

The Philosophy of the Act

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Only the first word of the Cartesian philosophy is true; it was not really possible for Descartes to say *cogito ergo sum*, but only *cogito*. The first (and last) thing that I perceive is my own act of spirit, myself perceiving. The spirit, which is life woken into self-consciousness, discovered its likeness to itself, or identity, through the act of thinking about thinking. All further perception is only an explication of this idea, which is *the* idea *par excellence*. I know that I think, that I am spiritually active, or, – since there is no other kind of activity – that I am active, but I do not know that I am. Not being, but the act, is the first and last.

If we go on to an explication of this act, we find it to be threefold: the thinking, the thought-about, and the identity of these two, the “I.” “I think” means: the “I” places itself (or sets itself) before itself as another, but passes through this reflection back to itself, in the same way that the discovery of one’s own life in a mirror is something that comes from the outside. It perceives that the image in the mirror is its own.

The awakening of life to self-consciousness is a complicated act. The simple saying of “I” does not constitute an identity. Whoever says, I am I, or, I know that I am, knows nothing, believes only in a mathematical point, is looking only into blackness and seeing only what is not real – is seeing, that is, the *difference* between the thinking and the thought about, between the subject and the object, and is not seeing their identity. The simple “I,” the thinking in distinction from the thought-about, is empty, has no content; there are no rational grounds for this saying of “I”; it is hollow, not at all a *moi raisonné*, a something thought about, but only a something believed. Only the “I think” amounts to anything, that is, the likeness to itself of the one in the other. What the “I”-sayer believes, the “I,” the identity, here becomes the imminent content of the act – against which the mathematical point, the black nothingness that calls itself Being, manifests itself in the middle of the activity as the fixed and frozen act of self-consciousness. The act thus becomes only half-realized, the thinking becomes arrested in the process of differentiation from the thought-about, which is really itself, so that the spirit runs its head against the wall, against the barrier that it has created and not broken through; it runs itself into a dead end. The act becomes frozen. The bridge, the steep passageway from the thinking to the thought-about, is broken away, the artery that carries life itself is choked off. Living Becoming is turned into dead Being, and self-consciousness into theological consciousness, which now must lie its way out of black nothingness into pallid Being.

The reign of shadows begins. All of the thought-about remains a mere shadow, which shrivels up into a dark point beyond the realm of the thinking. Now that the thinking and the thought-about have been torn asunder, real life, the living "I," the self-conscious identity, makes its appearance outside of both; it is the unperceived, though believed or guessed at. This life that has been placed at a remove is an empty reflection of the empty "I," the shadow of a shadow, the theological God, the "Eternal Being," the "Absolute Spirit," and so on.

The self-conscious "I," from which all philosophy must proceed, because the "I think," which has been elevated above all proof and is impossible to prove (in this case, even doubting is an act of thinking), this *moi raisonné* of Descartes, is thus in no way a proof of abstract Being, but only a proof of thinking, of the act of the spirit. The "I think" has presented itself to us as the act, which is comprised of three moments that together constitute the "I"; but even this latter is not Being, and is neither the thinking nor the thought-about, but is rather the realization of an act: the movement of life imposing itself upon itself as another, or distinguishing itself from itself, but in either case perceiving its likeness to itself.

The "I" within is not something that stands still or is quiescent, as the "I"-sayer thinks it is, but is rather something that is changing, is in constant motion, just as life, before it has been awakened to self-consciousness, is likewise constantly changing. Man is just like the "world's body," like everything that we see growing and moving, and this is true not only of the sensible part of his experience, but also of the spiritual part, his self-consciousness, which is constantly changing, is engaged in a constant activity of altering itself. The only thing that remains constant is this activity itself, or life. This constant altering of the "I" is necessary, because there is an "I" only so long as it goes on becoming another, in other words, only so long as it defines itself, limits itself, and perceives, in this act of the self becoming another, or limiting itself, its likeness to itself or free self-determination. Without this act there is no real "I," no identity, but rather either its act is unconscious (innocent, natural life), or it has split itself in two, and is a broken thread of life, a disrupted line, a black nothingness.

Reflection is like the Fates, cutting through the continuous thread of life with the shears of the understanding, disrupting all movement and choking off the breath. The "I" is an act of the spirit, an idea, which can comprehend itself only in change. The only thing that stands above change is the law that is involved in movement itself. The spirit perceives this law through the perception of its own life. In perceiving itself and its own activity, it is perceiving all activity, all life, with the same certainty. Life is activity. But activity is the recovery of an identity through the establishment and transcendence of its opposite, the producing of its likeness, its likeness to itself, through the breaking of the barrier within which the "I" is "not-I." Activity is, in a word, self-creation, the law of which is perceived by the spirit through its own act of self-creation.

Change, the differentiating of life, cannot be taken to be a change of the law of activity, an objective differentiating of life, but can be considered only a differentiating of self-consciousness. Reflection, which remains entirely within the head, turns things upside down and says: "Objective life is differentiated, but the 'I' remains constant." It seizes upon what is really the change of the "I," of self-consciousness, and views it as a change in the other, in the representation made by the "I" (which is really itself). All its representations are looked upon as objective life, which is seen, naturally, as differentiating itself, as becoming something else at every moment, because the "I" itself is becoming something else at every moment, because the self-consciousness is a continuous chain of representations, because the idea, the one act of the spirit, is not fixed, but is movement, excitation, a constant rising and falling between the lowest form of self-consciousness

(not in the usual meaning of this word) and its highest and most lucid form. The different states or excitations of the self-consciousness, which manifest themselves through time as different moments, stages, phases, and episodes, and in space as different examples or settings, are really the product of one and the same activity, which the self-consciousness recognizes in the end as its own. But reflection, the activity that can never arrive at likeness to itself, sees the opposite of reality everywhere. Objective life therefore seems to it to be differentiated, and the "I" (about which it *knows* nothing, but only *believes*) seems to be the constant, the immortal!

