

## TRADITION, SCIENCE AND THE CENTURIES

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*Science and Conservative Thought* is a subject that brings to mind old and stabilizing debates, with well-defined and respected concepts, since such debates used to unravel in a climate of deeply and even institutionally rooted positions. The double roots of conceptual stability used to be *science*, mostly in the sense of investigating *physis* from Thales to Nicholas of Cusa, and *tradition*, interpreted as adherence to natural law, to historical continuity, to a valid structure of being (1). It is remarkable that, in spite of the shifting paradigms and their superstructures, the debates were always meaningful, the respective arguments of which offered a rounded world-picture. No matter how unpalatable were the views of Plato, pseudo-Denys, Democritus, and Galileo, they offered to an opponent an admittedly oscillating yet recitable *story* and a representable *image*, allowing him to mobilize to good purpose his imagination, judgment, intuition. The «good purpose» was the harmonious description of parts or of the totality of the cosmos. The words in italics above point to the overall character of the debate: the basic assumption that the universe is imaginable, describable, graspable as a story. If it is not ultimately a representable reality, then the self can only weave endless abstractions like a Kandinsky canvas; it can mechanically mobilize fancies, but never rise to human comprehension (2).

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(1) Such essences were original sin, belief in a sustaining supreme power, adherence to meaning, the mediation of symbols, the rejection of pure *hazard* (*tyché*) as an organizing principle.

(2) The philosophical-scientific harmony in debate was manifest, for example, when in the Middle Ages jurists, poets, and architects were able to discuss, as cognitive equals, matters like the superiority or the dependence of painting over law. (It made sense that the Florentine urbanist, Alberti, had a law school background). Such debates had their civilizing roots in those between Socrates and Protagoras; in the consubstantialist controversy at Nicaea; in the iconoclastic conflict; in the political battle between the Pope's and the Emperor's jurists. Concepts were sharpened, attitudes solidified, and, above all, the unity of vision and the dialectical method required a common system of reference.

Gradually this cosmos-based harmony of thought and sensibility disintegrated (3), although the harmony-seeking debates continued being meaningful and the various participants used the same language. Meanwhile, Hellenic and Near Eastern assumptions yielded to a kind of panpsychism, and then, under the influence of Paduan materialists, the world-spirit was liquidated, the space being filled by astral debris instead of by gods and spirits. Christianity contributed decisively to the breaking-up of the universe and of its neutralization—and thus to the success of modern science. Jupiter and Venus became chunks of rock, floating in space; the task was now not to tell humanly significant tales but to find and to explore new principles of cohesion.

The great rupture in Western cosmology and consciousness does not have to be chronicled here. It is sufficient to diagnose one of its culminating moments from a recent writing of George Steiner. Our classical and religious culture has lived on the central idea that *words mean things*. Language is not an autonomous system as the nominalists, David Hume and B. Lee Whorf hold; it is anchored in sense. Steiner has valuable things to say about it in *Real Presences*—where he indicts Nietzsche, Mallarme, Rimbaud, Derrida for detaching significance from words, with the terrifying result that words drift apart, lead a loose existence, and destroy speech. «Words mean what I want them to mean» is the road-map to modernity, as communication disintegrates. Either science becomes as impossible as much of modern art, or else a narrowly algebraic set of signs is worked out in an emotionally and morally arid vocabulary. Meaning no longer has meaning because it is no longer backed up by a *presence*. Steiner accuses the university culture and its research-maniacs, puffed-up courses, and empty ambitions for this state of affairs. Heidegger concurs: it is no longer the philosopher, he writes, but the research assistants who dictate the topic and the style of academic work.

What we call «science» and «conservative thought» are then old notions and categories, still vaguely audible in postmedieval debate where they were meaningful; yet they can no longer be reconstructed since they can no longer carry a full load of comprehension. Let us consider a few instances which help us to cross the bridge from the Graeco-Christian world view to the modern one.

