

*Fifth Essay:*  
Is Technological Civilization  
Decadent, and Why?

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries are the age of an industrial civilization that has swept away—definitively, it now seems—humankind's other, older attempts to shape, even to produce their lives without the help of science and technology (of technology based on science and in a sense even fusing with it). This has carved so vast a cleft across the continuity of human history that some modern Enlightenment thinkers perceive the recent age of barely three hundred years as a timid beginning of the true history of humanity while all else is shunted off to prehistory. The humans of the industrial age are incomparably more powerful and have at their disposal a far greater reservoir of energy than humans of earlier ages, reaching into the subatomic regions which nourish the stars because the Earth is no longer enough for them. They live in an incomparably greater social density and can make use of it to intensify their attack on nature to force her to yield ever more of the energy they intend to integrate in the schemata of their calculations and the levers of their hands.

The mighty growth of industrial civilization appears as a trend which no difficulties can hinder, be they external or internal. The external obstacles, reflected in perhaps the sharpest and most modern idiom, physicalistic and quantitative, in the deliberations of the Club of Rome,<sup>1</sup> concern the exhaustion of the global supply of raw materials, demographic growth,

environmental pollution, and the impossibility of expanding the nutritional basis, with the exponential nature of growth trends indicating a possibility of not-too-distant catastrophes. Still, the alarming outlook, against which there are admittedly no incontrovertible arguments so far, has not evoked any fundamental interest in contemporary society, as rationalists were wont to expect. The internal obstacles, resulting from the way this civilization affects the nature of being human as such and which manifests itself in those human hekatombs (myriatombs, actually)<sup>2</sup> that have no analogue, have so far become historically manifest with any clarity only as a motive for seeking and finding as rapid ways of forgetting in further intensification of our achievements. European societies have evidently not only never been as rich but also have never in history carried out so vast a social undertaking as in the "postwar" time (that is, in the era following the second world war), as if this benefit could make up for the retreat of Europe from the center of history (meaning thereby the old Europe, the European West as it grew out of the Western Roman Empire). Yet on the whole this unheard-of progress proved unsatisfying and the demands on the world's wealth and therewith on the structure of a society which seems to resist such demands continue to expand. The optimism of this trend, full of vitality, defying attempts to tame it, appears more powerful than any objection that the development itself can provoke. Nor is there any shortage of objections; we could say that an entire scientific scholarly discipline, modern sociology, is basically an outgrowth of an awareness of the danger, or even of a sense of the pathological nature, of the development of the industrial civilization up to now. To some this pathology appeared as something transient, something that future development would itself cure in virtue of the inner logic which they believed they could detect therein; so Auguste Comte saw the crisis of society in a lack of social consensus, of a spontaneous harmony of perspective which, he claimed, would return as the common mode of thought would inevitably become more positive, more scientific.<sup>3</sup> Karl Marx was no less confident, though he trusted in a different

evolution: the inevitable disintegration and burial of the mode of industrial production toward which capitalist society is driven by its very functioning. Others, though, believed that they could see evident symptoms of pathology in the increasing incidence of suicides and mental disorders;<sup>4</sup> today we could add drug abuse, the revolt of the young, and the destruction of all social taboos, all of which manifest an evident conversion at anarchy as their limit.

Yet before we can answer the question posed in our title, we need to agree on a criterion, a standard by which we could judge something decadent or positive. We do not wish at this time to examine the whole question of value judgments and of their relation to the problem of truth. We shall rest content with noting that decadence and its opposite are not mere abstract "values" and "moral concepts" but, rather, are inseparable from human life in its intrinsic nature, its very being. A life can be said to be decadent when it loses its grasp on the innermost nerve of its functioning, when it is disrupted at its inmost core so that while thinking itself full it is actually draining and laming itself with every step and act. A society can be said to be decadent if it so functions as to encourage a decadent life, a life addicted to what is inhuman by its very nature.

What manner of life is it, though, which mutilates itself precisely when it seems full and rich? The answer has to be sought in the question itself.

What would human life have to be if something like that were to be possible—if life were in truth other than as at first it appears to itself? That *things* appear differently than they are is a function of their presenting themselves always one-sidedly, at a distance, in a perspective, and as a result can assume an appearance they share with other things. That we appear to ourselves as other than we are must be based on something else. Humans are not alien to themselves as things and their mode of being appear alien to them. Humans *are* themselves. If they are to appear to themselves as otherwise, they must become estranged from themselves and this process of estrangement must be something intrinsic to their mode of being. Thus there is

something about the human way of being that humans find estrangement somehow “more pleasant” or “more natural” than their own being. Being themselves is something that “comes naturally.” It is always an achievement. In a sense, we can say that even self-estrangement is in the last instance an achievement. It is a “relief,” not a “natural” lightness but the result of a certain “act.”