From every particular idea that is formed, from every stage of the self-consciousness, its opposite, its likeness as another, necessarily emerges, and indeed remains long enough for the particular idea to be able to explain itself. In other words, every essence duplicates itself until it has actually been created; it is active long enough, creative long enough, it lives long enough, to become reality. At that point, the duration of the particular idea, of this particular "I," comes to an end. "No," says reflection, "it is only then really beginning to live!" The spirit, which was nowhere able to find itself in life, which, whenever it saw its image in the mirror of life, was like the child who looked behind the mirror to see what was there and naturally never found anything but empty, black nothingness – this spirit, which, after it had produced, reflected and explicated itself, did not believe that it was seeing itself in the other, but thought that it was seeing something quite different from itself, at last looked again behind the mirror of life, to seek there what it ought to have found within itself. The poor devil who is constantly denying, but who never arrives, through the negation of the negation, at the breaking of limits, who has a retina that stands everything on its head, but no optic nerve to put it back on its feet again, tears with his careless hands the root, the hidden foundation of the tree of life, from the earth, and holds it up to the air, while pushing the treetop into the earth and thus preserving its rottenness. After removing his act from the spirit and making it into body, into a lifeless corpse, he wants to make this body eternal. He represents eternity to himself as the continuance through time of an unchanging body. He represents the particular "I," the temporal, as eternal, and the Eternal, the law, as a limited, particular, temporal "I." The essence of reflection is to turn thought into an absurdity.

The explication of a particular idea or act of the spirit, the working out of a particular stage of the self-consciousness, or of life, of humanity, one might say, is its transformation into reality, its individualization. The individual is the particular idea become other than itself, through which this idea becomes realized, establishes its identity. The individual is only the reality of the idea; it is generally only through the individual that life can arrive at self-consciousness, since no identity, no "I," is conceivable outside the act, as we have said earlier. The universal is intrinsically unreal, and is only an abstraction of the individual, which the idea reflects, and which is related to the idea, but takes shape not as the reality of it but as its reflection. The idea of life in general, the eternal law, "Absolute Spirit," "World-Spirit," "God," or by whatever names the Universal and the Eternal are either appropriately or inappropriately designated, is really only a thing that is changing, a thing becoming something else in the variety of things, in the individual, or, more correctly, in the endless succession of individuals, in the endless activity of things becoming something else or of things creating themselves. In other words, the universal comes out of the individual into its self-consciousness, and man, who perceives the idea of life, the universal, as his own life, is its highest or most thoroughly fulfilled reality.

All this, of course, is nothing new, and can be found in the works of all philosophers, especially the moderns. No new truths are being expounded here; rather, old ones are simply being repeated,

because what is to follow has these old truths for its fundamental principles, and they cannot be repeated often enough in an attempt to exorcise the theological consciousness, which has become arrested in the dead end of reflection. The theological consciousness is the great lie, the principle of all slavery (and domination), to which our species remains subject for as long as the idea of life goes on being alien to us, for as long as we have no perception of the self-conscious act. At the present time, as the idea of life begins to break a path for itself, the theological consciousness is binding itself up with the existing material powers, with the institutions that it originally called into being, so as to have their help in its fight against the free act of the spirit – a most natural alliance, an alliance of father and son, both defending their house; a family alliance that should not be taken lightly!

So far, this family alliance has not had the attention that it warrants from all sides. Either the son is forgotten in exclusive attention to the father, or the father is overlooked in the zeal to watch out for the son. The theological consciousness, religion, the father, is becoming known in this country in all its mendacity, but people here bother and alarm themselves very little over politics, the son. In Germany, people have almost forgotten politics in their concern over the religious dualism, and they have shown in recent times, now that they are beginning to trouble themselves about politics, that they, as one might expect, know scarcely anything about the modern social movement. They begin their republic at the Year One, and consider it an heroic deed to bring into Germany the slightest report about what seem to be the latest doings in the political-social movement, no matter how abstract or narrow-minded is the point of view expressed.

In France, on the other hand, where they have unmasked the son, the political dualism, people have remained at a standstill in religious matters right down to the present day. Proudhon, the most able leader that the contemporary social movement has produced, speaks quite unctuously of “God,” of the “Father,” and his “Children,” mankind, who are all “Brothers”; he believes that he has done as much as possible by dispensing with the “Priests,” just the way the good old Germans think they have set the political order aright by polemicizing against the king. But Proudhon does not allow himself to imagine, as a logical consequence of his position, that the kings and priests should be allowed to retain their old rights, or to recover them at will. Yet, the vague fantasies of God the Father and His little children are precisely what are exploited by the kings and priests, and used by them as a means of achieving domination. For the little children must have guardians, and among the sons of the father there can be only one first-born; thus there are unequal brothers, and nothing is more natural than that human society, when its relationship with its own essence comes to be conceived as that of a child in a family, should also want to be dominated by authority, and led along by the “venerable” reins of faith.

Who, then, has told our French philosopher, who protests so vigorously against all domination from without, that we have a father over us or outside us, that we are the children of another? His spirit, which feels or guesses at the identity, the unity, with its own essence, but does not clearly perceive it, represents this unity in the form of reflection, which stands before itself as another, outside of it. He takes this dichotomy to be real. But if it were real, it would mean that all men are in reality cut off from one another, rather than bound together, that they are different, not alike, opposed to one another, not united – and that, if they were to try to apply themselves, with their so very religious conceptions, to the problem of doing away with private property, they would turn out to be, in spite of all of Proudhon’s protestations, opposed to crude material communism, and in favor, rather, of the most crude abstract communism, the monkish or Christian kind, in favor of the annihilation of all independence for the individual, in favor

of the destruction of life or freedom. For they would have reached the point where they would either have to renounce or destroy the universal, which they represent as a heavenly power outside of themselves, a personality opposed to their own, or else would have to submit to it completely. Such submission would be an unbearable state of slavery which, when pursued to its logical extreme, would produce an impossible situation resembling that of the Middle Ages, the era of the *juste-milieu*, during which earthly free will was called into being and allowed to reign alongside the heavenly tyranny, so that a constant battle was fought between the representatives of the inauthentic individuals and the unreal universal, between earthly and heavenly interests.

