereof. Adopting no position, philosophical or meta-philosophical, the post-philosopher occupies a "non-locus" on the boundary between philosophy and its negation, from which vantage point to interrogate positions and counter-positions in such a way as will simply allow their self-refuting tendency to do its own work. Thus Derrida:

I keep myself at the *limit* of philosophical discourse ...for I do not believe in what today is so easily called the death of philosophy...³⁰ I have attempted to find...a non-site, a non-philosophical site, from which to question philosophy. [This] search for a non-philosophical site does not bespeak an anti-philosophical attitude. My central question is: how can philosophy as such appear to itself as other than itself, so that it can interrogate and reflect upon itself in an original manner.³¹

Rorty uses a similar language; he speaks of a rhetoric, "strong poetry" or small-philosophy whose specific business will be to take large-P Philosophy to task, to force it to give up on itself. Such a thinking which withdraws from itself to interrogate or renounce itself has already abandoned the option of taking a stand within *or* outside

²⁸ This appeal *ad hominem* was one of Nietzsche's favourite tactics: consider his diatribe against Strauss, his essay *Contra Wagner*, the vitriolic attack on Aquinas in *Genealogy of Morals*, or the chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil* titled "On the Prejudices of Philosophers". A recent post-modern example is Derrida's *Glas* (U.Nebraska, 1986) in which Hegel's relations with his sister and others are made to appear perversely at odds with his philosophy of the family. Such attacks are of course not "personal" in the strict sense but they reflect a basic ultra-modernist prejudice which refuses to accept that "thought" can have any other meaning beyond the thought of some particular, finite individual. .

²⁹ What Hegel called "objective spirit" becomes in its ultra-modernist reformulation by Marxists, English liberals and American pragmatists the apotheosis of the practical which assimilates all other dimensions of freedom to itself. With Richard Rorty it assumes a post-modern form which no longer speaks of a "free society" as a desired end-state or achieved revolution as with earlier liberals or socialists, but only the contingent commitment of individuals to an undefined social openness.

³⁰ Derrida, *Positions* (Chicago 1981), p.6

³¹ In an interview with R. Kearney in Kearney, *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, (Manchester UP, 1984) p.98.

philosophy. It stands aloof to the tendency within philosophy to surmount oppositions, reduce differences to unity and give itself a transcendental content; but it equally disdains to stand outside philosophy passing judgement on this tendency from some other position (science, meta-logic, praxis, poetry or whatever). In the interest of a more complete undermining of thought it lets ambiguities stand, embraces the metaphoric, undecidable character of meaning, and pursues "philosophy" only as the means to an ironic suspension that sets every philosophical issue whatever, including all resolutions thereof, in abeyance.

This of course is the classical form of all scepticism. In lieu of categories, axioms or methods its appeal is to *tropes*, rhetorical devices whose function is not to prove or disprove anything but to effect the *epoché* which sustains detachment from all reasons and arguments. Derrida's *trope* is "différance", described as neither concept nor technique but the dynamic that predetermines all meaning as differential/deferential rather than identical/referential. It is advanced as "the common root of the oppositional concepts, sensible-intelligible, intuition-signification, nature-culture" (also word-idea, being-thought, ontic-ontological, writing-speaking etc.). The "logocentric" thinking of philosophy prejudices one term in a dichotomy and represses the other so as to bring it to "presence" and to link it to some fictional "transcendental signified" seen as the object of a fictional intuition of thought - "idea", "being" etc. - which is thereby made immune to ambiguity or controversy. To reverse this metaphysical tendency, as critiques of metaphysics do, simply by affirming the opposite term - matter rather than mind, say - is only logocentrism again since "every transgressive gesture, precisely by giving us a grip on the closure of metaphysics, reencloses us within this closure."³² To restore the priority of *différance*, philosophical and meta-philosophical positions are "interrogated" to reveal how metaphoric instability still clings to and corrupts their terminology and unsettles the attempted fixations of meaning by which they would sublate ambiguity only to retain it in covert ways.³³

Rorty is a "positive" sceptic in that the standpoint from which he would subvert and finally abandon philosophy springs from practical considerations, namely, what is necessary to advance the cause of "post-modern bourgeois liberalism".³⁴ Pragmatism is of course scepticism's other face, its ethical counterpart, as in ancient times. Rorty's is not the approach of the exquisitely erudite European who knows how to make words and texts "tremble" and shatter every meaning into a maelstrom of nuances and conflicting

³² *Positions*, p.12.

