

## PREFACE

The lectures in this volume attempt to envisage what philosophy would be like if our culture became secularized through and through--if the idea of obedience to a non-human authority were to disappear completely. One way of putting the contrast between an incompletely and an completely secularized culture is to say that the former retains a sense of the sublime. Complete secularization would mean general agreement on the sufficiency of the beautiful.

The sublime is unrepresentable, undescribable, ineffable. By contrast, a merely beautiful object or state of affairs unifies a manifold in a especially satisfying way. The beautiful harmonizes finite things with other finite things. The sublime escapes finitude, and therefore both unity and plurality. To contemplate the beautiful is to contemplate something manageable, something which consists of recognizable parts put together in recognizable ways. To be swept away by the sublime is to be carried beyond both recognition and description.

Unlike beauty, sublimity is morally ambiguous. Plato's Idea of the Good is of something sublimely admirable. The Christian Idea of Sin is of something sublimely evil. The romance of Platonism, and of the Beatific Vision, is of something unspeakably precious--something which even Homer or Dante can never hope to capture. The romance of Radical Evil is the romance of something unspeakably depraved, something utterly different from mere failure to make the right choice. It is the deliberate willingness to turn away from God. It is inconceivable how one could make that turn--how

Satan could have rebelled. But it is also inconceivable how one could look on the face of God and live.

Not all religions require sublimity, but orthodox Christian theology--the religious discourse which has dominated the West--has always brushed aside the finitely beautiful and the finitely ugly, the finitely benevolent and the finitely vicious, in favor of the infinite distance between us and the non-human being whom we vainly attempt to imitate. This theology borrowed its imagery from Greek philosophy's attempt to abstract from finite human purposes. Carpenters and painters, politicians and merchants, calculate finite means to finite ends. Philosophy, the Greeks said, must transcend such ends.

The metaphors of pure luminosity and abyssal darkness in Plato's Republic, and the idea of an unmoved mover in Book Lambda of Aristotle's Metaphysics provide the materials for a surrogate religion--one designed to meet the needs of a certain kind of intellectual, the kind obsessed with purity. Such intellectuals have no use for the religions of the people, for their sense of the sublime is too intense to be satisfied by the merely beautiful, their need for purity too great to be satisfied by stories about highly-sexed Olympians. The chaste Fathers of the Christian Church inherited from these intellectuals the idea that the first causes of things must be immaterial and infinite--that the beauties of the material world were at best symbols of the immaterial sublime.

After Galileo and Newton, philosophy turned over cosmology,

and the question of first causes, to natural science. But the epistemological, subjectivist, twist which Descartes gave philosophy produced a new version of the Sublime. This was the infinite, abyssal, unbridgeable gap between our pragmatic minds or jerrybuilt languages and Reality As It Is In Itself. The problematic of modern philosophy has, I argued in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature, centered around the impossible attempt to cross this gap. The pathos of epistemology is the pathos created by setting ourselves an unreachable goal--defining the point of inquiry as the attainment of a description of reality which would swing free of human needs and interests. Epistemology restages the orthodox Christian narrative of the impossible attempt of a soul burdened by Original Sin to imitate God--the impossible attempt of a conditioned being to live up to the unconditioned.

This pathos is reworked yet again when Kant denies knowledge in order to make room for moral faith--when he tells us that we can give up on the impossible attempt to know things as they are in themselves, but only if we are then willing to take on an equally impossible task. This new task is that of bringing an empirical self under the control of an unconditional moral demand--the demand that none of the components of that self shall serve as a motive for action.

"Duty, thou sublime and awful name!", Kant says, reducing both the beautiful and the ugly things of this spatio-temporal world to what Fichte called "the sensible material of our duty". Still later this moralistic version of the sublime was to take the form of the infinite

distance that separates us from the Other.

Nietzsche's account of "How the True World Became a Fable" lies in the background of these lectures, as in that of much of twentieth-century philosophy. Nietzsche tells a story of how we got from Plato to Kant, and of how we then awoke from a gradually fading nightmare to "breakfast, and the return of cheerfulness". John Dewey told a complementary story of a post-Kantian awakening by showing how the French Revolution enlarged our sense of the politically possible and how industrial technology has enlarged our sense of other mundane possibilities. These changes, Dewey says, made us realize that we may be able to make the human future very different from the human past: they help us get over the philosophical idea that we can know our own nature and limits. In the last two centuries, it has become possible to describe the human situation not by describing our relation to something ineffably different from ourselves, but by drawing a contrast between our ugly past and present and the more beautiful future in which our descendants may live.

