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## Translation, Interpretation, and Conversation between Worlds

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**Abstract:** I consider how our complex human world is undergoing significant transition in the early twenty-first century. A central part of my diagnosis and assessment involves an exploration of our increasing tendency to construe the human world through financial and economic lenses. Offering an axial account that stresses devolution from a more heightened human existence as a means of articulating our current situation, I state and work in part to remove impediments to such an interpretation and evaluation of the present. Having also explored a more Baconian explanation of our predicament, I turn to an adumbration of the notion of absence and its pervasive, if elusive subtextual presence in contemporary life, a concession to and, if I am correct, a vital first step to a transformative overcoming of post-foundational experience. I also reflect on culture's relation to spirit and the likely contours of that sort of vacated space we may well now be undergoing as our problematic residence. Underlying my reflections is both an appreciation of Jaspers and a recurrent sense that much of our current orientation toward our world must cultivate a receptive silence.

Surely there are times to work within frameworks. Those of us who pursue philosophy often do that. It frequently takes the form of thinking through the implications of a particular philosophical program, whether to strengthen or to undermine it. It is in the nature of the ongoing philosophical enterprise to engage in such projects, whether for purposes of historical scholarship, or to extend an area of accepted contemporary research, or to advance a potentially novel position of one's own. These three purposes often overlap.

But there are also times when the urge arises—the hope and even felt need—to look out beyond existing frameworks to ask regarding the possibility of a new and reorienting horizon in terms of which to undertake our thinking. When various philosophers have claimed that genuine philosophy is ahead of its time and may find no echo in the present, this is part of what they have had in mind. This, of course, is a somewhat

presumptuous claim, and it seldom makes intellectual friends in other disciplines, even in our own. What it suggests is that the philosopher aspires to, might even become some combination of creator and/or prophet—in Kantian terms an embodiment of extraordinary spontaneity and/or deeply unusual receptivity. To put the matter in a Jaspersian way, in these circumstances philosophy might be said to connect in a central and transformative manner with transcendence. It is this possibility that I wish to explore, and I will do so in a series of somewhat connected, yet also slightly and deliberately disparate sections

### Worlds

A convenient distinction can be made between *the* world and *worlds* in the plural. *The* world, construed as the universe, is a stage of sorts upon which worlds in the plural emerge, rise, flourish (if they do), decline,

and fall. In the singular sense world as universe has been the domain studied first by philosophy and then subsequently by the various sciences. Hopes were rekindled through Kant especially, but also through more recent hermeneutical and conceptual or linguistic analyses that philosophy could remain connected to *the* world as the supreme science, the science of sciences. But the enterprise of grounding or legitimating scientific concepts, removing confusion from them, so the speak, has been on the wane for some time.

As opposed to world in the singular sense, worlds in the plural are often construed as being historical and as following after each other in sequence. Though we might not quite believe him, much of what we admire in Hegel was his ability to articulate an historical narrative in terms of which worlds came into being and then gave way—read *Aufhebung*—to their successors.

But worlds in the plural sense are not just historical, coming into existence successively and following each other in sequence. In profuse and often bewildering variants they can and also do exist simultaneously, sustaining various distant or close relations to each other. With appropriate qualifications we might say, for example, that two worlds fought a cold war with each other in the twentieth century and that during that time some other worlds watched this war unfold and understandably tried to exploit it to their advantage. And other sorts of worlds were in existence at the same time as well; artistic, athletic, religious, and so on.

Let us turn now to our time, the early twenty-first century, and some of its worlds. As is well known, many Continental philosophers have agreed with Hegel that philosophy should be its time—thus its worlds—comprehended in thought. Jaspers saw this as a most legitimate, if extraordinarily demanding task that philosophy should not evade. A communicative philosophy could not but pursue the interconnections of varying worlds.

There are at least two ways of pursuing this task. One is to reflect on how our time—that is to say, our contemporary worlds—fit together. Philosophers as diverse as Whitehead and Cassirer, Sellars and Rorty have at one time or another recommended this approach, but it is beset with a number of difficulties. One is that there are just simply too many of these worlds. Another is that it is itself a most fundamental and vexing philosophical question as to which of them qualify as relevant to an account of worldly interconnectedness and fit or, quite possibly, failure of

integration and fit. The connectedness of worlds, after all, may be in a stereoscopically oriented or, it seems to me, a stereoscopically somewhat *disoriented* state, and this, too, is relevant to—perhaps altogether crucial for there to be an illuminating account of our time and its worlds, our contemporary worlds and their current tendencies. It should be noted that if looked at on a comparative basis, Jaspers accomplished a very great deal in this regard, both in the range of his thought and in the diagnosis and connecting of those realms he explored within his time—a somewhat different one than exists for us some half a century and more later.

