

INDIVIDUALITY IN THE MODERN WORLD*

To be is to be a determinate individual. That is the thought towards which the theory of 'Individuality' points. This theory, like theory itself, first came to light in the ancient *polis*, where its most articulate spokesman was Aristotle. In many respects, the concept of individuality remains, even for us, most comprehensible when interpreted in the context of the ancient *polis*. That is what we must do when we interpret Aristotle. But we are members of the modern world. Our world is not Aristotle's, which is irretrievably lost. Ours is the modern world, which is yet to come into full view, even though it has been taking shape since global humanity was discovered at the turn into the 16th century.¹ In the early 19th century it was first discovered that global humanity was taking the shape of an ethical world. Following Hegel, I shall call this ethical dimension of the modern world 'civil society.' The pace at which civil society has been maturing in recent decades has been so rapid that there is reason to think that a much larger number of those endowed with leisure will soon achieve a much wider comprehension of the theory of individuality in the modern world.

Civil society is not the only ethical institution in the modern world, any more than the *polis* was the only ethical institution in the ancient. To function as effective media for ethical individualization, ethical institutions must be plural and qualitatively different.² That plurality in the ancient world was two-fold: the *polis* and the *oikos*. In the modern world we have a three-fold plurality of ethical institutions: the family, the political regime, and civil society. In both worlds the main function of ethical institutions is the education (*paideia/Bildung*) of habits to civilized individuality. What is generally hardest for us moderns to grasp is that this education shapes not merely our ethical characters but our intellects as well. Despite a swelling chorus of powerful arguments to the contrary, we of the leisured class are still disposed to think with two families of thought cultivated during the middle ages between the ancient *polis* and the modern world: **A. that our actions ought to spring from an inward control center (the 'will')** and **B. that our theories ought to be logical.** The modest purpose of this paper is to suggest some ways of augmenting the chorus of arguments against A. and B., mostly by suggesting a wider historical tableau for a backdrop and some post-nihilist discourse about modernity for our foreground. The keynote is that modernity is becoming an ethical world.

The distinguishing characteristic of the modern ethical world is that individualizing and civilizing education is now becoming available to all members of our species. But a world is ethical only when membership is accorded to individuals *qua* ethical, not *qua* members of a species. Of course we do, and always have, grouped by genetic disposition. Birds of a feather flock together. But the bonds of a 'speciesist' group are not ethical, they are not actual; our species, treated as ethical, can be, at best, transcendental, an ought-to-be, the hoped-for someday realization of an ideal speech situation.

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¹ The story of the emergence of the modern world is well told—albeit non-theoretically—by Fernand Braudel (*Civilization and Capitalism*, Sian Reynolds, tr., New York: Harper & Row, 1981–84, 3 vols.) and Norbert Elias (*The Civilizing Process*, Edmund Jephcott, tr., New York: Pantheon, 1978–82, 2 vols.).

² Recall Aristotle's observation (*Politics*, I, 1) that there is a qualitative difference between the largest *oikos* and the smallest *polis*.

Ethical worlds are ethnocentric; they are Durkheimian and Rortian ‘solidarities.’ But they call for no ironic tones from the leisured class. Quasi-ethical worlds, on the other hand, do call for irony, skepticism and satire. In the millennia between the *polis* and modernity, from the Roman Grecophil to the English gentleman, examples of quasi-ethical worlds abound.

A most succinct narration of the shaping of a quasi-ethical world is Erwin Panofsky’s. Listen:

“The concept of *humanitas* as a value was formulated in the circle around the younger Scipio, with Cicero as its belated, yet most explicit spokesman. It meant the quality which distinguishes man, not only from animals, but also, and even more so, from him who belongs to the species *homo* without deserving the name of *homo humanus*; from the barbarian or vulgarian who lacks *pietas* and *paideia*—that is, respect for moral values and that gracious blend of learning and urbanity which we can only circumscribe by the discredited word ‘culture.’”³

Participants in this ‘humanistic’ tradition are always open to irony because, under a name for our species, *Humanitas*, a leisured elite cultivated themselves on the literary and visual remnants of politan antiquity. Their speech situation was far from ideal; participation in ‘the conversation of mankind’ was strictly limited. Imagine, members of the human species disinvented from the conversation of mankind. There’s plenty of potential humor in that—all the way from the wit of an Erasmus to the campus cry “Heave ho, heave ho, western civ. has got to go.”