Either social freedom is based upon spiritual freedom, or it is without foundation, and is thereby bound to become transformed into its opposite, no matter how revolutionary its opposition to the existing conditions that have come down to us from the era of the *juste-milieu*. Out of the foundations of a Christian communism would emerge a Christian Middle Ages, if it were thinkable that history, once having reached the end of a line of development, could revert to an earlier phase.

Clearly, the fighters for freedom are isolated on either side, and are therefore not strong enough to stand up against their opponents, who are united.

The lies of religion and politics must be unmasked relentlessly and with a single blow; the entrenchments, the enemy's secret bidding places, the bridges of asses and of devils must be burned down and annihilated. We fully realize that there are lame and timid philosophers who, because the anger of the act has been lost to them, poke about with their Diogenes lanterns through the heaps of dirt that are the lies of religion and politics, to see if they might possibly ferret out yet another useful object. But it does no good to toil away picking shreds out of the rubbish-heap of the past and throwing them into the paper-mill of the dialectic so as to metamorphose them into currency, when one must acknowledge all the while that it is still the old familiar material in another form. The form is the essence; the spirit must itself create its own products at all times, and the Philistine, in order to be able to lay his hands sooner upon the merchandise demanded of him, considers the matter at an end, even if the product be out of his old lumber room, and looks upon it as something brand new that he will sell at as fair a price as the old. The support that props up the gaping masses can now once again be saved; the Philistines shyly recoil before every original act of the spirit as they do before an appearance of the Devil, until they gradually begin to have some idea of it, and befriend it. What, then, is true in religion and politics? Indeed, truth slumbers inside them. But the slumber, rather than the truth, is the part that properly belongs to religion and politics. If truth were to awaken from its slumber, it would stop appearing in the form of the dualism of religion and politics.

Religion and politics are passageways from unconsciousness to the self-consciousness of the spirit. The religious dualism, the heavenly politics, is a product of reflection, of dichotomy, of misfortune – as is the political dualism, the earthly religion. Although reflection has no idea that it is the *pons asinorum* of the spirit, it nevertheless divines this fact, and this divination manifests itself in the form of reveries about a lost Golden Age, and later on in the form of prophecies about a better era to come, in which all fighting, antagonism and sin will come to an end. The Bible itself, this venerable document of the origin of our religion and politics that guides us with the most extreme naïveté into a theological dead end, allows Adam to hear the voice of a higher essence outside himself only after the fall. In its last section it prophesies a time of realization, in which all creatures will come together, no longer divided from one another and from their God. Christ is simply an anticipation of this time of realization. It is precisely for this reason that

His role comes to an end at the moment when prophecy is no longer valid, because it has been fulfilled.

The state, like the Church, is the anticipation of the unity of social life. It is precisely because religion and politics hint at a future condition that they would never concede this condition to be in the present, because they would then do away with themselves. Yes, they must constantly postpone the presence of this future, because their role consists in hinting at a condition which, if realized, would bring this role to an end. In order that their lies not be browbeaten or denied by the truth, they must deny truth itself and turn it into falsehood. That is the greatest advantage won by religion and politics, although this is not their entire essence.

The essence of religion and politics consists, as has been said above, in allowing the real life, the life of the real individual, to become absorbed by an abstraction, by the “universal,” which is nowhere real, and which is outside the individual himself. That idea sums up the history of these lofty twin sisters. Moloch is their prototype – human sacrifices everywhere establish the keynote of religious ritual and state ceremony. The “Absolute Spirit,” which celebrates its reality in the “State,” is a reproduction of the Christian God, who let His first-born Son be crucified, who was satisfied to build his Church out of martyrdom and upon a martyr, “upon this rock.” The Christian God is a reproduction of the Jewish Moloch-Jehovah, to whom the first-born was sacrificed in order to be “atoned for,” and who was appeased with money during the era of the *juste-milieu* of Judaism, when the first-born was “redeemed,” and cattle were sacrificed instead of men. The original battle sacrifice everywhere was man, and when he later sought to be given “grace” again, or to be “redeemed,” he got what he wanted only in the figurative sense. This is still the case today, and will be as long as religion and politics remain in control of him.

Religion and politics stood as a counterpoise to the crude materialism of the individuals, who, before they began to strive for self-consciousness, struggled against one another; religion and politics entered into life and established representatives of the general interest, who stepped in as the unreal truth of the untrue reality and opposed particular interests. The priests gave themselves over to the “service of God,” and kings, aristocrats, and other sorts of selfish and ambitious men, as well as fools and frauds, gave themselves over to “service of the state,” as the representatives of the “general” interest, drew out the sweat and blood of their underlings, and raised the cry that self-sacrifice is the highest act of virtue.