Another way of grasping our time and its worlds, overlapping but not coterminous with the first, is even more challenging. It is to attempt a particular sort of diagnosis and assessment, thereby hoping to discern in the present those trends that portend an emerging era.

What I have just submitted should both seem strange and not seem strange. I start with its strangeness first. It has been our altogether understandable and appropriate practice to work within the constraints of continuities and traditions, what Kuhn, for example, would term normal science. It is not that common that what turns out to be productive work in any field takes on any other form. Occasionally, of course, and then often dramatically it does. But it is typically the case that genuinely fruitful agendas are constrained and thereby supported by regulated practices that circumscribe and constitute what are then carefully delineated fields of inquiry.

Sometimes, however, matters turn out differently, and I will ever so briefly adumbrate two historical moments in which they have. By doing so I hope to be illustrating how what I am forwarding is not only not so strange, but is recurrent in the history of thought, in what I have called the historical unfolding of worlds. Drawing these examples from the history of philosophy itself should help to illuminate this point in clear and familiar ways.

Philosophical thought has arrived at some significant cul-de-sacs at different times in its history. One of the more noted ones came during that time we now refer to as late Scholasticism. Not overly discouraged because of some quite questionable presuppositions and growingly isolated methodological procedures, a number of scholastic thinkers strongly defended and in the course of so doing refined numerous intricate theses. A circle of arguments were occurring that were quite distanced

from more ordinary concerns and also from a worldview that a number of intellectual peers were in the process of advancing in adjacent and in some cases overlapping investigative areas. Clearly, these scholastic thinkers were not especially open-minded. At the same time, they were intelligent human beings. To their own self-understanding, they were reinforcing significant spiritual truths because of threats that they perceived as arising from those we now simply call scientists. It was surely a peculiar historical moment. As could not be otherwise, its historical development was more complex in its unfolding than we are convincingly able to sort out even today, yet we do continue to live in the ambience of its consequences. During little more than a hundred years or so new concepts and accompanying philosophical problems arose. Mental acts, ideas, primary and secondary qualities, and representation gradually came to the fore. Notions such as final and formal cause faded into the background. One way to state this would be through the claim that a relatively novel philosophical horizon had emerged. It is doubtful that it could have been discerned as early as 1580, but by the middle of the seventeenth century it had come into reasonably articulate focus.

Less consequential and dramatic, an analogous circumstance arose toward the beginning of the twentieth century. The idealism of Bosanquet, Greene, and Bradley was superseded by "logical atomism." As we know, Russell was one of its pioneers and it underwent a transcendental metamorphosis in the work of the early Wittgenstein. Under pressure from what was then a novel polemic and underlying outlook, a dominant idealistic vocabulary gave way. Attack led to a transcendence of British Idealism and then to the perception that this idealism had been overcome and could be disregarded. Notions such as atomic and molecular proposition and external relations came to dominate over concepts such as the Absolute and its attendant internal relations arguments. This species of idealism faded more toward and into what we now call the History of Ideas and logico-Russellian type maneuvers came to be taken as the residence of genuine philosophy. Happily for at least some of us, the Russellian moment has now long since passed into the museum of philosophy as well.

To come closer to home, to a Continental home, Hegel, of course, provides a striking statement of such a transition:

...it is not difficult to see that our epoch is a birth-time, and a period of transition. The spirit of man has broken with the old order of things hitherto prevailing, and with the old ways of thinking, and is in the mind to let them all sink into the depths of the past and to set about its own transformation. It is indeed never at rest, but carried along the stream of progress ever onward. But it is here as in the case of the birth of a child; after a long period of nutrition in silence, the continuity of the gradual growth in size, of quantitative change, is suddenly cut short by the first breath drawn—there is a break in the process, a qualitative change—and the child is born. In like manner the spirit of the time, growing slowly and quietly ripe for the new form it is to assume, disintegrates one fragment after another of the structure of the previous world. That it is tottering to its fall is indicated only by symptoms here and there. Frivolity and again ennui, which are spreading in the established order of things, the undefined foreboding of something unknown—all these betoken that there is something else approaching. This gradual crumbling to pieces, which did not alter the general look and aspect of the whole, is interrupted by the sunrise, which, in a flash and at a single stroke, brings to view the form and structure of the new world.<sup>1</sup>

