
Philosophy as a Transitional Genre

Richard Rorty

1 Introduction

Richard Bernstein and I are almost exact contemporaries, were educated in mostly the same places by mostly the same people, have been exalted by many of the same hopes, and have been talking to one another about how to fulfill those hopes for more than fifty years. We share not only many enthusiasms, but the vast majority of our convictions, both philosophical and political.

Though Bernstein has been much more politically active than I, I doubt that we have ever seriously disagreed about what measures to support, whom to vote for, or in what direction we want history to go. So what disagreements remain might be called “merely philosophical.” This essay is one more attempt to restate my philosophical views in a form that may be a bit less vulnerable to Bernstein’s objections.

This attempt is made easier because Bernstein’s are among the most careful, detailed, and searching criticisms of my writings. He always understands my motives and intentions perfectly, never distorts or mocks what I say, yet often concludes that the view I am offering is largely wrong. I have been grateful for Bernstein’s willingness to spend time reading my stuff ever since he gave me some invaluable advice about how to revise my *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. That book owes a great deal to his comments, as does much that I have written since.

Bernstein has remarked, accurately, that the “aesthetic strain in [my] writings has become more and more pronounced over the years.”¹ He has also pointed out that I spend a lot of time reiterating “a version of the narrative of the history of philosophy that has its origin in Nietzsche, has been refined and perpetuated by Heidegger and Derrida, and has been disseminated by many of those who identify themselves as poststructuralist, postmodern or deconstructionist writers” (*NC*, p. 251). In this essay I rehearse this narrative yet again, and argue that its outcome should indeed be seen as the triumph, if not exactly the aesthetic (a Kantian notion for which I have little use), of what I call the “literary.” Once again, I am telling the old Nietzschean story about how “Truth” took the place of “God” in a secular culture, and why we should get rid of this God-surrogate in order to become more self-reliant. I am a hedgehog who, despite showering my reader with allusions and dropping lots of names, has really only one idea: the need to get beyond representationalism, and thus into an intellectual world in which human beings are responsible only to each other.

Bernstein is right to suspect that Dewey would have been unwilling to tell this story, and might have emphatically refused to endorse it. He has always had doubts about my attempts to fabricate a Nietzscheanized James, a Wittgensteinian Derrida, and a Heideggerianized Dewey. But what he calls my “ruthless and violent” readings of these authors are not eliminable extravagances. A way of getting Nietzsche, James, Wittgenstein, Derrida, Heidegger, and Dewey under the same antirepresentationalist tent, and a focus on the overlap between their views rather than on their disagreements, is pretty much all I have to offer. I want us to see all six of them as heralds of a new dawn—not just a new stage in the history of philosophy, but a new self-image for humanity. I think of them all as assisting in the takeover by what I call a “literary culture,” a culture unlike anything that has existed in the past. Help in spelling out how they (and various other philosophers, such as Sellars, Davidson, and Brandom) do this is the only contribution I have to make.

Bernstein thinks that we need to move away from such visions of a new intellectual world and get back to the rough ground: to continue discussing the questions that Dewey took seriously and that I do not—questions, for example, about how “the structural dynam-

ics of bourgeois society systematically undermine and belie liberal ideals” (*NC*, p. 245). He believes philosophers can serve good political causes by studying topics that I find relatively fruitless. He wants theoretical arguments for political stances, whereas I think such stances can be justified only by pointing to the results of actual or imagined social experiments. I doubt that he and I will ever break this deadlock, since our disagreement is not about the truth of propositions but about the fruitfulness of topics. All of us, by neglecting some issues and focusing on others, place our bets on what will and what will not seem worth discussing to future generations. Bernstein and I have made slightly different wagers.

I see discussing the structural dynamics of bourgeois society as a distraction from questions about how to use the tools of political reform available in the actually existing constitutional democracies to keep the rich from controlling the government. The gap between the level at which political theorists operate and the political alternatives we presently face seems to me just too great. Although I admire the skill with which Dewey and Habermas weave abstractions together in their writings on political theory, I cannot connect these abstractions with the political decisions we need to make. That is why I greatly prefer *geistesgeschichtlich* books like *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* to such books as *The Public and Its Problems* and *Between Facts and Norms*.²

Although the bulk of this essay is, as I have said, just one more retelling of my tediously familiar up-from-representationalism story, its last two sections were written in an attempt to deal with the sorts of doubts that Bernstein has expressed about my philosophical project. In these pages, Bernstein is the reader over my shoulder. I hope they may persuade him to see my use of the private-public distinction in a somewhat more favorable light. But whether they do or not, I am glad to have this occasion to express my gratitude for the stimulation that his criticisms have provided.

2 The Existence of Truth

Questions such as “Does truth exist?” or “Do you believe in truth?” seem fatuous and pointless. Everybody knows that the difference between true and false beliefs is as important as that between

nourishing and poisonous foods. Moreover, one of the principal achievements of recent analytic philosophy is to have shown that the ability to wield the concept of “true belief” is a necessary condition for being a user of language, and thus for being a rational agent.

Nevertheless, the question “Do you believe in truth or are you one of those frivolous postmodernists?” is often the first one that journalists ask intellectuals whom they are assigned to interview. That question now plays the role once played by the question “Do you believe in God, or are you one of those dangerous atheists?” Literary types are frequently told that they do not love truth sufficiently. Such admonitions are delivered in the same tones in which their predecessors were reminded that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom.