In its original shape and contents, science drew its postulates from the essence of things, the Greek *physis*. What is? Parmenides, Democritus, Plato, Aristotle, with each giving a different and differently pregnant answer. Democritus, to pick here the most controversial philosopher, sees the world as

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(3) The process and the end-result of disintegration are classically described, among others, since the literature now is enormous, by Alexandre Koyré, *From the Closed World to the Infinite Universe* (1957) and Paul Hazard, *La crise de la conscience européenne* (1935). Note that next to the modern cult of the description of utopia, the current fashion is that of writing books locating the origin and spread of decadence. If pursued civilly, this too could become a classical debate.

an empty space with colliding balls in it, while what we call their qualities are super-added by us to help our debile needs. They are, Democritus says, atomic motions observed by rough senses. This hypothesis is the epitome of «anti-conservatism», as it was bruited for centuries since it described an in-itself stable substratum and told a «story» where things fitted. Indeed, taking a long leap of about 1800 years, we find that Descartes's admiring friend, Father Mersenne, located in Democritus a left-handed philosophical ally of the Church, insofar as the Greek allows at least a centrally directed mechanism to run the universe, with hazard (*tyché*) stepping in the shoes of God. Accordingly God becomes the Great Watch-maker not unacceptable perhaps for a boldly investigating materialist from Abera. Still this construct is better than what Spinoza had to offer with his panpsychism.

Obviously the «What is?» question had moved to a new location, whether traditionalists noted it or not. They (Pope Urban, Bellarmine, the Jesuits) were now (mid-seventeenth century) busy with Galileo, and seemed at peace with some ancient materialists who, as Peter Green remarks of the Hellenistic Age, began long before «cultivating their souls», detached from their pagan background. Science in the seventeenth century, and Newton even later, had still not lost that soul, and the scientists themselves were still called, very significantly, «natural philosophers». Newton himself had hopes of finding a better explanation for the questionable gravitation, an explanation closer to God.

What happened between Democritus and Mersenne and their respective world views? Science deals with *facts*, but the understanding of what fact is changes. For this to happen, parameters must be validated or revalued; for example, when the pagan view apprehends the cosmos as one filled with degrees of vitality, then the subsequent monotheistic vision «cleanses heavens» until only astral debris remain in empty space. One asks: What is left for a personal and majestic God to rule over? He did indeed change into a master-mechanic, a status from which he may have meanwhile also abdicated.

There have been many other bridges crossed, blocked, or by-passed. At any rate, what we used to call science has now arrived in an unrecognizable shape, in a break with the old meaning, the old story, the old image. Science has been metamorphosed into technology, recasting not so much its raw data as the whole set of the cognitive assumption. The hierarchy that used to connect the human enterprise to God's sustaining act has been blasted by a series of epistemological explosions.

Science has changed into technology, as it has also changed the whole culture and the meaning of «conservative thought». We have argued that science was never merely «science», that it was part of a web of significances, of the search for cosmic harmony, of a series of languages mostly grown out of each other, continuous yet accommodating revolutions, changes of patterns, and paradigms. Hence, there was never a need for a political or an aesthetic vision

to go to war against science, other than in times of cordial debate between interpretations and ways of illustration, the ultimate mode of arbitration. But modernity is not a new scientific enterprise to be observed, utilized, rectified, and, above all, illustrated. It is anti-science, it models itself on the *repudiation of meaning* as actually an ideal (like modern art and politics), in reality a form of *hybris*. Henceforward, there will be no limit to the artistic, linguistic, pedagogical, and institutional deformations imposed upon mankind; all we shall need will be a suitable «laboratory» to present its finding.

What can conservatism say to this situation, how can it influence the «outcome», and what kind of outcome does it expect to prepare? Provided that conservatism, for lack of a rich content, is not a mere periodic cry «to halt progress!», a social defense mechanism or a pitiable disregard of change (4), it ought to repair to the previous harmony and not adopt, for example, the opponent's war cry of «Let's have more growth!». This special issue of *Modern Age* asks a number of always pertinent questions, but my reaction is that these questions would have been perhaps more suitable some centuries ago. Now they sound rhetorical. Some questions suggest a surrender to the modern temptation for the conservative intellectual class to join surreptitiously their opponents, and together to become an *intellectual clerisy*, handling a cooledoff charisma. It is perhaps done with the intention to work from inside, but this critical intention regularly succumbs to a new ceremonial role-modelling.

Conservatives are summoned at intervals to re-examine the tenets of modernism and their own connection with it; to reverse the trend and to veer off the road that leads implacably and with technological precision to a brave new world. But do they understand the weight of the summons? Do they contemplate from the supposed «end of history» what history has come to signify *now*, when the scientific world view is the only reality surrounding us, and is clearly bent on abolishing whatever human substratum still whispers its humble presence? In other words, the issue is no longer the comfortable one: science versus tradition, an articulated ensemble of concepts, but a frenzied circus act versus the humanly fitted nature of things.