### Transitions

It is better to start retrospectively with what we may have learned from previous world disappearances and emergences. I say, "may have learned," because transitions need not be of a piece with each other. What Hegel would have termed an *Übergang*, and Jaspers might have somewhat reluctantly allowed to be described as analogous to aspects of a boundary situation, is not of such a nature as necessarily to fit a pattern. Nonetheless, transitions tend to be prospectively opaque, though retrospectively relatively transparent. The retrospective transparency, we know, has in our own time been attributed to the gift of narration, not the logic of necessity. Had Hegel more overtly acquiesced to this point, his account of the succession of worlds—of stages or moments in the unfolding and development of Spirit (*Geist*)—might have had more staying power. But such did not happen, though I now draw from a famous Hegelian passage that indicates it might have, even though the work of Hegel himself.

When we consider this spectacle of the passions; when the consequences of their violence and the folly that accompanies not only them but even, and indeed pre-

<sup>1</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind* (New York: MacMillan, 1961), p. 75.

eminently, good intentions and legitimate aims, come before our eyes – the ills, the evil, the destruction of the most flourishing realms that the human spirit has created; when we behold individuals with the deepest sympathy for their indescribable misery – then we can only end up with sadness over this transitoriness and, insofar as this destruction is not only a work of nature but of the will of men, even more with moral sadness, with the indignation of the good spirit, if there be any in us, over such a spectacle. We can raise such events, without any rhetorical exaggeration, merely by putting together all the misfortune that the most glorious peoples and states as well as individual virtues or innocence have suffered, into the most horrible portrait, and thus intensify our feeling into the most profound and helpless sadness which cannot be balanced by any conciliatory result.... But even as we contemplate history as this slaughter bench on which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of states, and the virtue of individuals have been sacrificed, our thoughts cannot avoid the question *for whom, for what final aim* these monstrous sacrifices have been made.<sup>2</sup>

One problem with prospect is what might be called discretion, partially a play on word, for transitions tend to involve discrete movements, not continuities. Because this is the case they can seldom be projected as extensions of current conditions, even rapidly occurring extensions. Especially in retrospect, what is typically seen is that a new element has entered into the mix, one not altogether or even partially anticipated. Somewhat unhelpfully, Kant had suggested this with his notion that the third of each of his four groups of triadic categories arose from some coming together, some synthesis of the first two in each group. And I need not remind us how Hegel dynamized, extended, and brought Kant's triadic intimations to questionable fruition a few decades later, especially in his *Logic*. But it probably is best to look closer to our present for the best way to comprehend any transitionally discrete moment or element that emerges and thereby renders forecasting a depressingly futile endeavor. John Mackey speaks of unnecessary and insufficient conditions as the basis for many an occurrence and its occasionally somewhat novel outcome. Simply put, things tend to happen. These happenings are not just discrete, but seldom at our discretion, that is to say, within our control. Freud famously asks—and obviously rhetorically—why chance should not be

viewed as noble enough to determine our fate. Charles Sanders Peirce even gives chance a prominent place in his philosophy—possibly one of the reasons Harvard never hired him. But of course I jest. The serious point is that the discrete, construed as the separate and unanticipated, *does* sometimes happen. It comes into play.

Mackey's notion of unnecessary and insufficient conditions is probably best and more consolingly and transparently captured by what has come popularly to be called the *tipping point*. A certain state is reached—as in 32°F for water—where incremental quantitative alteration gives way to qualitative transformation. There is ice. The consolation in putting the matter in this way is that in retrospect a very reasonable explanation can be given of what has happened. Not only this. The transformative process can in principle be duplicated. Unfortunately, however, worlds are not water and their historical differences, their settings and circumstances do not allow the sort of uniformity found or fixed into place for experiments with water. What is suggested, however, is that the notion of tipping point is fertile hermeneutic soil, a kind of halfway house between the relentless, though often wildly implausible progressions of dialectal necessity and the imaginatively intuitive, if nonetheless especially selective and at times rather fanciful readings provided through literary meta-narrative.

There is a story to be told about our present world in its particular presence and potentially transitional nature, a diagnosis and prognosis that I believe to be schematically instructive with respect to worlds and their generation and corruption over historical time. Though this narrative attempts to illumine our time, it is drawn from an earlier moment and its attendant template that have features that surely recur in diverse ways over the course of history—not with rigid regularity, but frequently and similarly enough to call forth our thinking.