Obviously, the sense of the word “truth” invoked by that question is not the everyday one. Nobody is worried about a mere nominalization of the adjective “true.” The question “Do you believe that truth exists?” is shorthand for something like “Do you think that there is a natural terminus to inquiry, a way things really are, and that understanding what that way is will tell us what to do with ourselves?”

Those who, like myself, find themselves accused of postmodernist frivolity do not think that there is such a terminus. We think that inquiry is just another name for problem solving, and we cannot imagine inquiry into how human beings should live, into what we should make of ourselves, coming to an end. For solutions to old problems will produce fresh problems, and so on forever. As with the individual, so with both the society and the species: each stage of maturation will overcome previous dilemmas only by creating new ones.

Problems about what to do with ourselves, what purposes to serve, differ, in this respect, from scientific problems. A complete and final unified science, a harmoniously orchestrated assemblage of scientific theories none of which will ever need to be revised, is, perhaps, an intelligible goal. Maybe scientific inquiry could terminate, simply because anomalies stopped turning up. So if a unified account of the causal relations between all spatiotemporal events

were all that were meant by “truth,” even the farthest-out post-modernists would have no reason to doubt truth’s existence. The existence of truth only becomes an issue when another sort of truth is in question.

I shall use the term “redemptive truth” for a set of beliefs that would end, once and for all, the process of reflection on what to do with ourselves. Redemptive truth would not consist in theories about how things interact causally, but instead would fulfill the need that religion and philosophy have attempted to satisfy. This is the need to fit everything—every thing, person, event, idea, and poem—into a single context, a context that will somehow reveal itself as natural, destined, and unique. It would be the only context that would matter for purposes of shaping our lives, because it would be the only one in which those lives appear as they truly are. To believe in redemptive truth is to believe that there is something that stands to human life as elementary physical particles stand to the four elements—something that is the reality behind the appearance, the one true description of what is going on, the final secret.

Hope that such a context can be found is one species of a larger genus. The larger genus is what Heidegger called the hope for authenticity—the hope to become one’s own person rather than merely the creation of one’s education or one’s environment. As Heidegger emphasized, to achieve authenticity in this sense is not necessarily to *reject* one’s past. It may instead be a matter of reinterpreting that past so as to make it more suitable for one’s own purposes. What matters is to have seen one or more alternatives to the purposes that most people take for granted, and to have chosen among these alternatives—thereby, in some measure, creating yourself. As Harold Bloom has recently reminded us, the point of reading a great many books is to become aware of a great number of alternative purposes, and the point of *that* is to become an autonomous self.³ Autonomy, in this un-Kantian and distinctively Bloomian sense, is pretty much the same thing as Heideggerian authenticity.

I shall define an intellectual as someone who yearns for Bloomian autonomy, and is lucky enough to have the money and leisure to

do something about it: to visit different churches or gurus, go to different theatres or museums, and, above all, to read a lot of different books. Most human beings, even those who have the requisite money and leisure, are not intellectuals. If they read books it is not because they seek redemption but either because they wish to be entertained or distracted, or because they want to become better able to carry out some antecedent purpose. They do not read books to find out what purposes to have. The intellectuals do.

3 From Religion through Philosophy to Literature

Given these definitions of the terms “redemptive truth” and “intellectual,” I can now state my thesis. It is that the intellectuals of the West have, since the Renaissance, progressed through three stages: they have hoped for redemption first from God, then from philosophy, and now from literature. Monotheistic religion offers hope for redemption through entering into a new relation to a supremely powerful nonhuman person. Belief in the articles of a creed may be only incidental to such a relationship. For philosophy, however, beliefs are of the essence. Redemption by philosophy is through the acquisition of a set of beliefs that represent things in the one way they really are. Literature, finally, offers redemption through making the acquaintance of as great a variety of human beings as possible. Here again, as in religion, true belief may be of little importance.

From within a literary culture, religion and philosophy appear as literary genres. As such, they are optional. Just as an intellectual may opt to read many poems but few novels, or many novels but few poems, so he or she may read much philosophy, or much religious writing, but relatively few poems or novels. The difference between the literary intellectuals’ readings of *all* these books and other readings of them is that the inhabitant of a literary culture treats books as human attempts to meet human needs, rather than as acknowledgements of the power of a being that is what it is apart from any such needs. God and Truth are, respectively, the religious and the philosophical names for that sort of being.

The transition from religion to philosophy began with the revival of Platonism in the Renaissance, the period in which humanists began asking the same questions about Christian monotheism that Socrates had asked about Hesiod's pantheon. Socrates had suggested to Euthyphro that the real question was not whether one's actions were pleasing to the gods, but rather which gods held the correct views about what actions ought to be done. When that latter question was once again taken seriously, the road lay open to Kant's conclusion that even the Holy One of the Gospels must be judged in the light of one's own conscience.

The transition from a philosophical to a literary culture began shortly after Kant, about the time that Hegel warned us that philosophy paints its gray on gray only when a form of life has grown old. That remark helped the generation of Kierkegaard and Marx realize that philosophy was never going to fill the redemptive role that Hegel himself had claimed for it. Hegel's supremely ambitious claims for philosophy almost instantly flip-flopped into their dialectical opposite. His system was no sooner published than it began to be treated as a self-consuming artifact, the *reductio ad absurdum* of a form of intellectual life that suddenly seemed to be on its last legs.