It is not necessary to repeat over and over again that the fine history of all religions and states was a necessity. As long as the peoples and individuals had not yet begun to strive for morality or self-realization, they had to be satisfied with allowing themselves to be treated like the good old cow; as long as they did not know how to govern themselves, they were governed by powers outside of themselves. That is clear. But it is also clear that religion and politics are the products of a situation appropriate only for cows, and that they themselves or their representatives are only the other side of the materialism that is dominating individuals and peoples. The priests and rulers cannot use the excuse that the peoples had made them necessary, any more than the individuals and peoples can somehow excuse their condition of slavery by pointing to their priests and rulers. Slavery and tyranny, abstract materialism and spiritualism, make their peace with one another, and the only deplorable people are those who do not perceive that there is no way out of this closed circle of servitude except a radical break with the past. This break the French and Germans have now achieved, the former by calling forth anarchy in politics, the latter by bringing about the same anarchy in religion. The main task now is to find the common ground from which this power of negation emerged on both sides. Without this common ground,

all efforts are merely fragmentary and run themselves into their own opposition, as has actually been the case up until now in Germany and France.

Slavery has its own enclosed system; it has set up a well-ordered structure of lies that works as a block upon the still unborn freedom, a theoretical and practical block that is effective so long as freedom does not rise up and oppose it with the consequences of truth. Freedom becomes the surrounded phalanx of slavery, against which it will always be at a disadvantage so long as it does not carry out its own principles to their furthest consequences, as slavery had done with its principles. As long as dualism has not been overcome everywhere, in the spirit as in social life, freedom has not yet been victorious. The dualistic world-view necessarily had to come forth in history. But lies are none the less lies because of this. All of our history until now has been a necessary lie, so to speak. The Christ, in order to become a reality, had to appear as an individual among others, and thus above all in opposition to himself. The spirit evolves in opposition to itself.

History, which is nothing but this evolution of the spirit, could also not possibly have been anything in itself but the appearance of this opposition, and it should therefore not be surprising that, until now, only this opposition, the struggle of the individual with himself and with the universal, has come to the fore. The true individual – the self-conscious spirit, the free man, the true universal – had not taken shape as yet. The universal did not yet have any inner reality, since it is not real outside the individual. The individual appeared, in opposition to its essence, the universal, as the particular; the universal appeared, in opposition to reality, as abstraction – God, Priesthood, Pope, Church, State, Monarch, etc. And so a dichotomy came upon us, with the abstract universal on one side, and the material individual in opposition to it on the other, a dichotomy that is in itself nothing but an illusion created by falsehood, since the universal has no life without reality, and the particular has no spirit without truth. This dichotomy of the spirit has manifested itself, as I have said, in all history up until now. It achieved its highest peak in Christianity, the most fully realized religion, and in monarchy, the highest form of realization of the state. This is quite correct to say: Christianity is the true religion, and monarchy is the summit of all the forms of the state. In other words, the absolute religion and the absolute state are themselves nothing but the *absolutism* of the heavenly and earthly *tyrants over slaves*.

Domination and its opposite, subordination, are the essence of religion and politics, and the degree of perfection with which this essence manifests itself is the degree of perfection of religion and politics. In absolute religion and politics, the Lord is a lord of all. Universality manifests itself here as the negation of all individuality. All separate existences vanish before God and the monarch. God and the monarch are not themselves real individuals; they are exalted above all reality, are sacred persons, which is to say that they are not persons at all. The monarch, like God, is unthinkable majesty. Do not think about it, do not ask – just fall upon your knees! Abstraction can be pushed no further, and dualism, brought to these heights, can no longer maintain itself. It capsizes, and revolution and criticism begin.

The abstract universal must give way to the abstract individual; this, however, is no longer the natural individual, as was the case at the beginning of history, but the spiritual subject. From now on, not individual free will, but subjective freedom comes to the fore, not natural equality or the equal rights of individuals struggling in immediate opposition with one another, but the abstract rights of man or the equal right of the abstract personality, the reflected “I,” the mathematical point. The majesty and sovereignty of the one has transformed itself into the majesty and sovereignty of everyone. Whereas previously the abstract universal ruled in the form of the one

over the particular, and oppressed the individual, now the abstract individual rules in the form of the many over the universal, and oppresses the unity. In place of hierarchy and class structure, in place of fettered individuals, representation and the competition of individuals come forth.

Through the medium of this revolution an essentially new history emerges. The individual again begins with himself, history again begins at the Year One, and surges forward in fits and starts, in pendulum-swings of the spirit, along the path that leads from the anarchy of abstract freedom through slavery to the final point, where the striving for real freedom begins, as the law of negation begins to take shape along with the common ground from which this power of negation arose, to manifest itself on the one side as the subjective, and on the other as the objective, act of the spirit.

The revolution allowed the dualism to remain; the spiritual revolution, like the social (that is, the German revolution, like the French), really allowed everything to remain as it had been, at least so it would seem to any observer. Everything was “restored” to the way it had been; such had been the historical situation, and history is always right. What did the revolution achieve after all? Its freedom and equality, its abstract rights of man, turned out to be just another form of slavery. The other side of the scheme of opposition, the abstract individual, achieved domination, but the scheme itself, the opposition between domination and slavery, had not been overcome and discarded at all. The impersonal domination of justice, the self-domination of the spirit, which is like itself, had not done away with the domination of the one over the other. “The tyrants have only replaced one another, and tyranny has remained.” The people, Proudhon says, were only the monkey of the kings. The kings were motivated in the making of their laws by the notion: For such is our pleasure [*Car tel est notre plaisir*].

But the people also wanted to have their pleasure for once, and to make laws. For fifty years now they have been making thousands of laws, and they still seem to get endless pleasure out of it. And we are paying extra for it – the people were only the monkey of the priest, Robespierre, who decreed the existence of a “highest essence,” and stumbled into the role of a Pontifex Maximus. Our *Burschenschaften* students are good Christians, and they would like to be the means of anointing a pious Kaiser, another sort of Pope. Saint-Simonianism was simply an aping of hierarchy. The “Brahmans of logic” wanted to make their master into a second Christ, and they celebrated in him the “Second Coming of the Lord,” or the Paraclete. The pious demagogues are incessantly carrying on their mischief in Germany and France, and one of them has ascended the throne. All possible freedoms are laid claim to on his behalf: freedom of trade and industry, of education and conscience. To what end? For the benefit of private interests and private opinions, which intend to strangle overlordship to death through the “free competition” of truth and justice! What is this democracy but the domination of the individual will under the name of “subjective” or “personal” freedom? How does it really differ from the domination of one person?