Not long ago it was possible to speak, in complete seriousness, about ‘the white man’s burden,’ clearly implying the mission of bringing some semblance of *Humanitas* to the great unwashed. A resurrected and unreconstructed Kipling today would need no satirist. Civilization today is no longer white and it evades all longitudinal boundaries. Anthropologists and sentimentalists may lament; it doesn’t matter. A global ethical world is taking shape. Its membership is increasing, not by coercion but out of *desire*. Members of our species are being inducted, not by subscription to some evangelical or ideological *credo*, but by hard work and progressive habituation. That is the basic story of civil society today. It is becoming an ethical world. It is becoming a vast civilizing institution in which, for the first time, genetic and mimetic individuality are coming to coincide—not to an identity, that is a transcendental illusion, but to a coincidence.

This was far from the case in the ancient ethical world, for which the limits of the *polis* were the limits dividing civility from barbarism. In the world of the *polis*, the idea of humanity as an ethical—as opposed to a biological—unity was unthought. (It is true that Isocrates⁴ and Xenophon,⁵ anticipating Richard Rorty⁶ in our own day, spoke of widening the sphere of ethnocentric solidarity, but *Humanitas* as a legal and moral ideal remained to be discovered by Roman Stoicism.⁷) In our own time—under the guise of vulgar, ‘intellectual,’ and institutional or Stalinist ‘Marxism’—the progress of civil society has been inhibited by the false identification of civil society with another putative

³ Erwin Panofsky, “The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline,” *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955), pp. 1–2.

⁴ Isocrates, *Panegyricus*, 47ff.

⁵ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* (esp. Cyrus’ “Address to his Soldiers”).

⁶ Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989).

⁷ Bruno Snell, “The Discovery of *Humanitas*, and Our Attitude Toward the Greeks,” in *The Discovery of the Mind* (New York: Dover, 1982), pp. 246–63.

‘ethnocentrism,’ capitalist ‘*bourgeois* society.’ Given the established connotations of the word ‘bourgeois’—small-minded, self-serving, guilty, nihilist, groupy, trendy, ironical, deconstructionist—‘bourgeois society’ has deserved all of the opprobrium heaped upon it.

It will be clear in what follows that I am not proposing another interpretation of either Aristotle or Hegel. Any attempt to ‘get Aristotle right,’ or Hegel, in the space available would be unreasonable. I will confess that I have, in my own estimation, plagiarized most of the thoughts which follow from one or the other of these philosophers, but since the thoughts, if heard as interpretations of Aristotle or Hegel, would inevitably strike many as ‘incorrect,’ it would be a waste of time to engage in hermeneutical polemics. Of course I would be honored to be charged with such plagiarism. But I will forego any claim to align my thoughts with these famous philosophers and will simply ask the reader, in response, to focus attention upon the argument.

All men by nature desire to know individuals. And they do. Anyone with well-functioning sense organs comes to know individuals all the time. But only a lucky few have had the pleasure of theorizing individuality. There are several reasons for this. The first is that theorizing in general, and especially the theorizing of individuality, requires leisure time and a well-functioning, well-habituated, intellect. Seeing and hearing are activities we perform on the strength of our genetic endowments (our genes); as physical individuals, our activities (living, sensing, and knowing) as well as our motions (qualitative, quantitative, and local) are actualizations of capacities ‘written’ into our genome. Intellection (or ‘nousing’) is an activity performed on the strength of highly cultivated, or civilized, habits (our ‘memes’⁸); as ‘mimetic’ (or ‘cultural’) individuals, our highest activity (theorizing)—as well as our ethical action (*praxis* or ethnocentric interaction with other recognized individuals) and our productive behavior (*techné*, instrumental motions)—are actualizations of capacities that have been post-natally acquired (mostly by mimesis, hence ‘memes,’ the counterparts of ‘genes’ in individuation by genesis).

The full activation of intellect (theorizing) can only be achieved by well-trained members of an ethical world. Only they *can* get their habits right. Only they have the sense of solidarity with their world and the ‘charity’⁹ toward others that theory requires. For theorizing, like ethical actions and technical deeds, is at bottom a matter of habits or memes. All three require what we call ‘culture,’ in addition to genetic endowment. But theorizing requires a very special form of culture, what I have called ‘an ethical world.’ As the biologist J.T. Bonner has shown, animals, too, have culture,¹⁰ in the sense that much of their behavior is only explicable as the activation of dispositions which have been post-natally acquired. But Bonner (together with E.O. Wilson¹¹ and Richard Dawkins) also argues that even the ‘cultural’ behavior of animals is instrumental: mimetic strategies supplement an animal’s

⁸ I borrow this useful term from Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: OUP, 1976).

⁹ In something like the Davidsonian sense of the word.

¹⁰ J.T. Bonner, *The Evolution of Culture in Animals* (Princeton: PUP, 1980).