Pythagoras, it is said, construed humans as dividing into sorts: the commercial, the competitive and the contemplative. In terms of the Pythagorean standard and, thus, criteria of measurement, the contemplative was highest, next the competitive, and then the commercial. This ranking should come as no surprise to us, for we usually learn and teach it through Plato's *Republic*, and we are led to believe that it conveys the ascendancy of the sage over the warrior and a growing respect for reason and wisdom over valor or material accumulation.

<sup>2</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* [79 f], in Walter Kaufmann, *Hegel* (New York: Doubleday, 1965), p. 256.

That such a choice would need to be made raises other issues, but we know that it is no passing fancy, for in the religious West—and not here alone—devotional depth and enhanced spirituality are often intimately tied to prerequisites of asceticism and even poverty. Kant's appropriation and subsequent configuring of an allegedly autonomous moral sphere, articulated in terms of distinctions between autonomy and heteronomy, duty and inclination, is a rationally reconstructed, yet faded version of the Pythagorean vision, largely secularized and soon to be disenchanting.

What seems to have been happening in terms of *our* historical world, a world I have yet to sketch but have been setting the stage for outlining? Were one to put the matter in culturally hermeneutical terms, we have understood the world increasingly and more and more pervasively through economic and financial lenses. In Pythagorean terms we have been living in an upside down manner.

There are at least two ways to parse this. One is in terms of that axial model of human life that Jaspers outlined so cogently and influentially. It amounts to an account of a fall or, less dramatically, a failure of ascent. The former adumbrates a religious, possibly Gnostic conception of life. The latter perhaps does this as well, but certainly also offers an indictment of an educational system or set of practices that has not inculcated an orientation toward higher dimensions of culture and spirit. In either case one lives in appearances, not reality; bondage, not liberation; confusion, not insight; and darkness, not light. Flickering shadows cast on the walls of a cave are accepted or possibly even preferred over allegedly higher realities. If we were to remain with this well-worn image, a quantitative accumulation of such shadows would take precedence over their qualitative diversity—or, in a marginally more complementary scenario, their qualitative and rapidly changing qualitative diversity would occlude and obstruct one's vision of the possibility of a pathway toward something distinctly beyond them in the "order of being."

There are a number of serious objections to such an account, however. The first may be more tactical than ultimately substantive. It raises the specter of moralism, an obvious and traditional one, anti-materialist in nature that is nonetheless based on a hierarchy of values that is not easily justified, particularly in "advanced," postmodern societies. What should be said against a predominantly materialistic and economic perspective any more than against a predominantly

political or religious one? That one of these should become historically and hierarchically dominant might be construed more as mere cultural fact than as symptom of liberation, transfiguration, progress, decadence, disorientation or dehumanization. There is the further worry that such a tactic—what amounts to an axially based critique of the ascendancy of the economic metaphor insofar as it becomes the pervasive and determinative vocabulary—slides all too easily into stereotypical arguments within socio-political philosophy. From there it is an even easier slide into conventional polemics about social policy, government, the public good and the status of the individual. At this point any potentially serious philosophical conversation has almost certainly been suffocated within and by that sort of polarized rant that has become endemic to our time.

A second objection to such an account is implied by the first and is of course metaphysical, though in a largely socio-cultural way. Insofar as philosophy as queen of the sciences is superseded by the sciences themselves—and what is termed reality is given over to arguments between instrumentalist-pragmatists and scientific realists with respect to such issues as truth, correspondence and even human nature, for that matter—the conversational space has at best receded and is thus not in place for a genuine dialogue regarding allegedly fundamental matters. It is altogether noteworthy that the most speculatively bold and synoptic work is now generated by figures arising from the sciences and basing their theories on evolutionary biology, genetics, and neuroscience. As we are well aware, Jaspers had a lot to say about the distinction between the sciences and philosophy, and wondered whether there was an indissoluble bond between the two. According to Jaspers the evolution of the sciences had needed philosophy as its base, but Jaspers then concluded that in our present world, *heute*, the sciences were leading the direction of current philosophizing. It is hard to disagree, and this makes the interventions of the philosopher highly problematic.

Based on sales and general media visibility—unfortunately significant measures—there is a growing readership of scientific material. Perhaps more tellingly, some of the most central intellectual arguments of our time, consequential to an extraordinary and currently somewhat alarming extent, have occurred far, far less *about* economics—that is to say, from any standpoint *beyond* it—than within economics. Monetarists, Austrian school adherents, Keynesians and behavioral economic

theorists, for example, have been contending about matters extending far beyond the business cycle and the appropriate configurings of the public and private sectors. They have been implying and at times even stating specific and not even altogether covertly philosophical doctrines regarding human nature itself.