To be sure, the revolution is different from the *ancien regime*. A turning point in history has arrived, an even more important one than that time when the self-consciousness gave the first sign of life, and rose up to present itself as the universal, as distinguished from the particular – when the domination of kings and priests, the domination of Moloch, began. In other words, the individual is again laying claim to his rights, but now above all as the particular, not as the true universal. For now the opposition with itself in which the spirit finds itself is by nature intolerable; since it is no longer the unconscious, natural individual, but the conscious, spiritual subject, that finds itself in opposition to its own essence. It perceives the falsity of regarding itself as something separate, without being fully conscious of this perception; it knows that it is standing in a false

distinction from the universal, but wishes to maintain this distinction all the same, because it still fears the “human putty” of the *ancien regime*, which it only barely negated and did not overcome. The specter of absolutism still keeps the individual from recovering consciousness. He embraces freedom in a delirious frenzy, and smothers it. Out of pure fear of falling back into the condition of “human putty,” he makes himself into a stone, and throws himself with all his might against his opposite, the abstract universal, without realizing that he is thus keeping alive his mortal enemy, who is lying there close to death. The abstract universal has no more power, and is too senile to be able to oppress the individual or absorb the particular. But the particular willingly throws itself to the lions, and Moloch goes on swallowing it, like a sick man sucking up through a funnel the nourishment that someone is giving him in an effort to keep him alive a little longer.

Oppositions are the form in which the idea of life appears in the order of nature, so that there is no life where no opposition presents itself. But the life of nature does not consist in the realizing of freedom, and as long as the spirit is still joined to nature, there can be no talk of freedom. But the spirit and its proper world, the social life, man and mankind, finally arrive at the point of existing in likeness to themselves, the point where all the forms within which activity had previously been confined, and which had established themselves as habit and “second nature,” are scattered, and do not remain as redundant activity – where the whole of determined nature transforms itself into free self-determination. German philosophy had long perceived this destination of the spirit entirely with respect to thought, and although the Philistines, seeing the whole stock of embodied ideas of which they finally had achieved some small grasp going up in smoke, raised the cry of “murder” over the arson that they thought was being committed, which seemed to “negate” everything for them, in reality very little was destroyed. And what happened here in relation to thought, happened in France in relation to social life.

The French social philosophers, Babeuf in his day, which was the time of Fichte, and more recently Proudhon, touched the igniting flame of the modern spirit to the structure of the old society, just as the German philosophers did to the structure of the old beliefs. But both the French and the German arsonists scarcely knew what they were after. The aim of socialism is nothing other than that of idealism which is this: to allow nothing to remain of the old activity of plunder. None of the forms within which this plunder had affixed itself until now can continue in the face of the free spirit, which now manifests itself only as active, and which does not stop with some result that has been won by someone and fix, embody and materialize it in order to store it up as “property” – which rather, as the real power over all things that are finite and determined, ever transcends them, and creates itself anew as an active force (each time in a different, particular way, to be sure). In this way does the free act distinguish itself from unfree work; for, in the condition of slavery, the very act of creation enchains what is created, whereas, in the condition of freedom, every limitation of which the spirit divests itself is not turned into determined nature, but is overcome, and thus turned into self-determination.

It is now the task of the philosophy of the spirit to become the philosophy of the act. Not only thought, but all human activity, must be brought to the point at which all oppositions fade away. The heavenly egoism, that is, the theological consciousness, against which German philosophy is now so zealously crusading, has thus far hindered us from stepping forth into the act. In this respect, Fichte went much further than our latest philosophy has gone. The young Hegelians, paradoxical as it may sound, continue to be enmeshed in the theological consciousness; for, although they have renounced the Hegelian “Absolute Spirit,” which is a reproduction of the Christian God, although they have given up the Hegelian politics of Restoration and *juste-*

milieu, and although they have finally negated the religious dualism, they nevertheless continue to set up the universal, or “State,” against the individual, and they arrive at best at the anarchy of liberalism, that is to say, at the condition of limitlessness, from which they nevertheless fall back into the theological “State,” because they have never really stepped forth into self-determination or self-limitation, but rather have remained in the self-centeredness of reflection. With them, social life has never overcome the attitude of reflection, the stage of self-centeredness. In this stage, the object of activity still appears to be really another, and the subject, in order to strive for the gratification of its selfhood, of its life, of its activity, must hold on to this object that has been torn from it as its “property,” because it is otherwise threatened with the loss of its selfhood. It is in the form of material property that the notion of itself being active – no, of itself having *been* active – for its own sake, first occurs to the consciousness of the subject, which is still in the stage of reflection. Its act never manifests itself as present; it never lives in the present, but only in the past. It goes forth constantly deprived of its real property, its present act, because it does not yet have the capacity to manifest itself in its true form. It holds fast only to appearance, to the reflection of its property, of its activity, of its life, as if this reflection were its true life, its real property, its own act!

This is the curse that has weighed upon mankind throughout history until now: that men do not set up activity as an end in itself, but constantly conceive of its gratification as something separate from it, because all history up until now has presented itself as none other than the evolution of the spirit, which, in order really to evolve, must constantly rise up in opposition to itself. And just as this curse came into being with religion and politics, so it will also disappear after the domination of religion and politics is brought to an end, after the stage of reflection is overcome, and the reign of speculation, of the philosophical ethic, begins and takes hold of all of life.