Humans cannot *be with the spontaneity* of nonhuman existents; they must *accomplish* their life, must *lead* it; they must “be done with it,” “come to terms” with it. Thus it seems that humans stand ever between two equivalent possibilities. That, though, is not the case. Estrangement means that *there is no* equivalence but, rather, that only one of the possible lives is the “right” one, our own, irreplaceable, the only one that we ourselves can act out in the sense that we truly bear it, that we identify with its burden—while the other is avoidance, escape, deviation into inauthenticity and relief. Thus the perspective of “choice,” decisionism, is from the start a false, objectivized, and objectivistic perspective *from without*. The true “perspective” is one of nonequivalence for which there is a fundamental difference between the responsibility which *bears* and “exposes itself” on the one hand and avoidance and escape on the other. Thus the reality of human life does not allow a perspective from without, the perspective of a “disinterested observer.”

One other distinction is needed besides this distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic.

The opposition, authentic/inauthentic, is based on the recognition that we can never be not interested in our own being: our own responsibility always captivates us, occupies us: a decision has been made about us before “we have decided.” True, authentic being consists in our ability to let all that is be as and how it is, not distorting it, not denying its own being and its own nature to it.

There is, however, also the distinction between the ordinary, the “everyday,” and the exceptional, the holiday. The exceptional, the holiday also unburdens, though not by escaping from responsibility but rather by revealing that dimension

of life in which the point is not the burden of responsibility and the *escape* from it but where, rather, we are *enraptured*, where something more powerful than our free possibility, our responsibility, seems to break into our life and bestow on it meaning which it would not know otherwise. It is the dimension of the demonic and of passion. In both, humans are placed at risk; however, they are not simply escaping from themselves into the “public realm,” into the ordinary everyday, into “objectivity,” they do not become estranged in the everyday manner. It is not a self-estrangement but rather being swept along, enraptured. Here we are not escaping from ourselves but, rather, we are surprised by something, taken aback, captivated by it, and that something does not belong among things and in the ordinary day in which we can lose ourselves among the things that preoccupy us. Here we experience the world not only as the region of what is in our power but also as what opens itself to us *of itself* and, as experience (for instance of the erotic, of the sexual, of the demonic, of the dread of the holy), is then capable of penetrating and transforming our life. Face to face with this phenomenon we tend to *forget* the entire dimension of the struggle for ourselves, forget responsibility and escape, letting ourselves be drawn into a new, open dimension as if only now true life stood before us, as if this “new life” had no need to care for the dimension of responsibility.

Thus the distinction of the sacred and the profane is distinct from that of authenticity-responsibility and escape. It has to be related to responsibility by means other than escape, it cannot be simply overpowered, it has to be grafted on to responsible life.

The distinction sacred/profane is important also because the profane is essentially the realm of work and of the self-enslavement of life, of its bondage to itself. The demonic, orgasmic dimension is fundamentally opposed to the sense of enslavement experienced by humans alone and expressed most powerfully by the need to work. Work is always forced labor. Work is concern for oneself, the demonic is heedless. To the life which is bound to itself, to the self-bondage of life, there belongs an

orgiastic pendant, life engendering what we cannot procure and what is not at our disposal. For that reason the orgiastic dimension is not absent simply because responsibility as such is not discovered or taken into account, where we avoid it, but, rather, there it becomes pressing. Its inevitability and its rule extend from the "primitive" natural peoples to our own day.

Thus the sacred, the domain of the holy, represents another, different counterpart to the everyday. Durkheim's sociology stresses, for instance, that in totemic societies such as he studied in Australia, reality breaks down into two basic categories, that of the profane with which humans deal "economically" and that of the sacred, including totems, their symbols, their representatives among humans.

For anyone familiar with Durkheim's analyses, the description of the orgiastic scene of the explorers Spencer and Gillen, as Durkheim interprets it, is unforgettable.

It is easy to imagine that on this level of exaltation people lose all self-consciousness. Since they feel ruled, drawn along by some external power which makes them think and act otherwise than in ordinary times, they have understandably the feeling of being themselves no longer. It seems to them that they have been made anew: the decorations with which they drape themselves, the masks covering their faces, express this inner transformation outwardly more than they help bring it about. And since all of a company feel transformed at the same time and in the same way . . . it appears to all as if they really had been carried over into a special world, quite different from the one in which they normally live. How could such experiences, especially when repeated daily for weeks on end, help but convince the experiencers that there really exist two diverse and incompatible worlds? In one of them they laboriously carry out their everyday life; the other they need but enter to stand in relation to extraordinary powers which galvanize them to the point of frenzy. One is profane, the other is the world of the sacred.<sup>5</sup>

The positivist prejudice that attributes to the everyday world a primacy over the other world cannot keep us from recognizing in this interpretation a sharp, precise presentation of a phenomenon.

The demonic needs to be brought into a relation with responsibility as originally and primarily it is not. The demonic

is demonic precisely in its ability to deepen the self-estrangement to which, on the other hand, it points: humans estrange themselves by becoming bound to life and its objects, losing themselves among them. Ecstasy is an ek-stasis from this bondage, but it is not yet freedom. Ecstasy can pretend to be freedom and at times it does—from the perspective of overcoming this orgiastic sacredness it is precisely then that it is seen as *demonic*.

No special proof is needed that sexuality belongs to this dimension of the demonic opposition to the profane everydayness—orgiastic cults almost always have a sexual aspect, on the other hand sexuality contains within it the same differentiation of two worlds, of a double reality which is the characteristic consequence of an orgy as Spencer and Gillen describe it.