¹¹ E.O. Wilson, *The Insect Societies* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1971), and *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (HUP, 1975).

genetic strategies to win the only game in animal-town, the Darwinian struggle for reproductive success. The clever title of Dawkin's hugely successful book tells it all: *The Selfish Gene*.¹²

The trouble is that, especially among our kind of acculturated animal, habits or memes can run amok. The human animal, since it is the most mimetic of all,¹³ is the most liable to mimetic or cultural crisis. Such crises can, and have, taken many forms. But the most intense crisis takes place in the aftermath of an ethical world, when that world is lost but its legacy is preserved in the memory, the inscribed record, and the educational practices of successor cultures. Such was the case in the aftermath of the *polis*. Because of its distinctive origin and development (to be outlined shortly), the *oikos/polis* became the first 'ethical world' implicitly designed to achieve (not wealth or power but) the most complete realization of potential in the human species. To anticipate, the distinguishing characteristic of the *polis* was that it was the 'cultural' form which enabled human animals to discover 'the activity of being.'¹⁴ Once discovered, the 'activity' (as opposed to the mere 'motility') of being, together with the correlative theoretical activity in which it is discovered and theorized, could not be entirely forgot. An activity is complete; a motility is instrumental, and hence incomplete. Prior to the mature *polis* there *were* activities. But they were not known as such. All activities were interpreted, even in early pre-Socratic philosophy, *as if* they were motions, as if their determinacy were extrinsic, as if they were merely instrumental toward the achievement of some goal (*telos*) 'beyond' what they were (e.g., in the post-politan language of genetic biology, winning 'the struggle for reproductive success'). In the *polis* it was discovered that activities are different from motions, that activities are informed by immanent ends, that they are 'entelechies,' and that the most complete—and hence most 'divine'—entelechy is theorizing itself. But more of this later. For now, please consider the impact of a notion that, we might say, 'oft was intimated, but ne'er quite full discovered.' If, as I shall argue, this discovery and the appreciation of its significance, was dependent upon an ethical world, the *polis*, then the haunting recollection, in the cultural aftermath of the *polis*, that it had been discovered and actualized, would produce psychopathologies of the first order.

In the aftermath of an ethical world, this was inevitable. And for the several millenia between the decay of the *polis* and the rise of the modern world, human culture lacked an ethical world. But since the human 'spirit' had been discovered—an animal community that made the breakthrough from instrumental motion (the topic of physics or 'second philosophy') to autotelic activity (the topic of 'metaphysics' or 'first philosophy')—it could not be entirely forgot. A substitute for the lost ethical world was needed, and one was found. Language.¹⁵ In the immediate aftermath of the independent *polis* (BC 323ff.), the need to distinguish man from the other animals was met by saying, not that man was the politan animal (Aristotle), but that man was the speaking animal. Of course, the objection was immediately raised that other animals utter articulate sounds. What our sociobiologists know today

¹² All of this recent work in evolutionary biology helpfully supplements the theory of individuality; it enables us better to grasp the distinctive, and quite unmystical, character of 'an ethical world.'

¹³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, ch. 1.

¹⁴ Under the somewhat misleading title, *The Discovery of the Mind* (less misleading in the original German, *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*), Bruno Snell has outlined some of the main features in the 'emergence' of ethical life among the politan Greeks.

¹⁵ The topic of my paper, "[Minding our Language](#)," presented at a session of the Society for Systematic Philosophy at the Annual Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division, New York, December 28, 1987.

was well known by Hellenistic skeptics: parrots, parakeets and other birds which habitually pair sexually for longer durations have the custom (or culture) of learning new and ‘idiosyncratic’ bird-songs, for the purpose of (i.e., instrumentally) maintaining auditory contact (e.g., in the thick foliage of tropical rain forests), and optimally mating with, *individual* members of their species.

(A most illuminating counter-example to this mimetic, or ‘cultural,’ behavior has been discovered among northern cowbirds, which are parasites: they “do not have a normal home life; they do not build a nest or have a nest-oriented territory. When a female is sexually receptive it is essential [, given the contest for ‘reproductive success,'] to find a mate. In these rather casual social relations, an auditory signal is clearly advantageous, but it cannot be a learned [or ‘cultural’] one, for the birds would [then] be attempting to mate with the males of their foster species. A young female cowbird or cuckoo may never hear a male sing until it is ready to mate; therefore, it must have some system of immediate recognition”¹⁶—which is transmitted ‘genetically’ rather than ‘mimetically’).