The first words through which the God of reflection made himself known to man was that curse that the Bible loyally handed down to us in the form of the well-known saying: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread.” The first words through which the free spirit made itself known to man in opposition to the other was the famous dictum of Spinoza’s *Ethics*: “What activity furthers and the love of life extols, is good.” The work by “the sweat of thy face” has reduced man to slavery and misery; the “activity out of love” will make him free and happy.

Because men in Germany and France have so far not united with each other, but have striven after freedom isolated on either side, the result has been that a reaction has recently set in on both sides. On the French side, of course, where spiritual freedom has not yet been won, it has come from religion, while in Germany, on the other hand, where social freedom has been neglected, it has come from politics, or the states. In France we see the Clergy and the Legitimists steadily regaining power; here the Nobility and the Pietists are doing the same. There, it is the power of the state that has emerged from the revolution that feels itself threatened, here, it is the science that has come out of the Reformation. And because both revolutionary powers, in their one-sidedness or isolation, are without a strong base upon which to stand, they are led by a sense of their own weakness to placate and make concessions to the enemies whom they could destroy if they were united. In opposition to this tendency, as a result of the sense of deficiency in this matter that is now developing on both sides, a so-called radical party is emerging in both countries, to stand up against the reaction that has so far been victorious, in Germany in the form of the official learning, and in France in the guise of the official revolutionary government. This party does not wish to be known as a mediator and maker of concessions, because it is beginning to have an

inkling of its real power, which resides in the fusion of the problems of spiritual freedom and social freedom.

In both countries, the radical party has come out against the official powers that emerged from the spiritual and social movement. Protestantism and the July Monarchy have now been attacked. Pierre Leroux, the French Arnold Ruge, is polemicizing against the *juste-milieu* government, just as his German equivalent is polemicizing against Protestantism, because they are beginning to see that these represent only a half-victory, as I have pointed out, and that they are really insufficient to destroy the enemy – and indeed are more likely to let themselves be overcome by it, in order to maintain the appearance of their existence. Consequently, an apparent alliance of radicalism with reaction emerges. This alliance is only an ironical one, to be sure, the character of which is made evident enough, for example, by Bruno Bauer's "trumpet blasts." Certainly the alliance between radicalism and the Legitimists in France is an old story by now, just as is the one in Germany between the radicals and the Pietists against the old rationalism. But now as they organize themselves to pursue practical goals, the irony fades into the background, and they show a stern mask to the world. To any but the most superficial observer, this alliance appears only all the more comical as a result. But because of this ironical alliance, the people allow themselves to be led out of the light, that is, back to religion, which here in Germany serves, by tacit agreement, as a common meeting-ground for both the radicals and the reactionaries. Just as it is the "State" that is exploited here in Germany, in the name of their opposing aims and by very different means, of course, by the philosophers and the Pietists (the one group using the material power of the State, the other employing the abstract Idea), so it is the "Church," religion, that is exploited in France.

The free act of the spirit is the common ground from which all the aspirations of the present time originate, and to which they return. It is therefore necessary to inquire into the very law of its structure and of its consequences. The basis of the free act is the *Ethics* of Spinoza, and the forthcoming philosophy of the act can be only a further development of this work. Fichte laid the groundwork for this further development, but German philosophy cannot break out of idealism on its own. In order for Germany to be able to attain socialism, it must have a Kant for the old social organism, just as it had for the old structure of thought. Without revolution, no new history can begin. As strong as was the approval of the French Revolution in Germany, its essence, which consisted in nothing less than tearing down the pillars upon which the old social life had stood, was just as strongly misunderstood everywhere. The value of negation was perceived in Germany in the realm of thought, but not in the realm of action. The value of anarchy consists in the fact that the individual must once again rely upon himself, and proceed from himself.

But Kant's philosophical criticism brought about this state of anarchy nowhere but in the realm of thought, and so his immediate successor, Fichte, laid the groundwork of modern history only, once again, in the realm of thought, and not in the realm of the whole life of the spirit, of free social activity. In this respect, people were happy simply to appropriate "the results of the French Revolution" for themselves. But nothing more than that is done about it. In History, in the life of the spirit, results mean nothing; it is only the carrying out of legacies that is effective. The "realizing," not the "realization" is the important thing. With the "realization," the spirit has nothing more to do, nothing new to realize, to work out and strengthen. Simply to appropriate results is to place old patches upon old clothes. People in Germany have become satisfied with just this kind of patchwork as far as social life is concerned, and they believe that they have thus wrought justice. Only in France was the spirit given its due in the matter of free social activity.

From the anarchy of terrorism stepped forth Babeuf, the French Fichte, the first communist, who laid the groundwork for the further development of the new ethic with respect to social activity, just as Fichte, the first true atheist, laid the groundwork with respect to thought. On the other hand, matters pertaining to thought were not set right in France, and as much as people there strive to appropriate the “results of German philosophy” for themselves, they have not been able to make any sense out of it all, for the same reason that this appropriation of “results” miscarried in Germany.

Man must begin with himself, with the “I,” if he wants to create, to be active. Just as the old History, the History of nature, began with the first man, so must the new History, the History of the spirit, begin with the original individual. Descartes made an unhappy attempt at this – he lost the thread, as we have seen, with his second word. Spinoza did it all, but history did not immediately come to terms with his achievement; his *Ethics* lay in the earth bearing no fruit for more than a century, until finally the two-edged sword of the spiritual and social revolution cleared away the rubble that was weighing down the buds of the modern era. Suddenly there appeared two little shoots, whose roots no one had perceived. Atheism and communism were taught, to the horror of the Philistines, by Fichte and Babeuf, in the two chief cities on either side of the Rhine, Berlin and Paris, and young people streamed to these places, seeking the inspiration of the new teachings. Atheism and communism! Let us examine this sapling.