At the same time, sexuality illustrates how inevitably the orgiastic realm is brought into a relation to the sphere of responsibility. This bringing into relation to responsibility, that is, to the domain of human authenticity and truth, is probably the kernel of the history of all religions. Religion is not the sacred, nor does it arise directly from the experience of sacral orgies and rites; rather, it is where the sacred qua demonic is being explicitly overcome. Sacral experiences pass over religious as soon as there is an attempt to introduce responsibility into the sacred or to regulate the sacred thereby.

All that originally takes place and can take place ever again without any explicit clarity about the mode of being of the responsible beings that humans are. Explicit clarity about humans cannot be achieved without an explicit relation to being. Religious and sacred forms of experience do not always include such clarity. They are experiences of breaks, of inversions and conversions in which the being of humans asserts itself without explicit clarity, without a fundamental criterion of what is and what is not. For that reason, in the question of being human religious conversions (and all that goes with them, for instance artistic experience) do not have the fundamental importance of the *ontological* experience of philosophy. Perhaps for that reason, too, it may turn out that religion is

subject to temporary obscurity until its problems have been resolved philosophically.

The opposition of the sacred and the profane, of the feast and the workday, of the exceptional and the ordinary is not the opposition of the authentic and the inauthentic but rather belongs among the problems responsibility has yet to master. Every form of humanity on whatever "level" recognizes some form of the opposition between the ordinary and the exceptional, but not everyone also seeks to rise above decadence. The ordinary and the special can mean simply that we are rid of the ordinary; does that, though, mean that we have thereby also achieved our inmost, full and irreplaceable being at which the word "I" points with its mysterious hint? We believe that *I* in this sense emerges at the dawn of history and that it consists in not losing ourselves in the sacred, not simply surrendering ourselves within it, but rather in living through the whole opposition of the sacred and the profane with the dimension of the problematic which we uncover in the responsible questioning in a quest for clarity with the sobriety of the everyday, but also with an active daring for the vertigo it brings, *overcoming* everydayness without collapsing in self-forgetting into the region of darkness, however tempting. Historical life means, on the one hand, a differentiation of the confused everydayness of prehistoric life, of the division of labor and functionalization of individuals; on the other, the inner mastering of the sacred through its interiorization, by not yielding to it externally but rather confronting internally its essential ground to which the human unclarity, that refuge of our life's routines, opens the way when it has been shaken to the very foundations. That is why the emergence of epic and especially of dramatic poetry is so important among the foundations of the historical process, since here humans follow first with the inner and then the outer eye the events in which they can participate only by yielding to the orgiastic. History originates as a rising above decadence, as the realization that life hitherto had been a life in decadence and that there is or that there are possibilities of living differently than by toiling for a full stomach in misery and

need, ingeniously tamed by human technologies—or, on the other hand, by striving for private and public orgiastic moments, sexuality and cult. The Greek *polis*, *epos*, tragedy, and philosophy are different aspects of the same thrust which represents a rising above decadence.

Precisely because history first means this inner process, the emergence of humans who master the original dilemma of human possibilities by discovering the authentic, unique *I*, that history is foremost a history of the soul. For that reason history is almost from the beginning accompanied by a reflection on history; for that reason Socrates designated the *polis*, which is the proper place of history, as also the proper place of the care for the soul. For that reason already earlier Heraclitus, angered that his *polis* destroys the best, those who alone are capable of rising above decadence in defiance both of everydayness and of the orgiastic leap into darkness, spoke of the bounds of the soul (that which gives it its form) which cannot be found along any (ordinary) path, for its *logos*, the expression for it, is too deep.<sup>6</sup> For that reason, the central theme of Plato's thought is the state, which for him was at the same time the model by which it is possible to reveal externally the structure of the individual soul. For that reason Plato's philosophy is at its core focused on the soul as that which first makes it something firm and definite. We might suppose that the special character of ancient society favored the special character of ancient philosophy in its classical phase. Plato's thought, decisive for the ontological character of this philosophy as a metaphysics, is, according to Eugen Fink's apt description,<sup>7</sup> an attempt to think light without shadow (in the last instance, to be sure, because there can be no doubt about the duality of reason and necessity in the world of fact as Plato sees it). That means that philosophy can dedicate itself to its inmost life's task, that of being the nonstatic, nonorgiastic counterpart and inmost resolution of the problem posed by everydayness, regardless of the structure of the society—reason, understanding, has here only this function and can find its fulfillment in it since in living reality there is so much that is nonordinary that there need be no fear that the

pathos of the everyday might overwhelm and choke out its opposite. This ontology is for that reason a philosophy of the soul which, by *perceiving* that authentic, transcendent being differs from our reality of mere transient, changing opinion by virtue of its character of eternally immovable being, first gains its own unitary core, capable of resisting the pressure of various questions and problems which would otherwise drive the soul hither and yon. Unity is the essence of the soul, achieved by thought, an inner dialogue, a dialectic which is the proper method of insight and the essence of reason. That is why philosophy must be at the same time the care for the soul (*epimeleia tēs psychēs*), ontology and theology—and all that in the care for the *polis*, for the optimal state. It retains this structure even when the nature of its proper object shifts from *idea* to *energeia* (in Aristotle) and transcendence shifts from the world of ideas to god or gods. Here philosophical theory still lives up to its calling to be the realm in which our I arrives at itself as well as at the lived experience its being which it has grasped at last. (The transcendence of the divine part of the world is then made more emphatic by the inability of the world to reach the divine and of the divine to think the world—this transcendence is an expression precisely of that “spiritual” overflowing of everydayness to which philosophy fundamentally contributes.)