The philosophical views sketched in these lectures offer a way of thinking about the human situation which abjures both eternity and sublimity, and is finitistic through and through. The lectures try to sketch the result of putting aside the cosmological, epistemological and moral versions of the sublime: God as immaterial first cause, Reality as utterly alien to our epistemic subjectivity, and moral purity as unreachable by our inherently sinful empirical selves. I follow Dewey in suggesting that we build our philosophical

reflections around our political hopes: around the project of fashioning institutions and customs which will make human life, finite and mortal life, more beautiful.

Simultaneously with Nietzsche, Dewey urged that we turn our backs on the very idea of Reality As It Is In Itself. Nietzsche saw this idea as an expression of the same weakness, the same masochistic desire to bow down before the non-human, as had permeated Christian "slave-morality". Dewey saw it as a survival of the ancient world's organization of society into artisans and priests. Nietzsche said that if we can get rid of the idea of The True World, we shall also get rid of the idea of a World of Appearance. Dewey added that it would help to get rid of the appearance-reality contrast if we viewed the beliefs we call "true" pragmatically, as tools for adjusting means to ends, rather than as representations of the intrinsic nature of reality.

For Nietzsche and Dewey, the idea that Reality has an intrinsic nature which common sense and science may never know--that our knowledge may be only of Appearance--is a relic of the idea that there is something non-human which has authority over us. The idea of a non-human authority and the quest for sublimity are both products of self-abasement. Pragmatism says that the conditioned is all there is: that human beings have nothing to know save their relations to each other and to other finite beings. To be satisfied with the conditioned, to give up the quest for the infinite, would be to rest content with beauty. Those who have achieved such contentment will

see the pursuit of truth as the pursuit of human happiness, rather than as the fulfillment of a desire which transcends mere happiness.

Nietzsche's hostility to the ascetic priests was, unfortunately, combined with a contempt for democracy. He was sickened by the thought of "the last men"--the people who were content with ordinary human happiness. Dewey agreed with Nietzsche that we should set aside ascetic ideals, but he disagreed with him about greatness. Nietzsche feared that human greatness would be impossible if we all became happy citizens of a democratic utopia. Dewey was not interested in greatness except as a means to the greater happiness of the greatest number. For him, great human beings (great poets, great scientists, great thinkers) were finite means to further finite ends. They helped make new, richer, more complex, and more joyful forms of human life available to the rest of us.

Throughout the twentieth century, there has been a struggle between secularists who follow Nietzsche in hankering for a kind of greatness which cannot be viewed as a means to a larger end, and secularists who are pragmatic and finitistic in the manner of Dewey. Heidegger is an example of the former. The early Heidegger found a release from the merely beautiful in the sublime, abyssal, thought of death, and also in the contrast between the merely ontic and the sublimely ontological. The later Heidegger contrasted the mere happiness of the inhabitants of a peaceful and prosperous utopia, living with a technologically controlled environment, with the spiritual greatness which would result from a sense of the Truth of

Being.

Had Dewey read the later Heidegger, he would have seen nothing wrong die Zeit des Weltbildes, nor with the technological utopia described and dismissed in Frage nach der Technik. He would have welcomed a world of beautiful Gestelle, beautiful rearrangements of the human and natural world, rearrangements made in order to make possible richer and fuller human lives. Habermas, who did read the later Heidegger, is equally unconcerned with the need for something more than happiness. For those two thinkers, there is nothing higher or deeper to be yearned for than a utopian democratic society--nothing more to be desired the peace and prosperity which would make possible social justice.

For thinkers of this sort--those who are content with beauty--the proper place for sublimity is in the private consciousness of individuals. The sense of the Presence of God, like the sense of Radical Evil, may survive in the interior space of certain minds. Those minds are likely to responsible for the production of the great works of the human imagination--for astonishing works of art, for example. But for thinkers like Dewey, Rawls and Habermas these works are not the proper concern of philosophical reflection. Such reflection should instead be concerned with creating a society in which there will be room for many different forms of private consciousness--for both those who have, and those who lack, a sense of the sublime.