The thing about it that most frightens people is its apparent lack of roots in any solid earth. Anarchy, upon which both atheism and communism are based, the negation of all domination in both spiritual and social life, seems at first to be the absolute annihilation of all definition, and thus of all reality. But it is only the process of the act becoming fixed by something outside itself, the domination of one thing over another, that anarchy strips away. So far is self-determination from being negated here, that it is rather the *negation of it* (brought about by the process of determination from the outside) that is being transcended. The anarchy created through the spirit is only a negation of limitation, not of freedom. It is not the limits that the spirit establishes for *itself* that anarchy clears away, for the limits that the spirit establishes for itself form the content of its free activity. Thus this establishing for itself, this determining of self, this limiting of self, is not something that can be negated by the free spirit; it can be negated only by the setting of limits from the outside.

When I believe in a power that is above or outside of my “I,” I am thus limited from without. When I think in opposition to the object, and self-consciously create in accordance with the law of my spirit, I limit myself, without my being limited from without. In this way, I can determine myself in social life, and can be active in this or that determined way, without acknowledging a limit imposed from the outside on my activity – without having another to allow me my rights, or to limit me. How, then, now that anarchy is everywhere surging forth from communism and atheism, can we refashion the limitations from without into self-limitation, the outer God into an inner God, material property into spiritual property? To say it this way already makes it sound much less dreadful, and yet the atheists, communists and anarchists want nothing but this. It is what they must want, since they cannot desire the impossible.

In the meantime, we can perceive that the anarchists are not perfectly clear about what it is they want. The free individual who emerged from the revolution had no conception of his limits at first, but saw only his limitlessness; he did not see self-determination taking place within him, but saw only his complete lack of definition, his indeterminateness. He did not yet perceive that the true negation of the process of becoming defined from without consists in self-determination

from within. The upshot of this was that he was unable to arrive at overcoming the limits imposed upon him from without, and anarchy turned into its opposite, the domination of the one over the other. People once again were forced to tolerate the limits from without, material property, the complete separation of individuals, because they did not understand that they had to set limits upon themselves, had to determine their own activity, had to enter into spiritual creativity, refashioning the "I" into its becoming-something-else, their activity into its being-for-itself. The terrorists and Babouvists cried out against the betrayal of the revolution, while two fine thinkers, Saint-Simon and Fourier, who saw what this betrayal necessarily had to produce, dedicated themselves to finding a remedy for the evil, and sought anew to define, to delimit, to give "organization" to the limitlessness of social activity, which the conflict of individualities made sharper in their time than it had been before.

The Kantians and Idealists were displaced here in a similar fashion, when Schelling and Hegel began to reflect upon how to restore the negated objective world. But in the midst of this zeal for "Restoration," people rediscovered the essence of revolution in spite of themselves. In order to restore the objective world, Saint-Simon went to the rescue of personal authority, Fourier to the rescue of material property, Schelling to that of feeling, and Hegel to that of Being – all determinations from without, which had been negated long before by the modern spirit.

Finally, the acknowledged new movement, the return to the point at which revolution emerges, began in both Germany and France, in the macrocosm of the nations as in the microcosm of the individuals. The Restoration king was driven out, the Restoration philosopher, Hegel, died of cholera, the philosophers and socialists of the old school feebly flickered about as always, unable to shed new light on anything. People finally went back to the first heroes of the revolution, to Babeuf in France and Fichte in Germany, so as to begin at the beginning and move forward without any sudden leaps. Proudhon proceeds from anarchy, and the German philosophy proceeds from self-consciousness. Atheism is again taught in Germany, and communism in France; but people no longer swear by indeterminateness; Proudhon, like Feuerbach, has accepted the dialectical moment, but without employing it in the restoration of the old, outside, negated objectivity. It is along this path that freedom must be pursued, and will ultimately be achieved.

Freedom is the overcoming of limits from the outside through self-limitation, through the self-consciousness of the spirit as an active agent, through the transcendence of natural determinateness by self-determination. All history until now has been what is encountered by thought and by social life, this being the domain of the natural history of the spirit, just as everything that we call the objective, material or physical world is the domain of natural history itself. The only intrinsic difference between the history of mankind and the history of nature is that in nature, for every self-limitation of the spirit established, the object in which the spirit encounters itself continues to exist, whereas for mankind every self-limitation of the spirit is only a stage of development, and is ultimately transcended. The true history of the spirit first begins at the point where all natural determination comes to an end, where the spirit develops, self-consciousness calls out and the act of the spirit is clearly perceived. With this perception the reign of freedom begins, and we are standing at its portals and knocking upon them now. This perception is the true key to the kingdom, which has been withheld from us long enough now by the Bishop of Rome. The German religious Reformation was the first to stretch out its arm to him, but the arm was not long enough. In the meantime, however, the Reformation grew into German philosophy, while the French Revolution emerged by its side. With these two arms the European peoples are

tearing the key from the hands of its keeper; that is certain! The unification of these efforts is now the principal task. There is only one freedom, just as there is only one spirit.

The common ground of social and spiritual freedom is morality, the highest good, the “perception of God,” as Spinoza puts it, or the self-consciousness of the “Absolute Spirit,” as the Hegelians ineptly put it. It is the spirit’s consciousness of its likeness to itself in its becoming something else, the overcoming of otherness as fixed, the transformation of determined nature into self-determination. Without all this, neither equality nor inner freedom is possible. All things are one, and are equal. But this proves too much, and basically proves nothing at all. If all things are equal, then even plants and animals are equal to man, and Heine, the abstract pantheist, can quite rightly make nonsense of the freedom and equality of men (who are aristocrats alongside brute animals), as he does from the ironic viewpoint of his *Atta Troll*, in which he represents the communism of bears instead of men. Not only our efforts to achieve freedom, not only communism, but every earnest effort on the part of men, every moral act, is laughable if all things are one.

