

# Copernican Reflections and the Tasks of Metaphysics

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## I

IN ALEXANDER Gottlieb Baumgarten's dissertation of 1735, which not only helped to establish aesthetics in its modern sense, but gave the new discipline its name, we find the following analogy: "...the poet is like a maker or creator. So the poem ought to be like a world. Hence by analogy, whatever is evident to the philosophers concerning the real world, the same ought to be thought of a poem."<sup>1</sup> Baumgarten was thinking first of all of the metaphysics of German rationalism. Leibniz's *Monadology*, e.g., may be understood as an attempt to state what "is evident concerning the real world." If Baumgarten is right, the metaphysical propositions of such a work may be read, by analogy, as propositions in aesthetics. The newly founded science of aesthetics is given a license to appropriate a large part of traditional metaphysics.

Baumgarten's own reflections suggest the fruitfulness of such appropriation: like the cosmos, he claims, a poem should be a perfectly ordered whole; just as in God's creation nothing is superfluous, nothing missing, so it should be with the poet's work; and just as the metaphysician finds in God the *focus perfectionis* of all that is, so the aesthetician finds in a poem's theme its *focus perfectionis*.<sup>2</sup> The poem's theme, we may say, is its God; conversely, God may be considered the theme of the world. Presenting itself to us as being as it should be, the poem delivers us from that sense of contingency which is at the heart of nihilism. Similarly, by referring all that is to its divine theme, the metaphysician allows us to understand nature as a meaningful text, as a divine poem.

Elsewhere I have explored the significance of this analogy for the development of modern aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> Here I would like to take a look in the other direction. Does Baumgarten's analogy not invite the thought that the metaphysician's description of the world as a kind of poem is born not so much of the desire to describe faithfully what is, as of an attempt to represent it in such a way that it will appear as a meaningful whole, unified by a single theme? Baumgarten thus understands natural theology

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Reflections on Poetry (Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus)*, tr. Karl Aschenbrenner and William B. Holther (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1954), p. 63.

<sup>2</sup> Baumgarten, *Metaphysica*, 7th ed. (Halle: Hemmerden, 1779), par. 94. "Si plura simul sumpta unius rationem sufficientem constituunt, *consentiunt*, consensus ipse est *perfectio*, et unum, in quod consentitur, *ratio perfectionis determinans* (focus perfectionis).

<sup>3</sup> See "Metaphor and Transcendence," *Critical Inquiry*, 5 (Autumn 1978), 73-90 and "The Painter and the Word," *Bennington Review*, 13 (June 1982), 19-25.

as an indispensable part of metaphysics. Reference to God makes it possible to interpret all that is as a whole that justifies itself rather in the way a work of art justifies itself and its parts.

But can such a metaphysics claim the status of a science? Baumgarten's analogy between poetry and metaphysics may be thought to prefigure Carnap's claim that metaphysics has no "theoretical content" but serves "for the expression of the general attitude of a person toward life," a claim that leads Carnap to praise Nietzsche's *Zarathustra*, because metaphysics here no longer pretends to objective truth and discards its misleading "theoretical form." Owing up to its essentially poetic essence, metaphysics now speaks the language of poetry.<sup>4</sup>

Baumgarten would, no doubt, have been unhappy about such an extension of his thesis. He would have warned us not to push the analogy between poetry and metaphysics too far: we have a right to demand truth of the metaphysician's representations, while the poet need not serve truth, even if in aesthetic coherence his work may be said to possess an analogue of truth.<sup>5</sup>

But can we in fact distinguish poetry and metaphysics in this manner? Is Carnap not right to insist on the poetic essence of metaphysics? Have we not learned to read the texts of speculative metaphysics as a kind of cerebral poetry of which we cannot demand truth as we would of a text in science? Kant's juxtaposition of the steady progress of natural science and the meanderings of metaphysics, which knows no measure by which its progress could be assessed, will not be dismissed.

Without defending metaphysics, many today would object that science's claim to truth and its progress are far more questionable than Kant had thought. Has what is sometimes called the New Philosophy of Science not relativized theory to an extent that any dogmatic commitment to objectifying reason must be rejected? Have we not learned to appreciate the poetic or fictional character even of scientific texts? Richard Rorty, for example, insists that we cannot say that Cardinal Bellarmine's objections to the Copernican theory, on the ground that it conflicted with the Scriptural description of the heavenly fabric, was illogical or unscientific.<sup>6</sup> According to this post-Copernican, post-modern philosopher, we simply do not know how to draw a clear line between theological and scientific discourse. And could something similar not be argued with respect to the line separating metaphysical and scientific discourse? I shall return to Rorty's claim. But let me counter with the opposite assertion, without defending it at this point: if philosophy today is to be more than aesthetic play, it must be able to explain why we must reject Cardinal Bellarmine's objections as unscientific. What forces us to do so is our commitment to objectivity.