Among mate-loyal parakeets, for example, the counterpart feature of their ‘reproductive success strategy’ (which is mimetic rather than genetic) makes them susceptible (if they have not undergone maturation in companionship with an opposite-sex member of their own species) to imitate the sounds produced by other ‘sounding’ members of their maturational world, e.g., humans. Thus, properly ‘cultivated,’ they can learn to imitate relatively long sound sequences which are, phonetically, indistinguishable from propositions uttered by humans. The early Stoics’ reflection upon this phenomenon is recorded by Sextus Empiricus,¹⁷ with the observation that to sustain their definition of man as ‘the speaking animal,’ the Stoics were obliged to distinguish between the ‘outer *logos*’ (utterance, shared by some birds) and the ‘inner *logos*’ (pre-utterance, ‘meaning’ = the *lekton*) unique to man.

The whole point of this ethological digression is to note that language and (to use Chomsky’s phrase) ‘linguistic competence’ was sought out as a substitute for the once actualized but then lost ethical world which had discovered a level of culture (or mimesis) that was distinctively human. It had been autotelic, i.e., activity (*energeia*, *entelecheia*), and especially theorizing activity. It became linguistic. The transition from the ethical world of theory to the substitute world of language was a loss, but an inevitable loss.¹⁸

Let us call this period between the end of the *polis* and the emergence of the modern world the ‘middle ages.’ Medieval philosophy is accordingly philosophy in the world of language, or, in short, philosophy of language. Such philosophy was largely invented by the Stoics, nurtured by biblical monotheism, perfected by Kantian transcendentalism, and it has enjoyed a last flourish under the title ‘analytic philosophy.’ All these ‘medievalisms’ stress objective (linguistic) ‘truth’ over ethical ‘solidarity’ (ethical life). But whatever the title of such scholastic allegiances, most of the leisured class are still bent on talking about and reflecting on the structures of language, so much so that we substitute these

¹⁶ J.T. Bonner, *The Evolution of Culture in Animals*, p. 38.

¹⁷ Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos*, 8.275–6 (= SVF 2.223).

¹⁸ For a complementary reading of this transition, as it pertains to the *theory* of mathematics, see David R. Lachterman, *The Ethics of Geometry: A Genealogy of Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

for the determinate nature of individual things. We call it ‘explanation.’ It is a habit hard to shake, even for those lucky enough to live a leisured life in an ethical world—for the owl of Minerva returns to flight only after the seductive glow of propositional ‘truth’ has dimmed.

What was so special about the *polis* that it facilitated theory? Why did theory disappear from the world between the demise of the *polis* and the emergence of the modern world? What is there about the modern world that the chance to theorize has reemerged? The short answer to these questions is that both the *polis* and the modern world are ethical worlds. What, then, is an ethical world? And what is theory that it requires an ethical world? These are some of the questions that must be considered if ‘Individuality in the Modern World’ is to become a plausible topic of thought.

Let us begin with the first part of the last question:

1. What is theory?

At the risk of apparent dogmatism, let us consider the notion that to theorize is *to consider a thing as determinate*. According to our medieval or linguistic habits of thought, such consideration indeed seems dogmatic because, linguistically, a thing is a matter for description and we are describers. To describe is to say something about another thing said. We describe when we say ‘B’ about ‘A.’ The status of both ‘B’ and ‘A’ is linguistic. They are things said; we are the sayers. To say B about A is to put A in the category B. This is useful and easily done. We do it every time we utter an indicative sentence. We categorize when we predicate and we must predicate to enter into the useful medium of communication with one another. The problem is that we can conflate the structure of what we are talking about, our message, with the structure of our medium; we can confuse things with language. With the situation of knowing so configured, the presumption that we, on the one side, can know the determinate nature of a thing, on the other, would require an ‘intellectual intuition’¹⁹ into the nature of a ‘thing-in-itself.’ Thus put, the problem is insoluble and all solution-attempts will be chimerical. There can be no rite of passage from a thing to be determined (as an ‘object’²⁰), on the one side, to a knower to determine (as a ‘subject’), on the other, without something like divine revelation.²¹

It is an essential feature of theory to regard language as equivocal: a thing can be spoken of in many ways. No linguistic structures can serve as paradigms. But if a thing is a determinate individual, its individuality will be a matter of principle, or principles. No categories can capture the determinacy of an individual—they are always wide of the mark. But contraries can, if they are understood to be principles of the thing’s determinacy. Hence a determinate thing will always involve at least two principles: two contraries or a ‘contrastive determinacy.’²² Of course a determinate thing *is* not the contraries by virtue of which it is determinate. To theorize an individual, a third principle is needed, namely, what undergoes the passage from the one contrary to the other (what Aristotle called the *hupokeimenon* and Hegel the *Sache*). Please note, however, that what undergoes the passage between

¹⁹ In the sense of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, or Stanley Rosen’s ‘Plato.’