The Heideggerian sense that justice and happiness are not enough persists among post-Heideggerian intellectuals. Sometimes this

sense appears in the form of the belief that justice and happiness are "as impossible as they are necessary". The latter phrase appears frequently in the work of Derrida, a great imaginative writer who takes sublimity and ineffability as his principal themes. Similar notions appear in the work of writers influenced by Lacan's notion of "the sublime object of desire"--notably Slavoj Zizek. Lacan and Zizek see both art and politics as centering around an unachievable but unforgettable sublimity, for which the mere beauty of peace, prosperity and happiness can never substitute.

From the point of view taken in these lectures, the attempt to make sublimity central to reflection on the human future is as dangerous as making God, or Sin, or Truth central to such reflection. As I see it, philosophy should treat the quest for the unconditioned, the infinite, the transcendent and the sublime as a natural human tendency--one which Freud has helped us understand. We should see it, as Freud saw the sublimation of sexual desire, as a precondition for certain striking individual achievements. But we should not see it as relevant to our public, socio-political, cultural prospects.

This means that we should separate the quest for greatness and sublimity from the quest for justice and happiness. The former is optional, the latter is not. The former may be required of us by our duties to ourselves. The latter is required of us by our duties to other human beings. In religious cultures, it was believed that besides these two sets of duties, we also had duties to God. In the completely

secularized culture I envisage, there will be no duties of this last sort: our only obligations will be to our fellows and to our own fantasies. So the only place for the sublime will be in the realm of the individual imagination--in the fantasy lives of certain people, those whose idiosyncracies make them capable of feats which the rest of us find both awesome and inexplicable.

Since I initially broached this suggestion of the need to split the private from the public (in my Contingency, Irony and Solidarity) I have been criticized for trying to put the two in water-tight compartments. I have no wish to do that. The utility of imaginative feats, bound by no social norms, for the public discourse of later ages is undeniable. Had thinkers like Plato, Augustine and Kant, and artists like Dante, El Greco and Dostoevsky, not aspired to sublimity, the rest of us would not possess the beautiful residues of these aspirations. Our lives would be far less varied, and the forms of happiness for which we are able to strive would be much poorer. But this does not mean that we should arrange our public institutions to suit the quest for greatness or for sublimity.

We have learned from the history of theocratic cultures, and of the quasi-theocratic state religions of the twentieth century, not to think of public institutions as vehicles of greatness. We should think of them as attempts to maximize justice and happiness by whatever makeshift devices (proportional representation, constitutional courts, the random patchwork of associations we call "civil society") give promise of doing the job. We should not expect or want, our public

institutions to have a firm philosophical foundation--a connection with the nature of Reality or of Truth.

In the spirit of Dewey, we should see these institutions as tools to be justified by their success in getting certain finite jobs done, rather than as instantiations of eternal truths. Moral and political principles should be viewed as abbreviations for narratives of successful use of tools, summaries of the results of successful experiments, rather than as insights into the nature of anything large (Society, or History, or Humanity). We should be as suspicious of attempt to ground political proposals on large theories of the Nature of Modernity as we are of attempts to ground them on the Will of God.

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I hope that the contrast I have been developing between beauty and sublimity has given the reader some sense of what to expect from these lectures. I shall end this preface by being a bit more specific about the topics which the lectures cover.

The ten lectures break into five groups of two each. The first two focus on the philosophy of religion. I offer an account of American pragmatism as an attempt to mediate the so-called "warfare between science and theology" which dominated so much of the high culture of the nineteenth century. More particularly, I treat pragmatism as an attempt to let a sense of democratic citizenship take the place of a sense of obligation to a non-human power. My account of Dewey's thought is of an attempt to let participation in democratic politics play the spiritual role which used to be played, in less hopeful ages

of the world, by participation in religious worship.

This theme of substituting time and beauty for eternity and sublimity is continued in the second pair of lectures, but in a quite different key. I criticize Juergen Habermas' idea that assertions are universal validity claims as a last, and unnecessary, attempt to preserve something of the older, pre-pragmatist, Kantian philosophical tradition. I see Habermas' account of "the moment of unconditionality" built into all validity claims as a last echo of Kant's and Husserl's attempt to make philosophy transcendental. I offer an alternative account of linguistic practise, one which eschews reference to both univerality and unconditionality, and in which assertions have no aim beyond conversational utility.