What I find important to emphasize is twofold: first, that these discussions are cast almost altogether in terms of economic and financial vocabularies; and second, that though these discussions are often quite metaphysical in nature, if only because involving warring philosophical anthropologies, there is virtually no conversational space in terms of or through which philosophers can engage each other, the "economic" community, and at the same time involve a wider public in a reflection on the issues involved. This is no small matter, for in differing though overlapping ways Jaspers, Oakeshott, and Habermas are surely correct in construing any intellectual human activity to have genuine significance only to the degree that it is amenable to and capable of making a larger difference. That means that it must be capable of participating in that larger conversation of humankind that is our history.

I will note in passing one further problem with any diagnosis of our current world situation—that is, our present world—that operates in terms of an axial hermeneutics. It overlaps with the first two problems but adds a further element. It is easily said that such predicaments as are constitutive of our current circumstances and attendant worldview, our *Weltanschauung*, are simply not the "business of philosophy." What is especially intriguing about this objection is that it tends to accept the axial schema for the purposes of the placement of philosophy, but in the historical meantime—having now rejected this schema as being inappropriate to any consequential discussion of the course of the world—it has concluded to the irrelevance of philosophy with respect to any consequential reflection regarding the trajectory of the world's unfolding, what I have referred to as the historical emergence and submergence of worlds.

Were he attended to closely—or even somewhat distantly yet reflectively—Jaspers, with his notions of world philosophy, *Existenz*, communication, Transcendence and *Weltanschauung*, would serve as a most helpful antidote to such a dismissive placement of philosophical thinking. And Jaspers had the further advantage of being far more extensive in scope and of having burdened his audience with far less

cumbersome philosophical baggage than most of those writing at his same level. But such a Jasperian-driven rehabilitation of philosophical thought is not overwhelmingly likely in our present world. This says less about philosophy, however, than about the thickness and the monoscopic features of the economic lens.

What any axial placement of philosophy in our current world does suggest, however—even if this placement is only schematic and for diagnostic purposes—is why a serious discussion of the end of philosophy could actually be taking place. It could be taking place, were the very enterprise of axial thinking deemed indispensable to philosophy itself and the axial age viewed as over and thereby a relic of the past—antiquarian in Nietzsche's terms rather than recuperable in Heidegger's. To pursue philosophy, for it to happen to a person or to an Age, does this require Athenian or possible pre-Athenian genes? Many conclude so, consigning the philosophical enterprise to a past over which one might be nostalgic, but never again existentially connected. Others, however, continue to discover such genes in themselves and mourn the absence of philosophy while undergoing a philosophy of absence.

Let us now turn to the consideration of a different account, an alternative to what we have been exploring. That we have comprehended the world increasingly through economic and financial lenses may have an explanation that is other than axial in dynamic or may exist only in the wake of axiality. In terms of the history of ideas, the genealogy of this explanation commences at least as early as Francis Bacon's claim that knowledge is power. (One always thinks of Thrasymachus in this regard, but that is a threshold we will bypass). The Baconian claim itself reminds us of Heidegger's repeated statement—not altogether divergent in tone and spirit from Jaspers—that if you begin with Plato, with *eidōs* and *logos*, you end up with technology. Technology, however, is now less construed in terms of technique and instrument and more in the frame of extracted energy reserve and the dynamics of its extraction, preservation and further accumulation. This extracted energy has largely been understood through and as *Capital*. The equation, thus, runs from knowledge through power to capital. In ways that are opaquely at work but surely present, Capital, thus, comes to be transitively identified with knowledge itself, identified, that is, as the highest that humans may strive for. But if Capital gets construed as the highest

and is equally identified with power—something that knowledge has been said to be, at the very least from Bacon through Nietzsche—it is not only not difficult but in fact nearly unavoidable that the "reality" of our current historical world, our particular present in its presence, will be seen and understood through the economic lens. Such a construal and its attendant hermeneutic amounts to no more and no less than our contemporary way of construing the correspondence of language with fact, thought with *Being*.

But our understanding of capital and its uses—understanding and use converging to become nearly the same instrument—has been steadily morphing over the last decades, requiring nearly a new Nietzsche to expound on it. And a new Nietzsche it would need to be, for what has come to be at stake is a new architecture and accompanying dispensation for the will to power, now less artistic than financial, less expressionistically pigmented than equationally calculated. Whereas the vocabulary of Nietzsche would be more in the direction of danger and daring, some one hundred plus years later our current world's lens points our vocabulary more toward risk and its management. Our uneasy discovery is that the boldness of the *Übermensch* is not confined—if it is even influentially present there anymore—to the studio or writing desk. It has found its more energetic residence on the trading floor and the derivatives desk. Let me extend this one step further. If Hegel's understanding was a breakthrough—that it was important to translate substance into subject and subject into process—his influence has at least reached the international financial system, though it may have had far less impact on Russell, Husserl or the Tractarian Wittgenstein.