³³ Derrida's goes to great lengths to repudiate the logic of *Aufhebung* in an effort to represent the wish to transcend difference as what primarily moves Hegel's logical thought. This runs surprisingly contrary to how Hegel himself represents the dynamic, for example in *Encyc.*, ss. 79-82, or how he treats difference itself in ss. 117-120 and in the *Doctrine of Essence of the Science of Logic* where, far from "transcending" difference, Hegel demonstrates how, in the concept of Ground, difference and identity are revealed as presupposing one another. Derrida, on the other hand would fix difference as absolute.

³⁴ Rorty, R. *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, (Cambridge 1991), pp.197-202.

associations. He is the no-nonsense American pragmatist who has learned from James and Dewey how to caricature philosophical verbalisms to make them ridiculous in the eyes of common-sense individuals confident of their objective freedom. Rorty also disdains to debate philosophy on its own terms; rather he would challenge classical philosophical notions of the thinking subject or a reason mirroring nature on ideological grounds rather than in the quasi-metaphysical mode of semiotic analysis. He sees the acceptance of philosophical beliefs as inimical to the openness to practical possibilities that is essential to the advancement of "liberal society" which he describes post-philosophically in terms of actually extant, ethnic-historical collectivities, namely "the rich North Atlantic democracies" whose survival is for him all that matters.³⁵

This Anglo-American pragmatism contrasts sharply, of course, with the anarchic sensualism of the French post-modernists; but it is evident from the esteem they hold for one another's work that it is quite the same interest that moves both a Rorty and a Derrida.³⁶ For Derrida, interrogating the extant legacy of philosophical writing has the end, in the Nietzschean tradition, of an aesthetic suspension of assent to all objective accounts of existence; Rorty's rhetorical interrogation of Philosophy, on the other hand, employs irony, satire and rhetoric to loosen habitual attachments to theoretical abstractions, thereby to strengthen communal solidarity among contingently constituted individuals. The aim and effect is in general the same: the conservation of a radically concrete individual freedom through the deliberate subversion of the abstract perspectives of reason.

Common also to Derrida and Rorty is the view that meta-philosophy - the standpoint equally of Wittgenstein and Heidegger - is no longer supportable. Such methods could not complete the decisive overthrow of reason because even though claiming to occupy purely critical and thus "presuppositionless" positions they founded philosophical positions nonetheless: a counter-metaphysics of temporal as opposed to infinite being, a meta-logic of fact opposed to a logic of thought, a transcendental deduction from contingency rather than apperception, a semiotic *a priori* replacing an epistemological one. This could not arrest and suspend the dominion of philosophical thought but only divide it into two, a traditional and a contemporary philosophy, the western-traditional legacy and its meta-philosophical critique, the corpse and its autopsy. Oppositionally dependent on the very legacy they would overthrow, they were doomed to remain entangled in it, the older tradition persisting in the new meta-philosophical doctrines as their specifically negated content.

Post-philosophy would rather accomplish the sceptical neutralization of philosophy, not by direct refutation, but by sceptically-pragmatically construing all its positions to make them appear self-refuting, to generate their own contrariness, or to collapse, as it were, under their own weight. This tactic again shows little interest in, or respect for the

³⁵ *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, p.15

³⁶ Derrida's positive attachments to America are well know; for reciprocity on Rorty's part see for example: "Is Derrida a Transcendental Philosopher?", in Madison, G.B., *Working Through Derrida*, Evanston 1993.

actual history of philosophy, for it gives no credence even to the idea that there is such. This amounts to a licence to manhandle traditional authors and texts. Rorty cites Representation as the ruling myth of philosophy and assimilates virtually the whole of the western tradition to this one idea, by which he understands the invention of fictitious faculties or media (first Thought and more recently Language) whose real purpose is to establish some static perception of things as absolute and permanent; a view anathema to liberals. Derrida rather speaks of a long-standing addiction of philosophy to the idea of Presence, similarly an invention of universal, self-given objects - "nature", "spirit", "being" - whose intent is to enable the denial of what Nietzsche calls "Life" and Derrida the inescapable ambiguity and uncertainty intrinsic to the determination of meaning.