Whoever knows no freedom other than limitlessness knows no equality other than complete levelling out – pantheism and communism in the sense of spiritualism. Whoever establishes unity only as the negation of differentiation, and seeks idealism only through materialism, as the Christians did, whoever does not have the power to attain abstract anarchy, like the radicals of the stamp of Heine (this last knight of modern Romanticism, this process of putrefaction of the Middle Ages), must run himself into his opposite at every moment, and finally must settle for declaring that the world is out of joint, because he has himself gone out of joint. This is a moral disjointedness, into which the world collapsed when it drifted away from itself in the time of Christ, negated all earthly interests and proclaimed only heavenly ones. Communism and anarchy rose to the surface at that time – the communism of bears, that is, freedom as limitlessness – and worldliness or state power was transformed into spirituality. We would be beginning the history of the Middle Ages all over again, as I have already said, if we were to insist upon holding on to abstract communism and idealism.

This would be to repudiate one’s rights not only in the history of religion, but in philosophy as well, not only in political history, but in socialism. German philosophy has already transcended the idealism of Fichte, just as French socialism has transcended the communism of Babeuf. We have once again lived out the history of the Middle Ages, this time spiritually. We will no longer say, all things are one; we will no longer say, all things are equal; least of all will we say any longer, everything is in opposition to everything else, everything is different from everything else. Instead we will say that the spirit renders everything one and in opposition, alike and different, at the same time; it creates its own opposite, the other, the world, in order for it to transcend this determination, this delimitation, every time, in order for it to pass back into itself and perceive that it is its own opposite, its own act, its own life, in order to conceive of itself, in other words, as living or acting – but not to create itself as material and fix itself in that state in which the free act would become an objective fact that limits it, in which the spiritual being-for-itself would become material property that throws away its likeness to itself, its morality, negates its freedom, freezes and confines the flow of its life, its movement.

Material property is the being-for-itself of the spirit transformed into a fixed idea. Because the spirit does not itself spiritually conceive its work, its working-out or working-away, as a free act, as its own life, but rather creates this work as a material other, it must therefore fix this other to itself, so as not to lose itself in infinity, so as to arrive at its being-for-itself. But property comes

to an end and turns into spirit, which is what it should be (that is, into being-for-itself), when it realizes not the forms of the act but the result, the creation itself, as the being-for-itself of the spirit, when it realizes the phantom, the representation of the spirit, to be its own idea – in short, when it realizes its otherness as its being-for-itself, and holds firmly on to this. It is the very quest for being, that is, the quest to endure as determined individuality, as a delimited “I,” as unending essence, that leads to greed. It is, once again, the negation of all determination, the abstract “I” and abstract communism, the outcome of the empty “thing-in-itself” of Kantian criticism and of the revolution, of the unsatisfied sense of duty, that led to being and having. This is how *auxiliary verbs became transformed into substantives*. This is how all verbs become substantives, and how everything that belongs to the changing periphery is made into the permanent core; yes, this is how the world was stood upon its head!

Freedom is morality; it is above all the fulfillment of the law of life, of spiritual activity, as much in the narrow sense, by which the act is called idea, as in the broader sense, by which the idea is called act, with clear consciousness of this law. Thus it is fulfillment, not as natural necessity or as determination by nature, as was the case for all living creatures until now, but as self-determination. Without this morality, no state of collectivism is conceivable; but also, no morality is conceivable without collectivism. The riddle drawn out of the closed circle of slavery can be solved by the spirit, and by the spirit alone, through the progress of the dialectic, through its history. History has already broken through the closed circle of slavery. The revolution is the break from captivity, from the condition of bigotry and oppression in which the spirit found itself before it became self-conscious. But, as we have seen, this anarchy only broke through the limits imposed from the outside, without progressing further to self-determination or self-limitation, to morality. The revolution is still incomplete, and it knows that it is still incomplete. Even so, the anarchy could not stay as it was at the beginning, and has in fact not stayed that way. And as we, the children of the revolution, move on from it forward into morality, the riddle is thus being solved.

The forerunners of the revolution foreshadowed this solving of the riddle. Montesquieu had already said that the republic is not possible without virtue. In this statement, as well as in many others made by other men of that time, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, they had shown themselves to have a fair premonition of the idea of collectivity and morality that is now beginning to reign. But they did not clearly perceive it, and imagined that they were doing away with the conditions of the past with their words, which really lacked clearly defined and meaningful ideas. They thought that they were drawing a picture of what was to be done.

Like the word “republic,” the word “virtue” has not been properly understood. *Res publica* and *virtus* are words without content, just as the ideal state of things that they described was without content. The content first had to be built up through history. Our morality is different from the virtue of the ancients, our freedom is not theirs; how could the future condition of society be like the ancient world? The conditions of old have been long since negated; Christianity transcended them, and the Middle Ages have transcended Christianity. Montesquieu committed an error in politics similar to the one that Luther, the forerunner of German philosophy, committed in religion. In its still blind strivings, the revolution sought to rehabilitate the situation of ancient times, just as the Reformation sought to revive primitive Christianity, whereas history had long since transcended these ancient conditions. They made this error because, though they had a consciousness of degeneration, of aberration, they did not know that the trouble had arisen in the transition from unconsciousness to the self-conscious spirit. Every early condition is an

undeveloped shoot that must first perish in order for the seed to sprout into a full-grown tree, into a ripe and succulent fruit. Whoever wants to return to an earlier condition wants, in effect, to go through history all over again from the beginning.

This is the sort of thing that we want to abolish at last, and we must do so! What we want is something brand new, that has never existed before. We must first begin to develop it. Freedom and equality are beautiful words. We have made ourselves suffer for them, we have sacrificed ourselves for them, and it is for them that we will be resurrected, so that we can stand up and fight once more!

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Moses Hess
The Philosophy of the Act
1843

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