Plato’s doctrine of the soul has still other aspects. Eugen Fink calls attention to one of the most important in his analysis of Plato’s allegory of the cave.<sup>8</sup> This presentation, especially in its dramatic part, is a reversal of the traditional mysteries and of their orgiastic cults. Those cults already aimed if not at a fusion, then at least at a confrontation of the responsible and the orgiastic. The cave is a remnant of the subterranean gathering place of the mysteries; it is the womb of Earth Mother. Plato’s novel idea is the will to leave the womb of Earth Mother and to follow the pure “path of light,” that is, to subordinate the orgiastic entirely to responsibility. Hence the path of the Platonic soul leads directly to eternity and to the source of all eternity, the sun of “The Good.”

There is another aspect linked to this. The Platonic “conversion” makes a vision of the Good itself possible. This view is as unchanging and eternal as the Good itself. The journey after the Good, which is the new *mystery* of the soul, takes the form of the soul’s internal dialogue. Immortality, inseparably linked with this dialogue, is thus different from the immortality of the mysteries. For the first time in history it is individual immortality, individual because inner, inseparably bound up with its own achievement. Plato’s doctrine of the immortality of the soul is the result of the confrontation of the orgiastic with responsibility. Responsibility triumphs over the orgiastic, incorporates it as a subordinate moment, as *Eros* which cannot understand itself until it understands that its origin is not in the corporeal world, in the cave, in the darkness, but rather that it is only a means for the ascent to the Good with its absolute claim and its hard discipline.

As a result of this conception, in Neoplatonism the demonic—*Eros* is a great *daimon*—becomes a subservient realm in the eyes of the philosopher who has overcome all its temptations. Hence a somewhat unexpected outcome: the philosopher is at the same time a great *thannaturge*. The Platonic philosopher is a magician—a Faustus. The Dutch historian of ideas, Gilles Quispel, derives from this one of the principal sources of the Faust legend and of Faustianism in general, that “endless striving” which makes Faust so dangerous but which ultimately can save him.<sup>9</sup>

Another important moment is that the Platonic philosopher overcame death fundamentally by not fleeing from it but by facing up to it. This philosophy was *meletē thanaton*, care for death; care for the soul is inseparable from care for death which becomes the true care for life; life (eternal) is born of this direct look at death, of an overcoming of death (perhaps it is nothing but this “overcoming”). That, however, together with the relation to the Good, identifying with the Good while breaking free of the demonic and the orgiastic, means the rule of responsibility and so of freedom. The soul is absolutely free, that is, it chooses its destiny.

So a new, light mythology of the soul grows on the basis of the duality of the authentic/responsible and the exceptional/orgiastic: the orgiastic is not removed but is disciplined and made subservient.

It is understandable that this entire complex of motifs could not but acquire a global significance in the moment when the end of the *polis/civitas* in the form of the Roman principality posed the problem of a new responsibility founded on the transcendent even within the framework of the social, in relation to a state which could no longer be a community of equals in freedom. Freedom is no longer defined in terms of a relationship to equals (other citizens) but to a transcendent Good. That also poses new questions and makes new solutions possible. The social problem of the Roman Empire is ultimately acted out on a foundation made possible by the Platonic conception of the soul.

The Neoplatonic philosopher Julian the Apostate on the imperial throne represents—as Quispel saw, probably rightly<sup>10</sup>—an important turn in the relation between the orgiastic and the discipline of responsibility. Christianity could overcome this Platonic solution only by an about-face. Responsible life was itself presented as a gift from something which ultimately, though it has the character of the Good, has also the traits of the inaccessible and forever superior to humans—the traits of the *mysterium* that always has the final word. Christianity, after all, understands the Good differently than Plato—as a self-forgetting goodness and a self-denying (not orgiastic) love. It is not the orgiastic—that remains not only subordinated but, in certain respects, suppressed to the limit—yet it is still a *mysterium tremendum*. *Tremendum*, for responsibility is now vested not in a humanly comprehensible essence of goodness and unity but, rather, in an inscrutable relation to the absolute highest being in whose hands we are not externally, but internally. The freedom of the wise man who has overcome the orgiastic can still be understood as demonic, as a will to separation and autonomy, a resistance to total devotion and self-forgetting love in which the true image of God consists. The soul

now does not simply seek itself in the ascent of an inner dialogue but also senses its danger. In the final analysis, the soul is not a relation to an object, however noble (like the Platonic Good) but rather to a Person who sees into the soul without being itself accessible to view. What a Person is, that really is not adequately thematized in the Christian perspective. However, it is powerfully presented in images and “revelations,” especially in the form of the problem of divine love and of the God-Human who takes our transgressions unto godself. Transgression, too, acquires a new meaning: it is an offense against the divine love, a dishonoring of the Highest, which is a personal matter and demands a personal solution. The responsible human as such is *I*; it is an individual that is not identical with any role it could possibly assume—in Plato this is expressed in the myth of the drawing of life’s lot; it is a responsible *I* because in the confrontation with death and in coming to terms with nothingness it takes upon itself what we all must carry out in ourselves, where no one can take our place. Now, however, individuality is vested in a relation to an infinite love and humans are individuals because they are guilty, and *always* guilty, with respect to it. We all, as individuals, are defined by the uniqueness of our individual placement in the universality of sin.