Both belabour Descartes, Kant, Heidegger and many others by way of exemplifying these alleged self-contradictory artifices of philosophy, and this without much regard to the actual history of thought which in fact offers precious little confirmation of such a consistent record of specific delusions and indeed a great deal of plain evidence to the contrary.³⁷ But for post-philosophy this is not to the point since it is neither its aim nor intent to be an objective interpretation of philosophical history, the validity of which it in any case roundly denies. Rather, as with ancient scepticism, the sweeping judgements and clever reworking of the arguments of an Aristotle or Hegel or Nietzsche in order to "demonstrate" the alleged self-inconsistency of philosophical positions are sceptical *tropes* whose sole purpose is to maintain a post-modern detachment from the standpoint of thinking reason, whether in its universal or its historical manifestations.

But in post-philosophy the original ultra-modernist paradox, as to how an end to thinking may be thought, is again not really resolved but only brought more vividly to light. For not only is the ambiguity of its outlook patent in the torturously obscure and deliberately indecisive rhetoric in which it is obliged to couch its thesis, but also in the self-subverting character of the task that it sets itself. For what it attempts is to abjure in principle every appeal to principle; to render the absolute indeterminacy of meaning meaningful; to deny that logic has force and then turn the logic of positions against themselves; to affirm categorically and as a global judgement that no overview is ever possible; and so on.

Were post-philosophy indeed to fall victim to the temptation to give itself a definite content (Rorty is often suspected of such for his blatantly liberal assumptions and Derrida for a tendency to relapse into semiotic theory) it would cease to be authentically post-philosophical and become just another meta-narrative - the problem to which Lyotard was sensitive. It is therefore essential to post-modern thinking it not be "about" anything,

³⁷ To depict Descartes as a "representationalist" as Rorty does entirely affronts the actual Cartesian argument which commences precisely with the *suspension* of representational assumptions in order to proceed from self-conscious thought alone. Similarly, Derrida's quite silly account of Leibniz's logic or religious ambitions or his free-form Freudian speculations on Hegel's feelings for his sister are the purest flights of trivializing invention showing an almost perverse disdain both for the individuals and their arguments. But again, for post-modernists, the point is never historical arguments themselves but only how they may be exploited for the construction of their own sceptical *tropes*, as post-modern architects freely borrow from the styles of the past without much regard for their original spirit.

or at least not allow itself to say what it is about. The only "content" it has is to be the relentless, subversive, inconclusive reflection carried out on an extant philosophical literature which, paradoxically, it is bound to conserve in order to sustain itself through the continuous deconstruction of it.

Through its own very project, then, post-philosophy becomes a wholly intellectual activity without result, thematic substance or reference. In it the paradox implied in the attempt to think beyond thinking is no longer merely *latent*, as in earlier ultra-philosophy; it is *this paradox itself* in the active form of a self-annihilating thinking. The restrictions it would set on all reasonable argument prevent it from arguing its own case with reason, that is, intelligibly. Perched on a sceptical fence it must withdraw in one moment what it asserts in the next: it says philosophy is about the writing-reading of texts and then again that there are no texts; or philosophy is an open, deliberately inconclusive conversation and then draws the boldest, dogmatic conclusions about all and sundry. That post-modern writing is given to wilful inconsistency, to ambiguous sleights of language or has recourse to comic, anarchistic or even pornographic rhetoric, expresses the predicament that it may never allow itself to say what it means, identify a theme, or reach a conclusion, for to do that would undermine the purity of the "post-philosophical" non-thinking it would sustain.

Conclusion: The Recovery of Philosophy

In post-philosophy ultra-modernist thought reaches both an impasse and a completion. Its project radically to affirm the modern principle of a concrete, here-and-now freedom in contrast with the other-worldliness of the spiritual-speculative tradition is articulated in its most extreme form. In its purely sceptical reflection on the philosophical legacy it is itself the attempted embodiment of the paradoxical idea of a self-annihilating thinking. This is far from saying, however, that it has at last succeeded in finally overthrowing and nullifying thought so that it really is now all over for philosophy. On the contrary, post-philosophy, even more than earlier forms of ultra-philosophy, remains tied to the tradition it disavows. By its own admission it cannot think to bring about the actual end of philosophy for that would not only be to revert to an ultra-modernist dogmatism whose very difficulties it was meant to overcome, but also to eliminate the very context whose deconstruction alone is what sustains it. And so it can only remain on the sceptical margins and boundaries, a purely suspensive thinking unable either to go beyond philosophy or return to it.