Since Hegel's time, the intellectuals have been losing faith in philosophy. This amounts to losing faith in the idea that redemption can come in the form of true beliefs. In the literary culture that has been emerging during the last two hundred years, the question "Is it true?" has yielded to the question "What's new?" Heidegger thought that that change was a decline, a shift from serious thinking to mere gossipy curiosity.⁴ Many fans of natural science, people who otherwise have no use for Heidegger, would agree with him on this point. On the account I am offering, however, this change is an advance. It represents a desirable replacement of bad questions like "What is Being?" "What is really real?" and "What is man?" with the sensible question "Does anybody have any new ideas about what we human beings might manage to make of ourselves?"

In its pure form, undiluted by philosophy, religion is a relation to a nonhuman person. This relation may be one of adoring

obedience, or ecstatic communion, or quiet confidence, or some combination of these. But it is only when religion has become mingled with philosophy that this noncognitive, redemptive relation to a person begins to be mediated by a creed. Only when the God of the philosophers has begun to replace the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is correct belief thought to be essential to salvation.

For religion in its uncontaminated form, argument is no more in point than is belief. To become a New Being in Christ is, Kierkegaard insisted, not the same sort of thing as being forced to grant the truth of a proposition in the course of Socratic reflection, or as the outcome of Hegelian dialectic. Insofar as religion requires belief in a proposition, it is, as Locke said, belief based on the credit of the proposer rather than belief backed by argument. But beliefs are irrelevant to the special devotion of the illiterate believer to Demeter, or to the Virgin of Guadalupe, or to the little fat god on the third altar from the left at the temple down the street. It is this irrelevance that intellectuals like Saint Paul, Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth—spiritual athletes who relish the thought that their faith is a folly to the Greeks—hope to recapture.

To take seriously the idea that redemption can come in the form of true beliefs, one must believe both that the life that cannot be successfully argued for is not worth living, and that persistent argument will lead all inquirers to the same set of beliefs. Religion and literature, insofar as they are uncontaminated by philosophy, share neither of these convictions. Uncontaminated religion may be monotheistic in the sense that a community may think it essential to worship only one particular god. But the idea that there can *be* only one god, that polytheism is contrary to reason, is one that can take hold only after philosophy has convinced us that every human being's reflections must lead to the same outcome.

As I am using the terms "literature" and "literary culture," a culture that has substituted literature for both religion and philosophy finds redemption neither in a noncognitive relation to a nonhuman person nor in a cognitive relation to propositions, but in noncognitive relations to other human beings, relations mediated by human artifacts such as books and buildings, paintings and songs. These artifacts provide a sense of alternative ways of being human.

This sort of culture drops a presupposition common to religion and philosophy—that redemption must come from one’s relation to something that is not just one more human creation.

Kierkegaard rightly said that philosophy began to set itself up as a rival to religion when Socrates suggested that our self-knowledge was a knowledge of God—that we had no need of help from a nonhuman person, because the truth was already within us. But literature began to set itself up as a rival to philosophy when people like Cervantes and Shakespeare began to suspect that human beings were, and ought to be, so diverse that there is no point in pretending that they all carry a single truth deep in their bosoms. Santayana pointed to this seismic cultural shift in his essay “The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare.”⁵ That essay might equally well have been called “The Absence of Either Religion or Philosophy in Shakespeare” or simply “The Absence of Truth in Shakespeare.”

I suggested earlier that “Do you believe in truth?” can be given both sense and urgency if it is reformulated as “Do you think that there is a single set of beliefs that can serve a redemptive role in the lives of all human beings, that can be rationally justified to all human beings under optimal communicative conditions, and that will thus form the natural terminus of inquiry?” To answer “yes” to this reformulated question is to take philosophy as the guide of life. It is to agree with Socrates that there is a set of beliefs that is both susceptible of rational justification and such as to take rightful precedence over every other consideration in determining what to do with one’s life. The premise of philosophy is that there is a way things really are—a way humanity and the rest of the universe are and always will be, independent of any merely contingent human needs and interests. Knowledge of this way is redemptive. It can therefore replace religion. The striving for Truth can take place of the search for God.

It is not clear that Homer, or even Sophocles, could have made sense of this suggestion. Before Plato dreamt them up, the constellation of ideas necessary to make sense of it were not available. Cervantes and Shakespeare understood Plato’s suggestion, but they distrusted his motives. Their distrust led them to play up diversity

and downplay commonality—to underline the differences between human beings rather than looking for a common human nature. This change of emphasis weakens the grip of the Platonic assumption that all these different sorts of people should be arranged in a hierarchy, judged on the basis of their relative success at attaining a single goal. Initiatives like Cervantes's and Shakespeare's helped create a new sort of intellectual—one who does not take the availability of redemptive truth for granted, and is not much interested in whether either God or Truth exist.

This change helped create today's high culture, one to which religion and philosophy have become marginal. To be sure, there are still numerous religious intellectuals, and even more philosophical ones. But bookish youngsters in search of redemption nowadays look first to novels, plays, and poems. The sort of books which the eighteenth century thought of as marginal have become central. The authors of *Rasselas* and of *Candide* helped bring about, but could hardly have foreseen, a culture in which the most revered writers neither write nor read either sermons or treatises on the nature of man and the universe.

For members of the literary culture, redemption is to be achieved by getting in touch with the present limits of the human imagination. That is why a literary culture is always in search of novelty, always hoping to spot what Shelley called "the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present,"⁶ rather than trying to escape from the temporal to the eternal. It is a premise of this culture that though the imagination has present limits, these limits are capable of being extended forever. The imagination endlessly consumes its own artifacts. It is an ever-living, ever-expanding, fire. It is as subject to time and chance as are the flies and the worms, but although it endures and preserves the memory of its past, it will continue to transcend its previous limits. Though the fear of belatedness is ever present within the literary culture, this very fear makes for a more intense blaze.