Thus I try to answer the questions formulated here—again, they would have been more validly put some centuries ago, and in fact they were, with a kind of nostalgic mood. No, technology cannot be controlled by any kind of «humanistic» re-coding; yes, bio-genetic manipulation has opened wide and

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(4) «Conservatism» has come to mean the «expansion of freedom» (of economic enterprise) when the issue is, precisely, that of *limits* in general. Capitalism is not virtuous, nor does it feed self-identity in fashionable globalistic confusion. When the Renault cars take over Nissan, 40,000 Japanese workers become dependent on alien processes, just as in the sixteenth-century arrangement of *cujus regio ejus religio*. It seems that conservative «values» culminate in a *planetary economism*, which is inclined to totalitarian solutions as any in this century, and probably the next.

irreversibly the gates of the brave new world; neither Left nor Right is likely to deal with what is science today. Yes, conservatives themselves often promote the destructive culture wars which devastate the planet (5). They are not on the side of the angels, and they seem to worry more about an efficient free-market than about a balanced cosmology. Finally, democratic governance may not be an ideal worth pursuing. Our finally sterilized «historical vision» has slipped from divine hands. (It stopped for a moment in ours, then slipped therefrom too). The industrial-technological end-station looms like an ever-swelling tumor. We have reached the point where we must assume, in a complete reversal of the assumptions crowding behind us, that enlightened modern man is no better and no wiser than history's so-called irrational and barbaric forces. They at least instinctively operated with meaning (as manifested in art, religion, myths, monuments); we rationally abandon it.

Men always used tools which were extensions of their hands, themselves too weak or too short. But modern technology does not reach or refine; it is composed of sets of machines, not extensions of the body but a self-multiplying and self-reproducing copy of the copy, increasingly far from necessities and from the Aristotelian *mimesis*. It has even deserved a somewhat comical label: «gadget», whether it serves kitchen and bathroom, or displaces rocks on other planets. Thus the machine has become man's only palpable and also visible contact with the universe, which subsumes his own milieu. An enlarged or diminished milieu can be seen in myriad samples in daily life: human robots with antennae, mobile phones, vicarious contacts, non-experienced relationships, and virtual realities (6). While man is thus taken out of himself, mini- and maxi-robots swarm around him with grotesque automatism. The modernist dream has taken shape with the manufacturing of an intelligent thinking machine and the genetic production of the mechanically perfect man. Evolution has ended in a fusion of machine-man and human machine. One at least superfluous. We have chosen to eliminate the factor-man. No wonder that the century's mainline literature, the literature of anguish and scream—Kafka, Nietzsche, Huxley, Orwell—is one continuous escape from machine-man, and that its mainline architecture is the faceless, inarticulate skyscraper. It does not even have arms to raise to heaven for mercy.

(5) In forty years of witnessing conservative cultural activities I hardly found any case of international philosophical awareness that would not rapidly fade away or ossify. The reasons given were (1) lack of money (2), unsustainable interest (3), lack of solidarity. Hardly an historical élan!

(6) Note how Western man, supposedly a synthesizer, has given up his vital contact with nature, the milieu in which he makes primary sense and finds a source of his identity. His dreams and dreads used to be bathed in *animal stories* (complemented with giants and fairies); tales surrounded him, explaining him to himself, elucidating while also mythifying the outer world and the inner world. Animals are now in research laboratories and in reserves, and the human animal is recast on the Freudian therapy couch. Man today is both dimensionless and directionless.

Have conservatives changed this landscape, or this *telos*, in the slightest? Have they decided to reverse, even to criticize the process other than in short bursts of lament? On the contrary, they have been on the side of growth where the Watchmaker-God is also located, of material enlargement, of the abolition of the remaining balance between nature and man's handiwork. Conservatives have faithfully escorted the scientific-industrial enterprises, making no effort to detach from it society's other aspirations. As said above, the seduction to rise to the status of a technological clerisy was too strong, opting hence for more gigantic industrial mergers and more global markets.