To sum up, the relentless intensification of focus on Capital, indicated through its extreme financialization through leveraged acquisition, analyses in terms of breakup value, securitization and further leveraging through an extended derivatives market built upon collateralized debt obligations, has come first to articulate and then to bring into a virtually Derridaean "total trembling" the parameters established for a synoptic understanding of our time. Derrida is worth quoting:

*The strategic bet.* A radical trembling can only come from the *outside*. Therefore, the trembling of which I speak derives no more than any other from some spontaneous decision of philosophical thought after some internal maturation of its history. This trembling is played out in the violent relationship of the whole of the West to its other, whether a "linguistic" relationship (where very

quickly the question of the limits of everything leading back to the question of the meaning of Being arises), or ethnological, economic, political, military, relationships, etc. Which does not mean, moreover, that military or economic violence is not in structural solidarity with "linguistic" violence. But the "logic" of every relation to the outside is very complex and surprising. It is precisely the force and the efficiency of the system that regularly change transgressions into "false exits." Taking into account these effects of the system, one has nothing, from the inside where "we are," but the choice between two strategies:

- a. To attempt an exit....
- b. To decide to change terrain....<sup>3</sup>

There is more to say in this regard. Remarks Hegel makes about art are instructive, and Heidegger quotes them to advantage for his own purposes. They serve us helpfully as well.<sup>4</sup>

Art no longer counts as the highest way in which truth finds existence for itself. (*Werke*, Vol. X, I, p. 134)

One may well hope that art will continue to advance and perfect itself, but its form has ceased to be the highest need of spirit. (*Ibid.*, p. 135)

In all these connections art is, and remains, with regard to highest vocation, a thing of the past. (*Ibid.*, p. 16)

In Heidegger's thought, of course, the "conversation" with Hegel concerns whether art must surrender to philosophy (Hegel's view) or philosophy to art construed as poetry (Heidegger's view). Some might say that the narrative of this conversation involves the more recent world of Heidegger that emerged a little over a century later as the problematic successor to an overly confident and self-celebratory Hegelianism. So the Heideggerians would have it, at least. But there is a further and distinctly different possibility that significantly circumvents both Hegel and Heidegger and provides a better, more plausible way of construing what I have been calling the "economic" lens of our particular present. That way is through the Nietzschean vestibule of power, now directed away from traditionally "higher" things like art and philosophy, ambivalently loved and hated by

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 134-35.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in Martin Heidegger, *Heidegger: Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and transl. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 51.

Nietzsche himself, and focused upon allegedly "lower" things, those that have enamored Marxists in equally ambivalent ways and absorbed monetarists in ways hardly ambivalent, if at all.

### Our Conversational Present

If a time, a particular stage in the unfolding of our human worlds—quite specifically ours, still in the early portions of the twenty-first century—is perilous, then what to say and how to convey it? An "old" world, ours, seems on the verge of "collapse" and another, seemingly new world gives intimations of hope, vaguely promising new and great things. Again, however, how might communication, a conversation proceed in the interim? To call this interim an abnormal time is to construe it as that moment that is the punctuation between a no longer and a not yet, a threshold in time.<sup>5</sup> A number of provisional inferences can be drawn, and along the way a few historical analogues may just help. Analogues invariably beg questions, however, and this we must keep in mind as we proceed.

I start with the notion of absence. Were we to say faithful to the concept of *Übergang*, we would need to remain close to its existentialization, better found in Kierkegaard—or in Jaspers' reflections on *Existenz* and boundary situations—than in Hegel, though less absent from the younger Hegel than is commonly thought.

Absence—that punctuation point that separates the no longer and not yet that may most significantly define the moment of our world in historical time—suggests that no foundation is present upon which to base action and from which to receive orientation. The hope is that on the other side of such absence—on the far side of the abyss (*Abgrund*) that any genuine *Übergang* must somehow traverse—orientation and informed and integrated action will again be possible. It is not difficult to believe that a "leap" may be necessary to cross this abyss. This Kierkegaardian counsel, however, involves assumptions that deserve to be put into question, if our attempts at conversation are to be authentically contemporary.