The sort of person I am calling a "literary intellectual" thinks that a life that is not lived close to the present limits of the human imagination is not worth living. For the Socratic idea of self-examination and self-knowledge, the literary intellectual substitutes

the idea of enlarging the self by becoming acquainted with still more ways of being human. For the religious idea that a certain book or tradition might connect you up with a supremely powerful or supremely lovable nonhuman person, the literary intellectual substitutes the Bloomian thought that the more books you read, the more ways of being human you have considered, the more human you become—the less tempted by dreams of an escape from time and chance, the more convinced that we humans have nothing to rely on save one another. The great virtue of the literary culture that is gradually coming into being is that it tells young intellectuals that the only source of redemption is the human imagination, and that this fact should occasion pride rather than despair.

From the point of view of this culture, philosophy was a transitional stage in a process of gradually increasing self-reliance. Philosophy's attempt to replace God with Truth requires the conviction that a set of beliefs that can be justified to all human beings will also fill all the needs of all human beings. But that idea was an inherently unstable compromise between the masochistic urge to submit to the nonhuman and the need to take proper pride in our humanity. Redemptive truth is an attempt to find something that is not made by human beings but to which human beings have a special, privileged relation not shared by the animals. The intrinsic nature of things is like a god in its independence of us, and yet—so Socrates and Hegel tell us—self-knowledge will suffice to get us in touch with it. One way to see the quest for knowledge of such a quasi-divinity is as Sartre saw it: it is a futile passion, a foredoomed attempt to become a for-itself-in-itself. But it would be better to see philosophy as one of our greatest imaginative achievements, on a par with the invention of the gods.

Philosophers have often described religion as a primitive and insufficiently reflective attempt to philosophize. But, as I said earlier, a fully self-conscious literary culture would think of both religion and philosophy as relatively primitive, yet glorious, literary genres. They are genres in which it is now becoming increasingly difficult to write, but the genres that are replacing them might never have emerged had they not been read as swerves away from religion, and later as swerves away from philosophy. Religion and

philosophy are not merely, from this point of view, ladders to be thrown away. Rather, they are stages in a process of maturation, a process that we should continually look back to, and recapitulate, in the hope of attaining still greater self-reliance.

4 The Culmination of Philosophy: Idealist and Materialist Metaphysics

In the hope of making this account of philosophy as a transitional genre more plausible, I shall say something about the two great movements in which philosophy culminated. Philosophy began to come into its own when the thinkers of the Enlightenment no longer had to hide themselves behind the sort of masks worn by Descartes, Hobbes, and Spinoza, and were able to be openly atheistic. These masks could be dropped after the French Revolution. That event, by making it plausible that human beings might build a new heaven and a new earth, made God seem far less necessary than before.

That newfound self-reliance produced two great metaphysical systems. First came the metaphysics of German idealism, and second, the reaction against idealism which was materialist metaphysics, the apotheosis of the results of natural science. The first movement belongs to the past. Materialist metaphysics, however, is still with us. It is, in fact, pretty much the only version of redemptive truth presently on offer. It is philosophy's last hurrah, its last attempt to provide redemptive truth and thereby avoid being demoted to the status of a literary genre.

This is not the place to recapitulate the rise and fall of German idealism, nor to eulogize what Heidegger called "the greatness, breadth, and originality of that spiritual world." It suffices for my present purposes to say that Hegel, the most original of the idealists, believed himself to have been given the first satisfactory proof of the existence of God, and the first satisfactory solution to the traditional theological problem of evil. He was, in his own eyes, the first fully successful natural theologian—the first to reconcile Socrates with Christ by showing that the Incarnation was not an act of grace on God's part but rather a necessity. "God," Hegel said, "had

to have a Son” because eternity is nothing without time, God nothing without man, Truth nothing without its historical emergence.

In Hegel’s eyes, the Platonic hope of escape from the temporal to the eternal was a primitive, albeit necessary, stage of philosophical thinking—a stage that the Christian doctrine of Incarnation has helped us outgrow. Now that Kant has opened the way to seeing mind and world as interdependent, Hegel believed, we are in a position to see that philosophy can bridge the Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal, just as Christ’s stay on earth overcame the distinction between God and man.

Idealist metaphysics seemed both true and demonstrable to some of the best minds of the nineteenth century. Josiah Royce, for example, wrote book after book arguing that Hegel was right: simple armchair reflection on the presuppositions of common sense, exactly the sort of philosophizing that Socrates practiced and commended, will lead you to recognize the truth of pantheism as surely as reflection on geometrical diagrams will lead you to the Pythagorean theorem. But the verdict of the literary culture on this metaphysics was nicely formulated by Kierkegaard when he said that if Hegel had written at the end of his books that “this was all just a thought experiment” he would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived, but that, as it was, he was merely a buffoon.⁷

I would rephrase Kierkegaard’s point as follows: if Hegel had been able to stop thinking that he had given us redemptive truth, and claimed instead to have given us something *better* than redemptive truth—namely, a way of holding all the previous products of the human imagination together in a single vision—he would have been the first philosopher to admit that a better cultural product than philosophy had come on the market. He would have been the first philosopher to self-consciously replace philosophy with literature, just as Socrates and Plato were the first self-consciously to replace religion with philosophy. But instead Hegel presented himself (at least part of the time) as having discovered Absolute Truth, and men like Royce took him with a seriousness that now strikes us as both endearing and ludicrous. So it was left to Nietzsche, in *The Birth of Tragedy*, to tell us that the premise common to Socrates and Hegel should be rejected, and that the

invention of the idea of self-knowledge was a great imaginative achievement that has outlived its usefulness.