If the outcome of ultra-modern thought since Hegel has indeed been the destruction of philosophy, this ought not to be understood as the direct consequence of its arguments but rather as a significant side-effect. While it is true that appreciation of the basic standpoint and argument of the great western philosophical texts has atrophied or been distorted and maligned to the point of extinction, this is not due to the success of scientism or Marxism or analysis or existential ontology or post-modernism in literally disproving, demystifying, repudiating, exposing or disposing of it. Rather it is due to the

real history of philosophy, the *actual* tradition of thought, having been buried and obscured under so many layers of misinterpretation and distortion visited upon it by generations of aggressive ultra-modernist dogma that it has become barely recoverable. For as earlier made out, not only is there a history of the ultra-philosophical argument as such, but also a history of its various reconstructions of the philosophical legacy, reconstructions which had little or nothing to do with that legacy itself or with understanding it on its own terms, but with enlisting it, appropriately misconstrued, in support of one or another version of the argument for a radicalized modernity. As the form of the ultra-philosophical dogma changed, so did the form of the attack on the philosophical tradition, and so also the form of the reconstruction of it.

And its point in all this was to retain a relation to philosophical history even while superseding it; to conserve itself as "philosophy" through appeal to negative reconstructions of the whole tradition of reason in lieu of a first-order appeal to it, which, in the interests of the affirmation of a radical subjective freedom and finite humanity, it would avoid. Thus what was unique about the attack on the philosophical tradition which has here been called counter-philosophy is its apocalyptic outlook; its view of being itself the legitimate issue of philosophical history whose final chapter it would write. Thus for nineteenth century scientism the upshot of intellectual history is the final conquest of the liberal-scientific spirit over a pre-enlightened cultural past epitomized in religious and metaphysical superstition. Absolutism on the other hand would find liberation in escape from a dehumanized, reason-ridden past into a present existentialized subjectivity. Both would repudiate philosophical history and give starkly contradictory accounts of it. For their sole interest in history was imaginatively to exploit it as a means of furthering a contemporary confrontation between contrasting views of what ultra-modern liberation means: for one the triumph of humanism and technology over a benighted past, the other a triumph of subjective life over abstraction and morality. The point is, for all their popular influence, the narratives which Nietzsche, Marx and their contemporaries imposed on the history of western art, religion and philosophy were not only mutually contradictory, they are fictional and ideological, not really "histories" at all. Yet these not only still enjoy a preeminence, but compete with, and have largely supplanted the comprehension of the authentic western legacy on its own terms.

The meta-philosophies of the 20th century are extensions of absolutist and scientific beginnings but differ in no longer seeing themselves as a culmination of world-philosophical history but as opposing to it entirely new, "contemporary" insights into the foundations of philosophy itself. They would thus seek to occupy an independent ultra-modern standpoint from which to view the arguments of the past in terms of the basic misconceptions on which they were alleged to rest which would now be their business critically to reexamine and correct. Its approach to traditional philosophy would be to root the whole of it in some alleged specific fallacy - forgetfulness of being, misuse of language, wilful transcendence of fact, a category mistake. Accordingly the great classical works were energetically reviewed, rewritten and retaught from some such perspective - Heideggerean, Rylean, Wittgensteinian - with the result that by mid-century a whole new generation of academic philosophers had become thoroughly imbued with

reconstructed interpretations of Plato, Spinoza or Kant which not only openly conflicted with the originals but violently with each other.

The history of philosophy was thus the object of a systematic, comprehensive distortion from which it has yet to recover, carried out in order to legitimize contemporary concepts that would lay hold of and express the absolute commitment to a present, con-temporal human self-consciousness and world. The enterprise fell into two general camps, an Anglo-American which positively embraced a behaviouristic anthropology and liberal-technocratic ideals and chiefly enlisted logic and language in its service; and a Continental-European which sought to refuse and stand against just this humanist, technocratic modernity through a cultivated pessimism which would turn philosophical thinking into a kind of ponderous lament that might fill the void created by the loss of a metaphysical tradition.³⁸

For post-modernism again, the history of thought as a whole is judged no longer meaningful so that even the distinction between contemporary and traditional philosophy is likewise meaningless. The ruin of the western cultural legacy lies at its feet; it constructs, reconstructs or deconstructs it at its pleasure since the life has gone out of it. If, as Rorty puts it, philosophy may once have been a useful tool for articulating the ideal enhancement of the human condition, in a liberal-technocratic society that is already free it must be abandoned as an outmoded, irrelevant relic. Or, as Derrida suggests, while there can be no desire to rejuvenate a wholly discredited philosophical literature, there might still be a virtue in rummaging about in its rubble to confirm and remind ourselves of our intellectual emancipation from all its reasons and positions.