Kierkegaard's "leap" is advocated for and in the service of the individual. Though altogether replete with individuals who have assumed various and

sundry poses, some of them quite influential and prominent—the libertarian posture perhaps the most extraordinary—the historical world that is our present appears in the grip of vast, largely economic forces that have disrupted countless individuals and significantly disoriented them. Were we to draw analogues from the past, thereby engaging in a Nietzschean critical history, the precarious and uncertain periods of the actual French revolution and its subsequent terror, rather than the time of Hegel's systematically calm and very Prussian retrospect on this revolution some years later, would be more apposite. Similarly, the context of the uncertainties of a patchy and makeshift global economy going into the yet unknown thirties is more appropriate for us to draw upon than the more steady and settled period that came with the Marshall plan and, closer to home, the Federal highway program.

In short, as a child of its time that would aspire to comprehend its time in thought, a philosophical conversation regarding our present, and the transition at which it is at the verge, may need to be cast more in the language of what Hegel would have called "objective" spirit, if only to sketch out the current context for more existentialized reflection and decision. In Jaspersian terms, *Existenz* and *Transcendence*, after all, are invariably situated in historical eras and come into their mutual encounter through the often-opaque medium of periodically transforming contemporary circumstances.

In *Christianity and Culture*, T. S. Eliot broods over the relation of religion to culture in a manner that may well prove informative and thought provoking for us. Eliot's strong, virtually irresistible temptation is to understand the relation between culture and religion to be so intimate that it would not be misleading to construe culture as the incarnation of religion. As a quasi-Kierkegaardian thought experiment let us assume something like this to be true and then ponder the somewhat delayed consequences of also taking as true Nietzsche's claim that "God is dead." As we know, the Nietzschean proclamation—significantly anticipated and foreshadowed in Hegel's *Early Theological Writings*—has multiple and overlapping meanings. Not the least of these is that the space that once was inhabited by devotionally inspired and seemingly transcendently saturated spiritual reality—in the singular or in the plural—has become vacant. Emptiness, alternatively experienced and construed as a void, pervades it. It is now a spiritual wilderness, a wasteland. It is well worth italicizing, however, *that by*

<sup>5</sup> See my *The (Coming) Age of Thresholding* (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 1999) [henceforth cited as *AT*].

*no means does this imply that what might be termed spiritual space has itself vanished, but only that it is no longer inhabited. Again, that what it suffers from is absence, not extinction.*

Staying closely to T. S. Eliot's ruminations, it would almost unavoidably follow that culture, as the intimate incarnation of the spiritual, its enhancing excrement, would itself concurrently empty out. That it would so empty, an analogue to the theological doctrine of *kenosis*, would not necessarily mean that all cultural content, all the variegated stuff of culture, would disappear. On the contrary, cultural artifacts, objects, events, items, and places would remain. But they will have become bereft of their significance, no longer able to draw us to them and absorb us in them. In this sense, they will have become hollow and we ourselves, in relation to them insofar as they are mediators and vessels of spiritual nutrition, will have become hollow people. It would not be as if we would not be able to "experience" these cultural vehicles, but that they will have lost, been divested of their transfiguring and transformative potencies and aura. Regarding them, most likely, in a delayed reaction, we will have become disenchanting, one of Max Weber's favorite diagnostic notions. But our disenchantment will have followed consequentially from the cultural sphere having lost its capacity to convey that spiritual reality that it has previously incarnated. The cultural sphere will have lost this mediating capacity because that spiritual reality—for whatever dynamically metaphysical or other reason—is no longer present to provide culture with the apposite infusion for it to transmit.

On such an account culture—as opposed to nature or commerce—will have originally been constituted and then construed as the very particular and singular clothing appropriate to spirit's incarnation. And of course one does not need to glance far to find analogues to these reflections. They are easily discovered, whether in romanticism or, of course, in that incarnational theology that those of Christian faith label Christology.

That spiritual space I have been adumbrating—one in which the cultural is almost certainly going to linger and to continue to reside in whatever stage of fading vitality it may be undergoing—will suffer from the absence of what is most essential to it, *Spirit* itself. This being the case—and very large assumptions obviously undergird such reflections as these—those cultural items resident in this space will have begun to

become lifeless. In Thomas Hardy's turn of phrase, they will have become "alive enough to have strength to die." In sum, any spiritual evacuation of *spirituo*—cultural space will have left disenchantment in its wake because of the failure of transforming spiritual meaning to continue to sustainably infuse that space. And spiritual meaning—understandably a hermeneutically suspicious notion in any age of disenchantment—must now be construed far less as a property of propositions than as a central and core dimension, a mode, in fact, of reality itself. On an account such as we are considering, the "death of God" will have had far less to do with the demise of a highest being than with the ambience and resonances visited upon what will inexorably become a cultural wasteland.