²⁰ It is perhaps worth noting that our word ‘object’ derives, via the Latin, from an early medieval Arabic neologism.

²¹ In Marburg neo-Kantianism, for example, revelation was taken from physics; more recent examples include Davidson’s Fregean borrowing from ordinary language according to ‘Convention T.’

²² I have outlined the theory of ‘contrastive determinacy’ in “[Phenomenology and Systematic Philosophy](#),” Merold Westphal, ed., *Method and Speculation in Hegel’s Phenomenology* (NJ: Humanities, 1982).

contraries is *not* the individual. That would entail a relapse into lingualism, with the thing functioning as the subject term ('A' in the above discussion), and the contraries functioning as predicates or categories. The most elementary feature of the theory of individuality is that a determinate thing is determinate *as* the process between contraries. An individual's determinacy is a function of all *three principles* together.²³

It will be evident that an individual is systematically different from a particular or a universal. The latter are at home in the realm of language or logic. Individuals are the topic of theory. A principal clue to the forgetfulness of theory, to 'medievalism,' is at hand when individuals are treated as particulars, that is, when they are treated logically. The mark of 'medievalism' is the conflation of theory with logic.

The theory of individuality in the modern world has three main parts. The first considers individuals as actual; the second considers individuals as physical; and the third considers individuals as practical. The main difference between the modern and the politan theory of individuality is that the latter only recognized—and could only recognize—the first two parts. They were developed under the titles 'first' and 'second' philosophy. I will attempt in a moment to indicate why 'third' philosophy remained pre-theoretical in the *polis* and how practical individuality has become a topic for theory, for a 'third' philosophy, in the modern world.

Individuals, in whatever part of philosophy, are theorized in many ways. Some, especially some animals, can be theorized in each of the three parts of philosophy mentioned above. But whatever the theory, the individual will be determinate only as involving the three principles: two contraries and a factor undergoing the transition from one contrary to the other. This is most readily illustrated for individuals *qua* physical, individuals we can see, hear, smell, taste, or touch. Such individuals are sensible because they are in the process of transition between any of three kinds of contraries: (1.) qualitative (e.g., from hot to cold, from dry to wet, from red to green), (2.) quantitative (e.g., from smaller to larger or vice versa), and (3.) local (e.g., from Atlanta to New York). The common characteristic in each of these processes (which Aristotle calls *kinesis* or motion) is that the process is one of which the physical individual is, by its nature, capable and is, at the same time, one which realizes that capability only *as* a capability. An individual in process from the contrary hot to the contrary cold is not yet cold, but it is capable of becoming cold. Once the capability is realized, once cold, the process is no more and the individual, *qua* physical, must be considered in another of the inter-contrary processes of which it is capable. Motions, quite evidently, are incomplete. While individuals, *qua* kinetic, are theorizable, the incompleteness of *kinesis* points toward a kind of theorizable process that *is* complete.

In the theory of individuality this more complete process is called activity. It is characteristic of individuals *qua* actuality (*energeia* or *Wirklichkeit*). It is best illustrated by the activity of seeing (even though any act of sensing would do). The point is that an individual seeing is exercising its capability to see, but it is not doing so by a movement toward more complete seeing. The activity of seeing fully realizes the individual's capacity to see in every instant of seeing. Seeing, like the qualitative motion of

²³ The clearest presentation of this argument known to me is to be found in Book I of Aristotle's *Physics*.

cooling, may *take place in time*, but what distinguishes seeing (and every other activity) from cooling (and every other motion) is that it does not *take time* to be what it is.²⁴ The same holds for all activities: living, knowing, and (most emphatically) theorizing.

So the first thing that must be said in answer to our question, “What is theory?,” is that theory is an activity.

An activity, in turn, is what it is by contrast with motion. Both motions and activities realize capacities. Both indicate determinate things, or individuals, in the process of development from contrary to contrary according to the determinate capacities of the individual. But motions develop from contrary to contrary in time (or, perhaps, *as* time) whereas activities are essentially timeless. This aspect of the theory of individuality may seem paradoxical, but, I submit, that is only because we have been so long accustomed to view activities as if they were motions, just as we are accustomed to viewing theory as if it were (or ought to be) logic.