Between Hegel's time and Nietzsche's, however, there arose the second of the great philosophical movements. It bore the same relation to Democritus and Lucretius that German idealism had borne to Parmenides and Plotinus. This was the attempt to put natural science in the place of both religion and Socratic reflection, to see empirical inquiry as providing exactly what Socrates thought it could never give us—redemptive truth.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, it had become clear that mathematics and empirical science were going to be the only areas of culture in which one might conceivably hope to get unanimous, rational agreement—the only disciplines able to provide beliefs that would not be overturned as history rolls along. They were the only sources of cumulative results—of propositions that were plausible candidates for the status of insight into the way things are in themselves. Unified natural science still seems to many intellectuals to be the answer to Socrates' prayers.

On the other hand, pretty much everybody in the nineteenth century had come to agree with Hume that Plato's model of cognitive success—mathematics—was never going to offer us anything redemptive. Only a few flaky neo-Pythagoreans still saw mathematics as having more than practical and aesthetic interest. So nineteenth century positivists drew the moral that the only other source of rational agreement and unshakable truth, empirical science, just *had* to have a redemptive function. Since philosophy had always taught that an account that bound everything together into a coherent whole would have redemptive value, and since the collapse of idealist metaphysics had left materialism as the only possible candidate for such an account, the positivists concluded that natural science was all the philosophy we would ever need.

This project of giving redemptive status to empirical science still appeals to two sorts of present-day intellectuals. The first is the kind of philosopher who insists that natural science attains objective truth in a way that no other portion of culture does. These philosophers usually go on to claim that the natural scientist is the paradigmatic possessor of intellectual virtues, notably the love of truth,

that are rarely sought among literary critics. The second sort of intellectual who continues along the lines laid down by the nineteenth century positivists is the kind of scientist who announces that the latest work in his discipline has deep philosophical implications: that advances in evolutionary biology or cognitive science, for example, do more than tell us how things work and what they are made of. They also tell us, these scientists say, something about how to live, about human nature, about what we really are. They provide, if not redemption, at least wisdom—not merely instructions on how to produce more effective tools for getting what we want but wise counsel about what we should want.

I shall take up these two groups of people separately. The problem about the attempt by philosophers to treat the empirical scientist as a paradigm of intellectual virtue is that the astrophysicist's love of truth seems no different from that of the classical philologist or the archive-oriented historian. All these people are trying hard to get something right. So, when it comes to that, are the master carpenter, the skilled accountant, and the careful surgeon. The need to get it right is central to all these people's sense of who they are, of what makes their lives worthwhile.

It is certainly the case that without people whose lives are centered around this need we should never have had much in the way of civilization. The free play of the imagination is possible only because of the substructure literal-minded people have built. No artisans, no poets. No theoretical scientists to provide the technology of an industrialized world, few people with sufficient money to send their children off to be initiated into a literary culture. But there is no reason to take the contributions of the natural scientist to this substructure as having a moral or philosophical significance that is lacking in those of the carpenter, the accountant, and the surgeon.

John Dewey thought that the fact that the mathematical physicist enjoys greater prestige than the skilled artisan is an unfortunate legacy of the Platonic–Aristotelian distinction between eternal truths and empirical truth, the elevation of leisured contemplation above sweaty practicality. His point might be restated by saying that the prestige of the scientific theorist is an unfortunate legacy of the Socratic idea that what we might all agree to be true is, as a result

of rational debate, a reflection of something more than the fact of agreement—the idea that intersubjective agreement under ideal communicative conditions is a token of correspondence to the way things really are.

The current debate among analytic philosophers about whether truth is a matter of correspondence to reality, and the parallel debate over Kuhn's denial that science is asymptotically approaching the really real, are disputes between those who see empirical science as fulfilling at least some of Plato's hopes and those who think that those hopes should be abandoned. The former philosophers take it as a matter of unquestionable common sense that adding a brick to the edifice of knowledge is a matter of more accurately aligning thought and language with the way things really are. Their philosophical opponents take this so-called common sense to be merely what Dewey thought it: a relic of the religious hope that redemption can come from contact with something non-human and supremely powerful. To abandon the latter idea, the idea that links philosophy with religion, would mean acknowledging both the ability of scientists to add bricks to the edifice of knowledge and the practical utility of scientific theories for prediction while insisting on the irrelevance of both achievements to searches for redemption.

These debates among the analytic philosophers have little to do with the activities of the second sort of people whom I have labeled "materialist metaphysicians." These are the scientists who think that the public at large should take an interest in the latest discoveries about the genome, or cerebral localization, or child development, or quantum mechanics. Such scientists are good at dramatizing the contrast between the old scientific theories and the shiny new ones, but they are bad at explaining why we should care about the difference. They are like critics of art and literature who are good at pointing to the differences between the paintings and poems of a few years ago and those being produced now, but bad at explaining why these changes are important.