Note how resoundingly odd the devolutionary cultural story just told is bound to sound. We are much more accustomed to understand and elaborate on any purported devolution of culture in a far more anthropocentric manner. The surface account remains largely the same. Culture has been devolving in the direction of so-called "mere entertainment," something somewhat less to be given over to and absorbed in than to be taken over, possessed virtually or through purchase, and metaphorically or literally consumed. That this is the course of things is viewed as the consequence of such developments as liberation from superstition, the distancing of the religious from the secular, the enlargement and enhancement of personal and contractual freedoms to buy and to sell, to travel and to see, and—consequently and perhaps most significantly—the increasing reach of the media coupled with, at least until recently, growing affluence.

To some extent all this is true, and no descriptive or critical philosophy of culture should or would fail to mention it. Also mentioned would be some concerns regarding whether the largely postmodern collapsing of allegedly higher and lower culture into one another has tended to celebrate and thereby enhance normal and everyday human life, or whether it has tended to dilute and thereby somewhat degrade those offerings that issue from a more significant realm of existence.

The more deflationary account of culture I have opposed to T. S. Eliot's places matters almost exclusively within at best the realm of philosophical anthropology and, more frequently and prevalently, within the socio-economically construed realm of a globally free or fettered market place. In contrast, residing within Eliot's premonitions strongly recommends a narrative of a far more traditionally

philosophico-spiritual nature, more "top-down" in a sense more congruent with a Heideggerian history of *Being* than bottom up in the sense of a narrative of liberation, an allegedly enlightened escape from religious covenants and, subsequently an unleashed plethora of increasingly unfettered consumer opportunities.

But staying within Eliot's outlook has further consequences as well. With appropriate caveats it makes much of what we have been construing as the historical world of today look quite different than it otherwise would have seemed. It makes this world look less the consequence of a conflictual situation—as in a Hegelian dialectic, for example, but now diminished to the more quotidian domain of a competitive economic market place. By contrast, it makes our historical world look more the consequence of some high level and largely inscrutable default—inscrutable because with respect to most any reasonable account of the comings and goings of ordinary life such a "default" gives all appearance of being incommensurable. To speak of default in this sense would be as if one were to account for the loss of taste in orange juice—the diminishing of its flavor—as consequential upon the removal of an uninstantiated tangularity that had no residence in orange juice in the first place.

Leaving geometry and juices aside, let us just note that the default suggested by Eliot, though not by means of this term, suggests ... absence. And it is quite possible that absence in this sense may be more consequential with respect to human beings in our current historical world than could have altogether been brought about by them. If this were true, authentic conversation regarding our historical world as in somewhat perilous transition—or at least some of the central stands of such a communicative endeavor—would need to find a portion of its grounding and orientation in the mode of silence, not in speech. This silence would need to be both devotional and without guarantee. It would need to be in the mode I have elsewhere called *thresholding* (see *AT*). That this might not only be possible but even appropriate, I hope to touch upon in other settings.

### Future Possibilities

I turn now very briefly to some reflections regarding globalization. Not in my title, it nonetheless opens in a particular way the two major remaining words that are: translation and interpretation. Once thought to be slow,

occasionally unstable in movement but nonetheless inexorable, globalization, as we now know, is currently perceived as intensely problematic and possibly unattainable or, if briefly attained, not sustainable. A disintegrating may be taking place, while until recently further cohesion was the prognosis. And these contrasting predictions leave open the question as to whether globalization is genuinely desirable. But why mention such matters?

For many, if not most, those culturally as well as those economically inclined, globalization has been articulated as the goal of our current transition, that new historical world into which our present historical world is projected to arrive. If so, a genuinely world-philosophy, one that would have any claim on substance over scope—traits thoughtfully considered in Jaspers' later reflections—would need to parse the outlines of such a successor world—however anticipatorially—in the hopes of serving its communicative possibilities and of deepening and enlarging their constructive benefits. By analogy, we would be in some such time as 1788-9 or 1929-30, were we to engage in this particular endeavor today, even and perhaps most prominently on a philosophical level. That such a conversation must increasingly occur, and that it must find a communication balance involving translation, appropriation, and interpretation in the space of a thoughtful, inquisitive silence, is a given. We continue to repay our vast debt to Jaspers by participating in this present and future undertaking.