Nietzsche coined the saying that Christianity is Platonism for the people and there is this much truth in it, in that the Christian God took over the transcendence of the onto-theological conception as a matter of course.<sup>11</sup> In the Christian conception of the soul, though, there is a fundamental, profound difference. It is not just that, as St. Paul would have it, the Christian rejects the Greek *sophia tou kosmou*<sup>12</sup> (metaphysics) and its method of inner dialogue—eidetic intuition—as the way to that being which belongs inseparably to the discovery of the soul. The chief difference appears to be that it is only now that the inmost content of the soul is revealed, that the truth for which the soul struggles is not the truth of intuition but rather the truth of its own destiny, bound up with eternal responsibility from which there is no escape *ad secula*

*secularium*. The intrinsic life of the soul, its essential content, comes not from seeing ideas and so from its bond to the being which agelessly, eternally is, but rather in an openness to the abyss in the divine and the human, to the wholly unique and so definitively self-determining bond of divinity and humanity, the unique drama to which the fundamental content of the soul relates throughout. The transcendent God of antiquity combined with the Old Testament Lord of History becomes the chief personage in the inner drama which God makes into the drama of salvation and grace. The overcoming of everydayness assumes the form of the care for the salvation of the soul which won itself in a moral transformation, in the turn in the face of death and death eternal; which lives in anxiety and hope intricably intertwined, which trembles in the knowledge of its sin and with its whole being offers itself in the sacrifice of penance. Implied, though never explicitly thematized and never grasped philosophically as a central question, is the idea that the soul is by nature wholly incommensurate with all eternal being, that this nature has to do with its care for its own being in which, unlike all other existents, it is infinitely interested; and that an essential part of its composition is responsibility, that is, the possibility of choice and, in this choosing, of arriving at its own self—the idea that the soul is nothing present *before, only afterwards*, that it is historical in all its being and only as such escapes decadence.

By virtue of this foundation in the abyssal deepening of the soul, Christianity remains thus far the greatest, unsurpassed but also un-thought-through human outreach that enabled humans to struggle against decadence. The actual forms of life in the Christian era, both external (social) and internal (conceptual), are, however, linked with the problems of the Roman Empire (originally analogous to the Greek *polis*, though thanks to its own success gradually transformed from a mere *res publica* into an *imperium*, alienating the masses of its citizens whose lives that change stripped of content) and with its downfall. This downfall, however, was not only something negative, the destruction of an elitist civilization, dependent on an

increasingly oppressive and crisis-prone slave system, and the transformation of its economic and social order. It represents at the same time the *birth* of Europe in the present sense of the word. For us, a revolutionary philosophy of economic dialectics has obscured the reality that the foundations of our revolutionary epoch lie in a transformation brought about by an external destruction and not by an internal eruption; the internal social transformation was largely a peaceful one, consisting in a progressive shift of the burden of labor from a *thing*, which is what a slave was, a being denied moral standing, to a being who, in family and property, however exploited, however modest, had an autonomous, potentially free character, the standing of a person. (Still the Hegelian and Comtean philosophies of history remained aware of the significance of this transformation and were fully conscious of its central significance.) It was thanks to this transformation that, after centuries of confusion, the European and especially the western European social mass reappeared as an awesome expansive power, that the potentials therein contained found expression in new social and political structures with immense impact: in internal colonization of the land, in the rise of cities wholly different from the ancient *polis*, cities where labor is guided by the idea of a tool and its perfecting, thus shifting the *burden* of labor from persons to things; in the expansion into the regions lost by the Roman Empire—the Mediterranean and the East—as well as into those which it never possessed: central and northeastern Europe.

What, however, interests us most in our context is that an entire school of modern sociology, inspired by de Tocqueville, insisted and still insists that the modern development tends towards a democratic equalization, an equality of opportunity, preferring well-being to “greatness.” What is the basis of this trend? Medieval society was hierarchical in origin, resting on the remnants of Roman municipal organization and Germanic conquest, but its real basis was the new attitude toward work, one based on rural colonization and urban production. The ecclesiastical hierarchy served the function of transcending the *tedium* of everydayness by introducing a dimension of



authenticity, at times dissolving orgasmic tendencies, at other times (as in the Crusades) channelling them. Understandably, the urban element proved the bearer of some new possibilities in the process. Its new attitude to work and the sceptical use it made of ancient rationalism helped generate a new conception of knowledge as ultimately practical and mastering nature. That was echoed by a distinctly practical tendency of Christian theology which emphasized that humans are not on this earth only or primarily to contemplate it but rather to serve and act. European expansion shifted from the form of Crusades to exploration beyond the seas and in the grasp for the wealth of the world; simultaneously, the internal development of production, of technologies, of commercial and financial practices led to the rise of an entirely new kind of rationalism, the only one we know today: a rationalism that wants to master things and is mastered by them (by the desire for gain).