There is, however, a difference between such critics and the sort of scientists I am talking about. The former usually have the sense to avoid the mistake Clement Greenberg made—the mistake of

claiming that what fills the art galleries this year is what all the ages have been leading up to, and that there is an inner logic to the history of the products of the imagination that has now reached its destined outcome. But the scientists still retain the idea that the latest product of the scientific imagination is not just an improvement on what was previously imagined, but is also closer to the intrinsic nature of things. That is why they found Kuhn's suggestion that they think of themselves as problem solvers so insulting. Their rhetoric remains "We have substituted reality for appearance!" rather than "We have solved some long-standing problems!" or "We have made it new!"

The trouble with this rhetoric is that it puts a glossy metaphysical varnish on a useful scientific product. It suggests that we have not only learned more about how to predict and control our environment and ourselves but have also done something more—something of redemptive significance. But the successive achievements of modern science exhausted their philosophical significance when they made clear that there are no spooks—that a causal account of the relations between spatiotemporal events did not require the operation of nonphysical forces.

Modern science, in short, has helped us see that if you want a metaphysics, then a materialistic metaphysics is the only one to have. But it has not given us any reason to think that we need a metaphysics. The need for metaphysics lasted only as long as the hope for redemptive truth lasted. But by the time that materialism triumphed over idealism, this hope had waned. So the reaction of most contemporary intellectuals to gee-whiz announcements of new scientific discoveries is "So what?" This reaction is not, as C. P. Snow thought, a matter of pretentious and ignorant litterateurs condescending to honest, hardworking empirical inquirers. It is the perfectly sensible reaction of someone who is thinking about ends and is offered information about means.

The literary culture's attitude toward materialist metaphysics is, and should be, something like this: whereas both Plato's and Hegel's attempts to give us something more interesting than physics were laudable attempts to find a redemptive discipline to put in the place of religion, a materialist metaphysics is just physics

getting above itself. Modern science is a gloriously imaginative way of describing things, brilliantly successful for the purpose for which it was developed—namely, predicting and controlling phenomena. But it should not pretend to have the sort of redemptive power claimed by its defeated rival, idealist metaphysics.

Questions of the “So what?” sort began to be posed to scientists by intellectuals of the nineteenth century who were gradually learning, as Nietzsche was to put it, to see science through the optic of art, and art through that of life. Nietzsche’s master Emerson was one such figure, and Baudelaire another. Although many of the literary intellectuals of this period thought of themselves as having transcended romanticism, they nevertheless could agree with Schiller that the further maturation of mankind will be achieved through what Kant called “the aesthetic” rather than through what he called “the ethical.” They could also endorse Shelley’s claim that the great task of human emancipation from priests and tyrants could have been accomplished without “Locke, Hume, Gibbon, Voltaire and Rousseau” but that “it exceeds all imagination to conceive what would have been the moral condition of the world if neither Dante, Petrarch, Boccaccio, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Calderon, Lord Bacon nor Milton, had ever existed; if Raphael and Michael Angelo had never been born; if the Hebrew poetry had never been translated, if a revival of the study of Greek literature had never taken place, if no monuments of ancient sculpture had been handed down to us, and if the poetry and the religion of the ancient world had been extinguished together with its belief.”⁸

What Shelley said of Locke and Hume he might also have said of Galileo, Newton, and Lavoisier. What each of them said was well argued, useful, and true. But the sort of truth that is the product of successful argument cannot, Shelley thought, improve our moral condition. Of Galileo’s and Locke’s productions we may reasonably ask “Yes, but is it true?” But there is little point, Shelley rightly thought, in asking this question about Milton. “Objectively true,” in the sense of “such as to gain permanent assent from all future members of the relevant expert culture,” is not a notion that will ever be useful to literary intellectuals, for the progress of the literary imagination is not a matter of accumulating *results*.

We philosophers who are accused of not having sufficient respect for objective truth—the ones whom the materialist metaphysicians like to call “postmodern relativists”—think of objectivity as intersubjectivity. So we can happily agree that scientists achieve objective truth in a way that litterateurs do not. But we explain this phenomenon sociologically rather than philosophically—by pointing out that natural scientists are organized into expert cultures in a way that literary intellectuals should not try to organize themselves. You can have an expert culture if you agree on what you want to get, but not if you are wondering what sort of life you ought to desire. We know what purposes scientific theories are supposed to serve. But we are not now, and never will be, in a position to say what purposes novels, poems, and plays are supposed to serve. For such books continually redefine our purposes.

5 The Literary Culture and Democratic Politics

So far I have said nothing about the relation of the literary culture to politics. I shall close by turning to that topic. For the quarrel between those who see the rise of the literary culture as a good thing and those who see it as a bad thing is largely a quarrel about what sort of high culture will do the most to create and sustain the climate of tolerance that flourishes best in democratic societies.

Those who argue that a science-centered culture is best for this purpose, set the love of truth against hatred, passion, prejudice, superstition, and all the other forces of unreason from which Socrates and Plato claimed that philosophy could save us. But those on the other side of the argument are dubious about the Platonic opposition between reason and unreason. They see no need to relate the difference between tolerant conversability and stiff-necked unwillingness to hear the other side to a distinction between a higher part of ourselves that enables us to achieve redemption by getting in touch with nonhuman reality and another part that is merely animal.

The strong point of those who think that a proper respect for objective truth, and thus for science, is important for sustaining a climate of tolerance and good will is that argument is essential

to both science and democracy. Both when choosing between alternative scientific theories and when choosing between alternative pieces of legislation, we want people to base their decisions on arguments—arguments that start from premises that can be made plausible to anyone who cares to look into the matter.