Myriad cases could be listed, each appearing small and unthreatening in isolation, yet each typifying the collective rush which then swells to mass proportions. True, it can be argued that from «the beginning» there has been a technological continuity, chasing after needs and entertainment and mere displays of ingenuity: from the ancient sun-dial through the waterworks of Versailles, Kempelen's chess-playing machine to the laser and the spaceship. But each of these «normal» constructions has been accompanied by monstrous negatives: countless automobiles, obligatory computers in classrooms, an internet in every pot, the splicing of genes—until, of course, we reach «tomorrow» and man's transmutation. It would be a vain effort to tell where exactly conservatives have undertaken initiatives in the face of these welcome changes. Here and there we hear an individual objection, even at times a correct diagnosis, but without concrete results. Tocqueville indicted democracy as «a monotonous tumult»; Max Weber warned against the drying-up of creative élan; Ortega y Gasset spoke against mass production in the arts; C.S. Lewis condemned the abolition of man. The tragic fact is that these one-shot reactions nowhere cohere as a philosophy, not even as a reasonable public assessment of the future. Facing Nietzsche's devastation of God and metaphysics, Bishop Prohaszka (Hungary, 1903) lamented: «It is possible to restore the Christian world view in today's cultural context?... I want speak to modern man, but do I understand his internal life, his language».

Let us attempt to work out an inconclusive conclusion rather than a summary. Until modernity's successive waves came knocking, science, statecraft, manufacture, art, and a more or less common ethical understanding of issues, public or private, were on reasoning terms: Man, in other words, faces a universe half his own making and imagining, half his neverpassive surrender. The material world helps and opposes, the spiritual manifests itself, often anarchistically but also intriguingly, all this because it is not monistic, but instead *sacred* and *profane*.

This unity-and-change allowed us to integrate knowledge into a *story* which we told in vastly different terms and accents, but never imagined that it was neither a tale of idiots nor even an arbitrary frame to be switched at will. Then there came upon us *not* science, which was easy to confront since it searches for understanding, but the machine, a locked-up pseudo-self, self-sufficient,

commanding. One of its unintended ancestors had been Leibnitz's monad turned into mechanism. In quick succession, the machine, now without a rival, absorbed the sciences, human relationships, and artistic and literary aspirations. It even went through a heroic/epic period when Zola hammered his metallic worker-legends, America found her vocation in technological gigantism, and Soviet propagandists invented the Stakhanovite virtues. Nobody understood at the time that the Promethean machine is a soul-crushing banality that takes the story out of life.

The malaise, becoming deeper with every step we take toward the machine, is cosmological, although its effects on us are spiritual, religious, social, and scientific. Its essence suggests an alienation from the universe does remain in the dominant position—it is always «out there», and it is we, in successive generations, who must grasp and adjust to it (7). We can call this grasp a corrected anthropology or a wise degree of humility in facing the real. We can also call it *meaning* which is best conveyed to us by a vast picture or a story, or even by a human act—not numbers, measurements, systems of coordinates, statistics. The universe for us (and there is no other) is not rocks in space senselessly hurling by, but tales with beginnings and endings, describable events, personified powers. It is, at its most significant point, myths to preserve, an architecture of the cosmos with huge doses of beauty, so to speak.

This is no naïve (or neo-naïve) recommendation for an exclusive return to the ABC of creation, but only a reminder of Max Weber's formula that the clock is winding down and that nature and history are disengaging from the seduction of magic and religion, and yield to a rationality which grows and expands. We should add that «rationality» means here the *machine* and its manlike equivalent, bureaucratization. To «disengage from magic and religion» contains the whole ambiguity of an age that Weber contemplated from its meta-historical and tragic side. Its clarification should help conservatives rest, to confront not science *per se* but technology, that is, themselves in a distorted mirror. Lack of awareness takes away something everyday from their *raison d'être*. Their philosophical status quo has long been shed, replaced by that of the technocrat, or at least his accomplice—a manipulator, or a social engineer, or a businessman. Indeed, the technocrat has produced, in turn, a good conscience since the moral space in which he is active does not raise questions of a different kind. Who or what will liberate us from this cave, which is deeper than the Platonic cave?

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(7) Western physics, struggling since the ancients, has suffered from the problem of action at a distance. As long as such an action was conceived as contiguously spreading, the transmission of cause/effect formed a story natural to man. Dozens of theories followed, each one a chapter of modernity, among them gravitation and a significantly centrifugal universe. Newton was still hoping for a God-centered one. The problem persists. Generally, up to the time of Galileo, theologians, moralists, and astrologers remained as a dominant presence in the cosmological/scientific field.