The origin of this modern (non-Platonic) rationalism is complex. A moment of far-reaching significance in it is the unresolved problem which the Christian era took over from antiquity: transcending the everyday and the orgasmic. Christian theology rejected the Platonic solution, though this theology did accept extensive elements of a solution launched along Platonic lines.

Platonic rationalism, the Platonic effort to subject even responsibility itself to the objectivity of knowledge, continues to affect the nether layers of the Christian conception. Theology itself rests on a "natural" foundation, understanding "the supernatural" as a fulfillment of "the natural."

The distancing of humans from "nature," which is no longer the locus of being human but rather something from which humans are separated by their unique unmediated relation, their relation to God, now enables them to perceive this "nature" as an "object."

Within the framework of nature so conceived, humans then strive for their freedom—understood Platonically as that over which they stand because they grasp it in eidetic insight. Hence the "mathematical" conception of nature and its new

appearance, in the making since the fourteenth century and definitively triumphing in the seventeenth, when it achieves its main interpretive successes. Galileo is, notoriously, a Platonist. It is Plato's metaphysics of the immortal soul that makes it possible for the domination of nature by the human soul to find a place in the Christian world with its unresolved problem of metaphysical philosophy and Christian theology.

Thaumaturgy, astrology, alchemy, and the Paracelsian<sup>13</sup> medicine of the Renaissance are likewise Platonic. Faustian tendencies claim their own and tempt humans to break the bond with the divine by the demonic.

On the other hand, the Christian attitude to life's practice, its valorization of practical life against theory, makes it possible to integrate even the Platonic "mastery" of nature into practical contexts and so to create a truly effective knowledge that is technique and science in one—modern natural science.

Transformations in the Christian spiritual core itself, the transition first from a Christianity of and for the nobility to an ecclesiastical autonomy and then to a lay Christianity, made it possible for Christianity—with Reformation's ascetic attitude to the world and with the pathos of personal certification by economic blessings—to contribute to the rise of that autonomy of the productive process that characterizes modern capitalism. That capitalism quickly sheds the constraints of its religious impetus and allies itself fundamentally with a superficial modern rationalism, estranged from any personal and moral vocation. It comes to be characterized by an immensely successful mathematical formalism. Its most successful aspect focuses on a mastery of nature, of movement, and of force. That is the modern mechanism which capitalism was only too glad to turn into a cult of the mechanical, so contributing to what came to be known as the industrial revolution. This revolution then penetrates throughout and ever more completely determines our lives. Given its differentiation of vocations and interdependence of interests, European humanity and by now already humanity as such simply are no longer capable of physically surviving but for the mode of production that rests increasingly on science

and technology (and, of course, increasingly devastates the global, planetary store of energy), so that rational domination, the cold "truth" of that coldest of cold monsters, today wholly obscures to us its origin, eliminating our traditional ways of overcoming everydayness in a nonorgiastic and so truthful mode (a deeper form of truth which pays heed not only to the formal guise assumed by dominant nature but also to humans in their uniqueness and profound individuality) while posing as the All in All, the steward of the cosmos.

So many spiritual themes ultimately conjoined in giving rise to an unspiritual, wholly "practical," secular and material conception of reality as an object to be mastered by our mind and hands.

What had originally in Plato been a bulwark against orgiastic irresponsibility has now passed into the service of everydayness. Therein humans flatter themselves that they are taking their lives into their own hands, and can indeed make use of causes they discovered to generate means for the facilitation and external multiplication of life and of its goods. In the process, work itself does at first enslave them more than once it did, then, though, it gradually "liberates" them until humans see the possibility of being "liberated" from it altogether.

One of the consequences which presents itself at first inconspicuously, then ever more insistently, is boredom. Boredom is not something negligible, a "mere mood," a private disposition, but rather the ontological condition of a humanity which has wholly subordinated its life to everydayness and its anonymity.

Already in the nineteenth century Kierkegaard identified boredom as the root of the aesthetic stage, of that inconstancy which cannot become rooted in what there is because boredom drives it out of it. In the seventeenth century, in Pascal, we can already find similar themes, conceived in the face of the mechanistic conceptions advancing across the board at the time.<sup>14</sup>

Durkheim noted that certain phenomena of the Great Revolution manifest a spontaneous renewal of the sacred. At the time of the Revolution humans seemed seized by

something like a "religious" fervor. "This ability of the society to posit itself as divine or to found divinities was never as evident as in the first years of the Revolution. Under the impact of the common wave of enthusiasm, matters wholly secular by nature were transformed into sacred, as Fatherland, Liberty, Reason . . ." <sup>15</sup> That, to be sure, is an enthusiasm which, for all the cult of Reason, has an orgiastic cast, either undisciplined or insufficiently disciplined by a link to personal responsibility. Here a danger of a new decline into the orgiastic is acutely evident.

A new flood of the orgiastic is an inevitable appendage to addiction to things, to their everyday procurement, to bondage to life.