The priests rarely provided such arguments, nor do the literary intellectuals. So it is tempting to think of a preference for literature over science as a rejection of argument in favor of oracular pronouncements—a regression to something uncomfortably like the prephilosophical, religious, stage of Western intellectual life. Seen from this perspective, the rise of a literary culture looks like the treason of the clerks.

But those of us who rejoice in the emergence of the literary culture can counter this charge by saying that although argumentation is essential for projects of social cooperation, redemption is an individual, private, matter. Just as the rise of religious toleration depended on making a distinction between the needs of society and the needs of the individual, and on saying that religion was not necessary for the former, so the literary culture asks us to disjoin political deliberation from projects of redemption. This means acknowledging that private hopes for authenticity and autonomy should be left at home when the citizens of a democratic society foregather to deliberate about what is to be done.

Making this move amounts to saying: the only way in which science is relevant to politics is that the natural scientists provide a good example of social cooperation, of an expert culture in which argumentation flourishes. They thereby provide a model for political deliberation—a model of honesty, tolerance, and trust. This ability is a matter of procedure rather than results, which is why gangs of carpenters or teams of engineers can provide as good a model as do departments of astrophysics. The difference between reasoned agreement on how to solve a problem that has arisen in the course of constructing a house or a bridge, and reasoned agreement on what physicists sometimes call “a theory of everything” is, in this context, irrelevant. For whatever the last theory of everything tells us, it will do nothing to provide either political guidance or individual redemption.

The claim I have just made may seem arrogant and dogmatic, for it is certainly the case that some results of empirical inquiry have, in the past, made a difference to our self-image. Galileo and Darwin expelled various varieties of spooks by showing the sufficiency of a materialist account. They thereby made it much easier for us to move from a religious high culture to a secular, merely philosophical one. So my argument on behalf of the literary culture depends on the claim that getting rid of spooks, of causal agency that does not supervene on the behavior of elementary particles, has exhausted the utility of natural science for either redemptive or political purposes.

I do not put this claim forward as a result of philosophical reasoning or insight, but merely as a prediction about what the future holds in store. A similar prediction led the philosophers of the eighteenth century to think that the Christian religion had done about all that it could for the moral condition of humanity, and that it was time to put religion behind us and to put metaphysics, either idealist or materialist, in its place. When literary intellectuals assume that natural science has nothing to offer us except an edifying example of tolerant conversability, they are doing something analogous to what the *philosophes* did when they said that even the best of the priests had nothing to offer us save edifying examples of charity and decency. Reducing science from a possible source of redemptive truth to a model of rational cooperation is the contemporary analogue of the reduction of the Gospels from a recipe for attaining eternal happiness to a compendium of sound moral advice. That was the sort of reduction that Kant and Jefferson recommended, and that liberal Protestants of the last two centuries have gradually achieved.

To put this last point another way: both the Christian religion and materialist metaphysics turned out to be self-consuming artifacts. The need for religious orthodoxy was undermined by Saint Paul's insistence on the primacy of love, and by the gradual realization that a religion of love could not ask everyone to recite the same creed. The need for a metaphysics was undermined by the ability of modern science to see the human mind as an exceptionally complex nervous system and thus to see itself in pragmatic

rather than metaphysical terms. Science showed us how to see empirical inquiry as the use of this extra physiological equipment to gain steadily greater mastery over the environment, rather than as a way of replacing appearance with reality. Just as the eighteenth century became able to see Christianity not as a revelation from on high but as continuous with Socratic reflection, so the twentieth century became able to see natural science not as revealing the intrinsic nature of reality but as continuous with the sort of practical problem solving that both beavers and carpenters are good at.

To give up the idea that there is an intrinsic nature of reality to be discovered either by the priests, or the philosophers, or the scientists, is to disjoin the need for redemption from the search for universal agreement. It is to give up the search for an accurate account of human nature, and thus for a recipe for leading the good life for man. Once these searches are given up, expanding the limits of the human imagination steps forward to assume the role that obedience to the divine will played in a religious culture, and the role that the discovery of what is really real played in a philosophical culture. But this substitution is no reason to give up the search for a single utopian form of political life—the good global society.

6 The “Decadence” of a Literary Culture

I have now said all I can to counter the claim that the rise of the literary culture is a relapse into irrationality, and that a proper respect for the ability of science to achieve objective truth is essential to the morale of a democratic society. But a related claim, much vaguer and harder to pin down, has been even more influential. This is that a literary culture is *decadent*—that it lacks the healthy-mindedness and vigor common to proselytizing Christians, science-worshipping positivists, and Marxist revolutionaries. A high culture centered around literature, one that wishes not to get things right but to make things new, will, it is often said, be a culture of languid and self-involved aesthetes.

The best rebuttal to this suggestion is Oscar Wilde’s “The Soul of Man Under Socialism.” The message of that essay parallels those of Mill’s *On Liberty* and of Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*. It is that the only

point of getting rid of the priests and the kings, of setting up democratic governments, of taking from each according to her abilities and giving to each according to her needs, and of thereby creating the Good Global Society, is to make it possible for people to lead the sort of lives they prefer, as long as their doing so does not diminish the opportunities of other humans to do the same thing. As Wilde put it “Socialism itself will be of value simply because it will lead to Individualism.”⁹ Part of Wilde’s point is that there can be no objection to self-involved aesthetes—that is to say, people whose passion is to explore the present limits of the human imagination—as long as they do not use more than their fair share of the social product.