With the idea of a meaningful tradition thus put to rest one way or the other, everything can now be put on one post-modernist plane; Plato can enter into dialogue with Freud, Gide be mated with Hegel, rock poets refute Kant, the western canon dumped because patriarchal or Christian theology is daily refuted in undergraduate seminars. In academe a belligerent antipathy to the whole legacy of reason has become pervasive, inclusive not only of historical culture but also of modernity itself. This outlook is sustained through popular declamations against the relevance of the past or against the very idea of reasoned argument having any exclusive rights in the aftermath of the overthrow of intellect; or else through exquisitely convoluted, literary-aesthetic arguments that would so thoroughly fragment and relativize meaning as to prevent any possible recurrence of the dread disease of definite thought.

What ultra-modernism would articulate is the extreme ideal of Modernity as fully and literally actual, a concretely present condition in which every reality or value has been thoroughly assimilated to the interests and perspectives of existing individuals who are subjectively convinced of their absolute freedom and of the world as subordinate to that freedom. This human-existential condition it affirms as one already or virtually

³⁸ Colourful insight into the existential sense of loss of a metaphysical tradition as the root of the Heideggerean account of "*denken*" is provided by Rorty in "Overcoming the Tradition" (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, Minnesota, 1982).

accomplished, thus such as exists before all mediations of history, culture or thought. For this reason it violently disengages itself from such mediations, even those of its own western-intellectual legacy from which it draws its ideals and its language. To the latter's notion of a reasonable, universal and objective freedom it opposes the contrary extreme of a finite, temporal, pragmatic, contingent and wholly subjective one. But as this latter vision in the end is bound to contradict its own very ideal of a concretely realized human freedom it falls into a scepticism where freedom itself becomes dissipated, confused and degenerate.

For in its post-modern form ultra-philosophy has discovered that since it can never complete the intellectual overthrow of reason, its only recourse is sceptically to suspend or abandon it. But in this it forfeits all legitimacy as philosophy and reaches an impasse beyond which, as it itself admits, it is impossible to go. In this sceptical form the ultra-modernist revolt is thus paralysed in its tracks; it can neither establish any position beyond the philosophical tradition nor can it return to it, nor can it give it up. The worlds now confronting each other are no longer some one ultra-modernist doctrine set against another - scientism *contra* absolutism, liberalism *contra* existentialism - nor is it the triumph of "contemporary" over "traditional" philosophy. It is now the philosophical legacy as a whole in its historical integrity on the one hand, and the utterly destroyed, annihilated post-modern account of it on the other. Thus, it can no longer make sense either to remain attached to the ultra-modernist critique or to the one-sided defense of traditional thought as against it. From a viewpoint no longer intimidated by the biases which have dominated the past two centuries it has become feasible to begin to speak of the ultra-philosophical project as having reached its limit, making it possible to recover again the connection between this revolt and the actual philosophical legacy it thought to abandon. The issue thereby shifts to become that of how the western tradition is after all to be reconciled to its ultra-modern critique, or contrariwise, how the ultra-modern demand for a concrete and worldly human freedom is to recover its roots in philosophical world-history. This implies a number of obvious challenges: to reinstate and liberate the authentic philosophical legacy from its ultra-philosophical distortions; to revisit the question as to what inspired the ultra-modernist revolution, what underlies its hostility to the philosophical spirit, and how it came to its present post-modernist impasse; overall to restore the sense of the unity, wholeness, continuity and the substance of world-philosophical culture as comprehensive of and moving beyond the now tiresome negativity of the ultra-modernist preoccupation with a history "broken in two".³⁹

³⁹ The important point is that the ultra-modernist revolt did not "reject" the philosophical tradition; it co-opted and misconstrued it in order to take certain of its key principles to their extreme. It is this legacy of co-optive distortion that has, however, rendered the present time largely incapable of philosophy as traditionally understood since it no longer has a clear idea what it is or was on its own terms. The recovery of the actual western tradition of thought is for this reason a paramount challenge of the times, and a prime objective of *Animus*, the journal in which the present essay appears.