The more modern technoscience asserts itself as the true relation to what-is, the more it draws everything natural and then even everything human into its orbit, the more the ageless traditions of balancing the authentic and the captivating are set aside and condemned as unrealistic, untrustworthy, and fantastic, the more cruel will the revenge of orgiastic fervor be. It makes itself felt already in the "wars of liberation" and the revolutionary crises of the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> It is exacerbated by their commonly cruel repression. The entire earnestness of life, its entire interest in its own being, becomes compressed into the realm of social conflict. Everydayness and the fervor of the fight to the finish, without quarter, belong together. Throughout the nineteenth century this link remains largely latent, the forces of inertia remain highly powerful. However, in the twentieth century, which is something like the "truth" of the nineteenth, this contradiction clearly becomes so dominant a motive as to require no proof.

In this century, war is the full fruition of the revolt of the everyday. A growing laxness in all things and random "happening"<sup>17</sup> go hand in hand with it, as the new manifestation of the orgiastic. Not just the outbreak of wars and revolutions, but the disintegration of old forms of *ethos*, the insistence on the "right to one's body" or to "a life of my own," the universal spread of "happenings" and so on attest to this linkage. War as a global

"anything goes," a wild freedom, takes hold of states, becoming "total." The same hand stages orgies and organizes everydayness. The author of the five-year plans is at the same time the author of orchestrated show trials in a new witch hunt. War is simultaneously the greatest undertaking of industrial civilization, both product and instrument of total mobilization (as Ernst Jünger rightly saw<sup>18</sup>), and a release of orgasmic potentials which could not afford such extreme of intoxication with destruction under any other circumstances. Already at the dawn of modernity, at the time of the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that kind of cruelty and orgasm emerged. Already then it was the fruit of a disintegration of traditional discipline and demonization of the opponent—though never before did the demonic reach its peak precisely in an age of greatest sobriety and rationality.

Boredom, naturally, does not retreat but rather forces its way to the forefront. Nor does it assume only the refined forms of the aesthetic and of romantic protest, but also the clear form of consumer offerings and the end of utopia (brought about by "positive" means). In the form of compulsory recreation, it becomes one of the characteristic collective metaphysical experiences of our age (while others include the experience of combat or Hiroshima).

What else does it mean, this gigantic Boredom which cannot be covered up even by the immense ingenuity of modern science and technology which it would be naive and cynical to underestimate or ignore? The most sophisticated inventions are boring if they do not lead to an exacerbation of the Mystery concealed by what we discover, what is revealed to us. The powerful penetrating ability of the human mind uncovers with an undreamed-of insistence, yet what it uncovers is right away seized by the everyday and by understanding of being as in principle already fully uncovered and cleared, that understanding which at a stroke turns today's mystery into tomorrow's common gossip and trivality.

The problem of the individual, the problem of the human person, was from the start the problem of transcending the

ordinary and the orgasmic. It implied simultaneously that humans cannot be identified with any role they may assume in the world. Modern individualism, as it stretches from the Renaissance on (according to Burchardt and many others<sup>19</sup>), was an attempt not to penetrate beyond and beneath every role but rather to play an *important* role. Bourgeois revolutions battle over roles (equality is equality of roles! and freedom is the possibility to choose whatever role suits us!). Modern individualism is increasingly being unmasked as a collectivism (universalism), and collectivism as this false individualism. Thus the real question concerning the individual is not at issue between liberalism and socialism, between democracy and totalitarianism, which for all their profound differences equally overlook all that is neither objective nor a role. For the same reason, a resolution of their conflicts cannot resolve the problem of setting humans in their place, resolving their wandering alienated from themselves and from the place that belongs to them.

This bewildered wandering is manifest, among other things, in modern homelessness. For all the vast production of the wherewithal of living, human life remains homeless. Home is understood ever more as a shelter, a place to sleep over so we can return to work the next day, the place where we store the fruits of our labor and lead our "family life" of which there is ever less. That humans, unlike all other animals, build dwellings, because they are not at home in the world, because they lean out of the world and for that reason are charged with a calling within and towards it, anchored in deep layers of the past which have not passed as long as they live on in them—all that vanishes in the face of modern voluntary and enforced mobility, the gigantic migrations which by now affect nearly all the continents. The greatest homelessness, however, is in our relation to nature and to ourselves: Hannah Arendt used to point out that humans no longer understand what it is they do and calculate. In their relation to nature, they are content with mere practical mastery and predictability without intelligibility. In a sense, in their natural sciences they left the earth long before cosmic flights and so have in reality lost contact with

that ground beneath their feet to which they had been called. Thereby, though, they also gave up their own selves, their distinctive place among all that is, which consists in being the living beings we know who relate to their beings, who really are this relation. Being ceased to be a problem once all that is was laid out before us as obvious in its quantifiable meaninglessness.