This claim itself, however, strikes many people as decadent. We were not, they would urge, put on this earth to enjoy ourselves, but to do the right thing. Socialism, they think, would not stir our hearts were it no more than a means to individualism, or if the goal of proletarian revolution were merely to make it possible for everybody to become a bourgeois intellectual. This sense that human existence has some point other than pleasure is what keeps the battle between Mill and Kant alive in courses on moral philosophy, just as the sense that natural science must have some point other than practical problem solving keeps the struggle between Kuhn and his opponents alive in courses in philosophy of science. Mill and Kuhn—and, more generally, utilitarians and pragmatists—are still suspected of letting down the side, diminishing human dignity, reducing our noblest aspirations to self-indulgent stimulation of our favorite clusters of neurons.

The antagonism between those who think, with Schiller and Wilde, that human beings are at their best when at play, and those who think that they are at their best when they strive, seems to me at the bottom of the conflicts that have marked the rise of the literary culture. Once again, I would urge that these conflicts be seen as recapitulating those that marked the transition from religion to philosophy. In that earlier transition, the people who thought that a human life that did not strive for perfect obedience to the divine will was a relapse into animality faced off against those who thought that the ideal of such submission was unworthy of beings who could

think for themselves. In the current transition, the people who think that we need to hang onto Kantian ideas like “the moral law” and “things as they are in themselves” are facing off against people who think that these ideas are symptoms of insufficient self-reliance, of a self-deluding attempt to find dignity in the acceptance of bondage and freedom in the recognition of constraint.

The only way to resolve this sort of quarrel, it seems to me, is to say that the kinds of people to whom a utopian society would give the resources and the leisure to do their individualistic thing will include Kantian strivers as well as self-involved aesthetes, people who cannot live without religion and people who despise it, nature’s metaphysicians as well as nature’s pragmatists. For in this utopia, as Rawls has said, there will be no need for people to agree on the point of human existence, the good life for man, or any other topic of similar generality.

If people who heartily disagree about such issues can agree to cooperate in the functioning of the practices and institutions that have, in Wilde’s words, “substituted cooperation for competition,”¹⁰ that will suffice. The Kant versus Mill issue, like the issue between metaphysicians and pragmatists, will seem as little worth quarreling about as will the issue between the believers and the atheists. For we humans need not agree about the nature or the end of man in order to help facilitate our neighbor’s ability to act on her own convictions on these matters, just so long as those actions do not interfere with our freedom to act on our own convictions.

In short, just as we have, in the past few centuries, learned that the difference of opinion between the believer and the atheist does not have to be settled before the two can cooperate on communal projects, so we may learn to set aside all the differences between all the various searches for redemption when we cooperate to build Wilde’s utopia. In that utopia, the literary culture will not be the only, or even the dominant, form of high culture.

That is because there will be *no* dominant form. High culture will no longer be thought of as the place where the aim of the society as a whole is debated and decided, and where it is a matter of social concern which sort of intellectual is ruling the roost. Nor will

there be much concern about the gap that yawns between popular culture, the culture of people who have never felt the need for redemption, and the high culture of the intellectuals—the people who are always wanting to be something more or different than they presently are. In utopia, the religious or philosophical need to live up to the nonhuman, and the need of the literary intellectuals to explore the present limits of the human imagination will be viewed as matters of taste. They will be viewed by nonintellectuals in the same relaxed, tolerant, and uncomprehending way that we presently regard our neighbor's obsession with bird watching, or collecting hubcaps, or discovering the secrets of the great pyramids.

To get along in utopia, however, the literary intellectuals will have to tone down their rhetoric. Certain passages in Wilde will not bear repeating, as when he speaks of “the poets, the philosophers, the men of science, the men of culture—in a word, the real men, the men who have realized themselves, and in whom all humanity gains a partial realization.”¹¹ The idea that some men are more really men than others contradicts Wilde's own better wisdom, as when he says “There is no one type for man. There are as many perfections as there are imperfect men.”¹² The same words might have been written by Nietzsche, but to take them seriously we must actively forget Zarathustra's contempt for the “last men,” the men who feel no need for redemption. In utopia, the literary culture will have learned not to give itself airs. It will no longer feel the temptation to make invidious and quasi-metaphysical distinctions between real and less real men.

To sum up, I am suggesting that we see the literary culture as itself a self-consuming artifact, and perhaps the last of its kind. For in utopia the intellectuals will have given up the idea that there is a standard against which the products of the human imagination can be measured other than their social utility, as this utility is judged by a maximally free, leisured, and tolerant global community. They will have stopped thinking that the human imagination is getting somewhere, that there is one far off cultural event toward which all cultural creation moves. They will have given up the identification of redemption with the attainment of perfection. They will have taken fully to heart the maxim that it is the journey that matters.

Notes

1. Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 233–234. Page references to this edition in the text are preceded by *NC*.
2. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1948), and *The Public and Its Problems* (Chicago, Ill.: Gateway Books, 1946); Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1987), and *Between Facts and Norms*, trans. William Rehg (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1996).
3. Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (New York: Scribner, 2000).
4. Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), pp. 167–173. See the discussions of *das Gerede* and *die Neugier* in sections 35–36.
5. George Santayana, “The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare” (1900) in *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*, ed. William G. Holzberger and Herman J. Saatkamp Jr. (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990), pp. 91–101.
6. Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defense of Poetry” (1821) in *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 701.
7. Søren Kierkegaard, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 182.
8. Shelley, *Major Works*, p. 695.
9. Oscar Wilde, “The Soul of Man Under Socialism” (1891) in *The Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (London: Collins, 1966), p. 1080.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*, p. 1087.