2. What was so special about the *polis* that it facilitated theory?

The capacity to engage in the activity of seeing is part of our genetic endowment. In the language of modern developmental biology, it is a built-in feature of our genome, just as it is for horses, dogs, parakeets, and fishes. Most such animals are first individuated via a process of sexual reproduction. That is the most radical process involving a transition from contrary to contrary, for in this case the contraries pertaining to the individual in question (and in this theory all contraries pertain to individuals) are the most radical: from the non-being to the being of the individual. This does not mean that the individual comes into being out of nothing; the non-being is the non-being of the individual. Man is begotten by man, and northern cowbird is begotten by northern cowbird. For both kinds of individual, most of the capacities for activities as well as motions—indeed, the capacities for the entire life cycle of the individual—are, as we know since Crick and Watson, derived from “information encoded on the DNA that makes messenger RNA by a chemical template system; this messenger RNA wanders into the cytoplasm of the cell, attaches to the ribosomes, and ultimately specifies the amino acid sequences of particular proteins.”²⁵ Of course this is only the outline for a theory of the genetically based development of individual multicellular organisms that is very much *in statu nascendi*. But it is very much in accord with the theory of individuality.

More importantly for our present purposes, the DNA/RNA account of how organic individuals are generated calls to attention (by underlining the necessity of) the complementary way in which organic individuals receive their mimetic capacities for activity and action. For the capacities of organic individuals are not all genetically encoded. Some are mimetically acquired. A complete account of individual capacity requires memes as well as genes. Sometimes, as we have seen, capacities for the same sort of behavior, e.g., birdsong, is DNA/RNA transmitted in some species, recall the northern cowbird, and is post-natally acquired in others, recall the parakeet. That is why a male parakeet, if

²⁴ On this critical matter of time and activity, see L.A. Kosman’s critique of Gilbert Ryle, J.L. Ackrill and Terry Penner in his “Substance, Being, and *Energeia*,” OSAP, II (1984), 123ff.

²⁵ Bonner, p. 35.

raised apart from any potential mate, is genetically disposed to mimic relatively complex sound sequences uttered, say, by human beings.

It is a general feature of human action (*praxis*) that our capacities to act—as opposed to our capacities to move and to live and to sense and to remember and to mimic—are all acquired, like the idiosyncratic songs and ‘utterances’ of parakeets, post-natally, in the course of our lives in interaction with others. These capacities are obviously a matter of memes rather than genes. Thus Aristotle on *ethos* and *arete*, and so too Hegel on *Sittlichkeit*. One distinguishing difference between man and parakeet is that human beings are vastly *more* mimetic. But that, by itself, is only a quantitative distinction. The telling difference is that human beings have formed ways of life which, though they may have originated out of the biological struggle for existence and for ‘reproductive success,’ have resulted in institutions whose principal purpose is to be places for a good life. Once achieved, this is the world of *praxis*.

Praxis is a difficult notion. It is easily confused with the acts of individual humans ‘as such.’ That is what it became, starting perhaps with Chrysippus, who, in the aftermath of the *polis*, sought to determine some feature of the human species of animal that could make claim to ethical status. Hence the notion of man as the speaking animal—duly qualified, once that behavior of parakeets was pointed out, as the ‘inwardly’ as well as ‘outwardly’ speaking animal.²⁶ *Incipit* the real ‘logocentrism’; *incipit* ‘medievalism.’

But *praxis* did not emerge when man began to speak, or when he began to ‘think’ before he spoke. *Praxis*, ancient and modern, pertains to ethical institutions that systematically foster the transfer of memes designed for a good life. So far as we can tell, such an institution emerged around the turn into the first millennium before the common era. Refugees from the iron-armed Dorian conquest of bronze-age Mycenae, gathered in Attica, Linear-B Greek literacy forgot, set sail into the Aegean, populating the islands and the coast of Asia Minor with small Ionian-speaking communities. This was not a diaspora of the book (they were, importantly, illiterate), but it was a diaspora with memories of Mycenae as its common bond and with the need, somehow, in the absence of writing, to preserve that memory.

Given Milman Parry’s account²⁷ of the oral composition of Homeric verse, Eric Havelock has projected the, to me, most plausible account of the birth of the *polis*.²⁸ It was born out of the spirit of poetry and (what was the same) music. “Sing o muse, sing through me, sing the wrath of Achilles.”

All previous social institutions among humans—including the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, and Mycenaean—had been structured around the need for a centralized system of water control or military order, all matters of biological survival or comparative success. The poetical *polis*, as uncovered

²⁶ *Logos endiathetos* / ‘*logos prophorikos*.’ See Sextus ref. in note 17.

²⁷ Milman Parry, *The Making of Homeric Verse*, ed., Adam Parry (Oxford: OUP, 1971). Cf. Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1960).

²⁸ Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1963). For supplementary argument by Havelock see *Origins of Western Literacy, Communication Arts in the Ancient World, The Greek Concept of Justice*, and Kevin Robb, ed., *Language and Thought in Early Greek Philosophy*.

through Havelock's reading of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, indicates the first human institution that happened upon a way of life that was good—not merely as instrumental toward some further end, biological or military, but as a way of life that was good as an end in itself, as an activity that was, unlike mere motion, complete in every instant.