Humans have ceased to be a relation to Being and have become a force, a mighty one, one of the mightiest. Especially in their social beings, they became a gigantic transformer, releasing cosmic forces accumulated and bound over the eons. It seems as if humans have become a grand energy accumulator in a world of sheer forces, on the one hand making use of those forces to exist and multiply, yet on the other hand themselves integrated into the same process, accumulated, calculated, utilized, and manipulated like any other state of energy. At first sight, this image seems mythological: what is force if not a concept for the human mode of predicting and controlling reality? Yet that precisely is the crucial point, that understanding the world as Force makes mere forces something more than a correlate of human activities. Hidden within Force there is being which has not ceased to be that light which lights up the world, though now only as a malevolent light. If we understand being merely from the perspective of the existents among which it belongs, and we do so understand it because being for us is what is forever, radically and agelessly ruling over all, what is thus contingent on the primordial beginnings which to master means to master all, then in present day understanding Force is the Highest Being which creates and destroys all, to which all and everyone serve.

Thus a metaphysics of force is fictitious and inauthentic, an anthropomorphism, and yet this criticism does not do it justice. For precisely this practical deification of force makes it not only a concept but a reality, something which, through our understanding of things, frees up all the effectiveness potentially contained in things; makes it an actualization of all potentials. Thus force becomes not only something that is but all of reality: everything is only in its functioning, in the accumulation

and discharge of potentials, while all other reality dissolves, qualities, comprehension for things (for the knowing subjects who themselves no longer "comprehend" but only transform) . . . Thus force manifests itself as the highest concealment of Being which, like the purloined letter in E. A. Poe's familiar story, is safest where it is exposed to view in the form of the totality of what-is; that is, of forces that organize and release one another, not excluding humans who, like all else, are stripped of all mystery.

A great contemporary thinker presented this vision of being absorbed in what is in his work without being trusted or noted.<sup>20</sup> The next and last chapter of our essay about history will seek to show how this is reflected in contemporary historical events and the alternatives they present.

As to the question whether the industrial civilization is decadent (as a whole and in its character as a scientific and technological revolution), the answer now seems easy. Still, we hesitate about it. It is true that it did not resolve the great, principal human—and so also its own—problem, namely, not only to live but to live in a humanly authentic way, as history shows we can, but that it has actually made the situation more difficult because the matrix of its possibilities does not include the relation of humans to themselves and so also to the world as a whole and to its fundamental mystery. Its concepts encourage superficiality and discourage thought in a deeper, fundamental sense of the word. They offer substitutes where the original is needed. They alienate humans from themselves, depriving them of dwelling in the world, submerging them in the everyday alternative which is not so much toil as boredom, or in cheap substitutes and ultimately in orgasmic brutality. The age reduces understanding to the monotonous model of applied mathematics. It generates a conception of a force ruling over all and mobilizes all of reality to release the bound forces, a rule of Force actualized through global conflicts. Humans are thus destroyed externally and impoverished internally, deprived of their "ownness," of that irreplaceable I, they are identified with their roles, standing and falling with them.

On the other hand, it is also true that this civilization *makes possible* more than any previous human constellation: a life without violence and with far-reaching equality of opportunity. Not in the sense that this goal would anywhere be actual, but humans have never before found the means of struggle with external misery, with lack and want, which this civilization offers. Not that this struggle with external want could be resolved by those social ways and exclusive means which the age offers. Even the struggle with *outer* need is an inner struggle. The chief possibility, however, which emerges for the first time in history with our civilization, is the *possibility* of a turn from accidental rule to the rule of those who understand what history is about. It would be a tragic *guilt* (not a misfortune) of the intelligentsia if it failed to comprehend and grasp this opportunity. History is nothing other than the shaken certitude of pre-given meaning. It has no other meaning or goal. For the bad infinity of the precarious human existence in the world, however, complicated today by a global emergence of the masses, accustomed to flattery and escalating their expectations, such a goal and meaning will largely do to make them facile victims of manipulative demagogues.

The second main reason why the technological civilization cannot be simply labeled decadent is that the manifestations of decadence which we have noted and described in it are not simply its own work but a bequest of preceding ages out of whose spiritual problems and themes it made up its dominant matrix. Our sketch of the rise of the modern age and of its fundamental metaphysical character was intended to show as much. Modern civilization suffers not only from its own flaws and myopia but also from the failure to resolve the entire problem of history. Yet the problem of history may not be resolved, it must be preserved as a problem. Today the danger is that knowing so many particulars we are losing the ability to see the questions and that which is their foundation.

Perhaps the entire question about the decadence of civilization is incorrectly posed. There is no civilization as such. The question is whether historical humans are still willing to embrace history.

## *Sixth Essay:* Wars of the Twentieth Century and the Twentieth Century as War

The first world war provoked a whole range of explanations among us, reflecting the effort of humans to comprehend this immense event, transcending any individual, carried out by humans and yet transcending humankind—a process in some sense cosmic. We sought to fit it into our categories, to come to terms with it as best we could—that is, basically, in terms of nineteenth-century ideas. The second world war provoked nothing of the sort; its direct causes and the course it took were (apparently) only too clear and, most of all, it did not end, mutating instead into something peculiar which looks neither quite like war nor quite like peace, and the revolution which in a way commented on this state did not let anyone catch their breath to speak the word which would “define each thing according to its essence and would tell us about the state of the matter.” Besides, a sort of a conviction spread among us that there must be some true, that is Marxist, explanation of the second world war, something hidden in the conceptual treasures of the Party which guides the movement of history. No one seemed to mind that in reality there are no such explanations . . .

It is not the task of these lines to provide a critique of the specific formulae forged to account for the first world war. I