The third pair of lectures turns from philosophy of language to what might, somewhat misleadingly, be called metaphysics. In "Pan-relationalism" I argue that a lot of the best recent philosophy can be summed up as an attempt to get rid of the substance-accident and essence-accident distinctions by claiming that nothing can have a self-identity, a nature, apart from its relations to other things. I argue that a thing has as many identities as there are relational contexts into which it can be put. This suggestion chimes with my suggestion (in an essay called "Inquiry as Recontextualization" which I published some years ago) that there is no such thing as "the correct context" in which to read a text, place a person, or explain an event. Rather, there are as many such contexts as there are human purposes.

For the same reason, there is no such thing as the correct description

of anything: there are only the descriptions which, by relating it to other things, put it in contexts which serve our current, varied, needs.

The second lecture in this pair--"Against Depth"--says that if we are pan-relationalists we shall see everything on, so to speak, a single horizontal plane. We shall not search for the sublime either high above, or deep beneath, this plane. We shall instead move things about, rearrange them so as to highlight their relations to other things, in the hope of finding ever more useful, and therefore ever more beautiful, patterns. From this point of view, great intellectual achievements (Newton's Laws, Hegel's System) are not categorically different from small technical achievements (getting the pieces to fit together neatly in a piece of cabinetry, getting the colors of the landscape to harmonize in a watercolor, finding a reasonable political compromise between conflicting interests).

The fourth pair of lectures turns to ethics and politics, and is, once again, anti-Kantian in its message. It relies upon John Dewey's attempt to see morality in finitistic terms--as a matter of solving problems rather than of living up to something with a sublime and awful name. I try to weave Dewey's views together with the neo-Humean account of morality offered by Annette Baier, as well as with the political philosophy of Michael Walzer. These three philosophers seem to me to complement each beautifully, and to help us see our moral task as the enlargement of our moral community--the inclusion of more and more different sorts of people in our use of

the term "we". From this perspective, moral progress is not a matter of greater obedience to law but of wider ranging sympathy. It is less a matter of reason than of feeling--less a matter of principle than, as Baier puts it, of trust.

The final two lectures are somewhat more narrow-gauged and less ambitious than those that precede. They concern the work of two contemporary analytic philosophers who have been influenced by many of the same figures (notably Wilfrid Sellars and Donald Davidson) as I have: Robert Brandom and John McDowell. Both men are the authors of books published quite recently (in 1994) which are being widely discussed among anglophone philosophers. I discuss my agreements with Brandom and my disagreements with McDowell in order to place my Deweyan, pragmatist, views within the current anglophone philosophical scene.

I regard Brandom's Making it explicit and McDowell's Mind and World as analytic philosophy at its best: that is to say, analytic philosophy permeated with historical consciousness, with awareness of the continuities and discontinuities between Greek philosophy, pre-Kantian modern philosophy, and recent reactions against Kant. Both books are extremely ambitious, and exceptionally accomplished. So they seemed good dialectical foils to use in clarifying my own position.

Since these lectures cover quite a wide variety of topics and philosophical debates, it may be tempting to think of them as offering a philosophical system. But pragmatists should not offer systems.

To be consistent with our own account of philosophical progress, we pragmatists must be content to offer suggestions about how to patch things up, how to adjust things to each other, how to rearrange them into slightly more useful patterns. That is what I hope to have done in these lectures. I see myself as having shifted a few pieces around on the philosophical chess-board, rather than as having answered any deep questions, or produced any elevating thoughts.

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Professor Josep-Maria Terricabras, who is responsible for the Jose Ferrater Mora Chair at the University of Girona, not only did me the great honor of inviting me to give these lectures, but kindly invited both Brandom and McDowell--as well as two other philosophers from whom I have learned much, David Hoy and Bjorn Ramberg--to form part of my audience. I am most grateful to Professor Terracabras and his colleagues for their invitation. I am also grateful to the audience in Girona for their penetrating and stimulating questions, and for the generous spirit in which they received my attempts to advance the cause of pragmatism.

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Bellagio

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