In Havelock's own words, "... in the Near Eastern autocracies, which the Mycenaean must ... have resembled. ... [t]he mechanisms of power ... are split and divided between the men of physical brawn or crude cunning and the men of skill, trained to use the clumsy elaborate script system. In the early *polis* communities of Greece, because of the total 'orality' of communication, this split did not exist. You cannot flourish a document to command a crowd: it is symptomatic that as late as Aristophanes the use of the document for this purpose is regarded as funny and inept. But you can give an epic speech. Even this will only sweep them temporarily off their feet unless it is easily memorisable or carries phrases which are repeatable and which will be repeated from mouth to mouth. This is what Homer calls 'leadership in counsel.'"

"We can hazard the guess, in short, that the specific and unique Hellenic intelligence, the source or cause of which has baffled all historians, received its original nurture in communities in which the oral technique of preserved communication threw power and so prestige into the hands of the orally more gifted. It made the competition for power, endemic among all human beings, identifiable with the competition for intelligence. The total non-literacy of Homeric Greece, so far from being a drawback, was the necessary medium in which the Greek genius could be nursed to its maturity."²⁹

Whatever one might think of Havelock's speculations on the origin of the *polis* (and they certainly cry out for amplification), it is fairly clear, once we understand theory as an activity, that it first saw light in the *polis*. And however one might assess Werner Jaeger's (to me misguided) interpretation of Aristotle, he is surely right that politan Greece marked the origin of *paideia*, that is, a way of life singularly devoted to bringing out the best of which human nature, first and second, is capable.

The critical point is that theory is an activity and that it is the actualization of a capacity in human memes rather than genes. Unlike genes, which are coherently transmitted all at once, from two individuals to one, memes are transmitted from many individuals to a single one. If the life of the transmitting many is not coherent, or if it is directed toward the motility in the service of mere life or monarchic domination, then the resultant, mimeticized individual, will not be a thing of beauty and an end in itself. It will be barbaric. All men *do* by nature desire to know, and to theorize. But that nature is only achieved as a second nature, only as the result of life in a community that takes the cultivation of second nature to be its first priority. When fully cultivated its supreme flower is the insight that being too, like the theorizing that discovers it, is an activity, complete and perfect in itself, serving no end beyond it, beautiful, divine. Such a coincidence of theory and being is, we may speculate, the implicit *telos* of genetic and mimetic individuation, the essence of civilization.

²⁹ Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato*, p. 127.

3. Why did theory disappear from the world between the demise of the *polis* and the emergence of the modern world?

For the purpose of an outline of Individuality in the Modern World, this question has largely been answered. I have speculated that the thought ‘To be is to be a determinate individual’ was discovered in a determinate ethical world. The contrasting opposite of determinacy, theoretical and practical, is, of course, indeterminacy or infinity or the *apeiron*. Two factors undermine determinacy, theoretical and practical. They are, respectively, language and money. More precisely they are prosaic, literal language and money as the measure of practical action. Alphabetic literacy and coined money arrived upon the politan scene virtually contemporaneously, sometime in the late eighth century. This may have been a coincidence; maybe not. In any case, it was discovered that the model of language, if taken as the model of reality, yielded an infinite regress. This discovery was made complete when Aristotle invented logic and made plain that categories *qua* categories operate as variables, never determinate of individuals, for which three principles (always two contraries and a substratum), and never variables, are constitutive.

In the Hellenistic aftermath of politan civilization, the Stoics sought for a notion of man *qua* man as ‘ethical’ and they soon found it in his ‘deep-structure’ linguistic competence, in his ability to give ‘meaning’ to sentences, in his inwardly ‘propositional attitudes.’ The concept of man as essentially linguistic had great ‘emancipatory’ power. The ideal of a perfect speech situation was postulated. ‘*Logos*-humanity’ took shape as the counterpoint to ‘*paideia*-humanity,’ setting the scene for an epic fugal struggle with all forms of local and exclusionary ethnocentrism, such as race, class, and gender. But in acknowledging the emancipatory power of *logos*-humanity, we must avoid the temptation of paying it theoretical compliments. For *logos*-humanity is essentially indeterminate, it is capable of generating no earth-bound ethical worlds, it can nurture no theorizing individuals.

Like language, money can also be destructive of individuality. It was seen to be a central problem by the great politan thinkers. But here too Aristotle stands out. In the apt words of Karl Polanyi, he “discovered the economy.”³⁰ Economics, or the study of the *oikos*, is, of course, a critical, if small, part of Aristotle’s practical philosophy. The principal feature of that philosophy is to show how individuals are habituated, by acts of mimesis, in a well-structured *oikos* and *polis*. Having discovered the potentially infinitizing mechanism of wealth-accumulation via the difference between use value and exchange value (the same mechanism lauded and applied by Marx in *Das Kapital*), and potentiation of exchange value via coinage, Aristotle discovered that there was a limit to or a cap on indeterminate wealth-accumulation, if it were restricted to the *oikos* and excluded from the *polis*. Hence ‘oiko-nomics.’ He saw that the *polis* had been, and in some measure continued to be, an ethical institution principally devoted to *paideia*, to the shaping of ethical individuals and the achievement of happiness. Any propensity toward politan acts in the service of GPP (Gross Polis Product)—which had already emerged, especially during the Delian League—was seen to be destructive of politan life.

³⁰ Karl Polanyi, “Aristotle Discovers the Economy,” in Polanyi et al., eds., *Trade and Market in the Early Empires* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), pp. 64ff.

Of course we know that the accumulation of capital has in the interval come to be a preoccupation of ‘political’ institutions in the western tradition. For some generations now, popular political leaders have directed their constituents to ask: “Are you better off now than you were four (or however many) years ago?” The economic invasion of the political realm has, we can safely say, reached its *reductio ad absurdum*.

4. What is there about the modern world that the chance to theorize has reemerged?

In such a state of absurdity, it may seem comic to suggest that the modern world—the favorite butt of intellectual irony and ridicule—is taking the shape of an ethical world. It would be truly ridiculous to attempt, at this point in my remarks, anything like an adequate argument. Let me therefore conclude with some observations about civil society.

The first is that it is now, at the end of the 20th century, rapidly distinguishing itself from the state. Of course it was theoretically distinguished from the state long ago, first by Hegel and then by Marx. But for much of this time it has been, as I observed earlier, misunderstood as ‘bourgeois’ society. What has actually been taking shape since the discovery of global humanity 500 years ago is a new ‘*oikos*,’ the global community. For much of this time the growth of the global *oikos* has been fraught with rank greed and mostly North Atlantic world exploitation. Capital has been accumulated at an accelerating pace. But this capital accumulation, as Marx and Luxemburg have shown, has been, and still is, dependent upon spheres of productive labor-power with different exchange values. Now labor-power is, in principle, homogeneous. That is the presupposition in every commodity exchange. But *de facto* differences, owing to stages of technological development and standards of living, have provided limits. When *de jure* exchanges of equivalents are mediated by *de facto* differences in the units of measure (at bottom, universal and homogeneous human labor time), the potential for an increment at the crossing of the limit is at hand. The shorthand expression for this is M-C-M’. Private enterprise together with public policy have found myriad ways of exploiting this critical limit.

This limit, however, is only a feature of civil society *in statu nascendi*. From the outset civil society has been, in principle, global. Its globalizing trajectory is now coming into clear view for anyone with the curiosity to look. No one can, at this point, guess its effective date of arrival. At the same time, no one who looks can doubt its direction and ultimate consummation. Once achieved, the limits necessary for the possibility of capital accumulation will have been abolished. Like the ancient *oikos* in which Aristotle discovered the economy, the global ‘*oikos*’ may well serve as the place where the potential, implicit in exchange value and money, for a practically infinite regress, may be limited by a civil society which has realized one of its, like the *oikos*’, natural functions, as ‘a *system* of need-satisfaction.’

The correlative process of de-economizing the political realm is already evident. The monetarist Tories of Britain resist the European Monetary Union. They protest the loss of sovereignty. But they yield. And so too will all forms of ‘economic sovereignty,’ as civil society further matures. We, members of the leisured class, can already foresee the day (even if it doesn’t arrive in our lifetimes) when the political realm can once again, for the second time in history, become a place of *paideia*. That will truly mark the end of the struggle between *logos*-humanity and *paideia*-humanity. Ethnocentrism

may abound; definite differences, individualities and distinctions may flourish. But unlike an elitist 'culture,' here none of these distinctions need be invidious. Like 'socialism in one country' (the formula of Stalinism), 'civil society in one country' (or in one region of the globe) is passing. All polities will have the potential to become what only the cities of Hellas once were, namely, unequivocally ethical institutions.

How this will happen in fact, and when, no one can say. But with the availability of an ethical world to each member of our species, with the coincidence of genetic and mimetic individuation to completeness, practical or 'third' philosophy may be realized as a topic for theory in the full-fledged sense of the word. One clue might be if members of something like our profession, the currently leisured class, rediscover the unique pleasure of theorizing being as an activity.

To be is to be a determinate individual. And the determinacy of an individual is activity.

KENLEY R. DOVE

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