The privilege modernity has accorded to objectivity was won in a pattern of thought that I shall call Copernican reflection.<sup>7</sup> This same pattern renders the claim of

<sup>4</sup>Rudolf Carnap, "The Overcoming of Metaphysics through Logical Analysis of Language," in *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Michael Murray (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1978), p. 34.

<sup>5</sup>Baumgarten does, however, insist that the poet's representation be possible, either in the real world or, if not that, at least in some possible world. The former he terms *figmenta vera* or true fictions. Truth in this sense is desirable in a poem because it prevents the reader from stumbling over improbabilities or impossibilities and allows him to surrender himself to the poet's inventions. See *Reflections on Poetry*, pars. 50–59.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 328.

<sup>7</sup>This paper owes its Copernican theme to Hans Blumenberg, *Die Genesis der kopernikanischen Welt* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1975). See my review discussion, "Copernican Reflections," *Inquiry*, 23 (1980), 253–269.

metaphysics to the dignity of a science questionable and tends to reduce it to a curious poetry. Yet, even as it does so, it raises the need for a metaphysics that is more than just poetry. And perhaps this need is greater today than ever before, greater because inseparable from Copernican reflection is a view of things *sub specie possibilitatis*, an oppressive sense of the contingency of all things, which is not alleviated by promises of scientific or technological control. I shall return to this need and to the possibility of meeting it. But first we must take a closer look at what I have called Copernican reflection.

## II

Nietzsche's early fragment *On Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense* begins with a fable that is representative of gloomy post-Copernican meditations on the immensity of the cosmos which would seem to make human existence no more than an insignificant cosmic accident.

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the haughtiest and most mendacious minute of "world history"—yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die.<sup>8</sup>

Following Schopenhauer, Nietzsche here calls attention to the accident of temporal and spatial location that governs human existence.<sup>9</sup> The universe was not made for man, nor was it made to be known by man. And not only does the earth not provide us with a stable ground or a privileged vantage point from which to observe the universe, but everything that presents itself to us as such a ground will begin to move under further reflection. "Since Copernicus," Nietzsche laments, "man seems to have gotten himself on an inclined plane—now he is slipping faster and faster away from the center into—what? into nothingness? into a *penetrating* sense of his nothingness?"<sup>10</sup>

What is the incline that lets us slip away from every center? Nietzsche points to the Copernican destruction of the geocentric world-view. The Copernican revolution may indeed seem to have condemned us to an eccentric and quite insignificant position in the cosmos. But we should not forget that eccentricity implies a center. Copernicus himself continued to hold on to the idea of the center and with it to the idea of a finite cosmos; he only denied the earth this central place, giving it instead to the sun. Still, his revolution presupposes a habit of thought that threatens the very idea of a center and with it the idea of the universe as a cosmos. This habit is part of our inheritance. As Hans Blumenberg has suggested, the form of life of modern man is determined by his passionate reflection on his point of view. Such reflection opposes to what presents itself what might be and in this way renders questionable whatever offers itself as firm ground.

An example may help make clearer what I have in mind. In *On Learned Ignorance*

<sup>8</sup> *Über Wahrheit und Lüge im aussermoralischen Sinn*, tr. Walter Kaufmann.

<sup>9</sup> See the beginning of the second volume of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*. Interpretations of Nietzsche's currently so popular essay that do not recognize the extent to which it remains faithful to Schopenhauer are likely to go astray.

<sup>10</sup> *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III, 25, tr. Walter Kaufmann.

the fifteenth-century cardinal Nicolaus Cusanus invites the reader to imagine himself on a ship drifting in the middle of a large body of water. Unable to see the shores, might we not think our ship the unmoving center of our world. And are we (imagine yourself a reader taught to take the central position of the earth for granted) on better grounds when, absolutizing our terrestrial point of view, we proclaim the earth to be the center of the cosmos. With equal right a lunarian might take the moon, a Martian Mars to be that center. Rest and motion, the cardinal points out, are relative concepts. What we take to be central or fixed will depend on our point of view. To become learned about one's ignorance means here first of all to become learned about the distorting power of perspective, about the central illusions that it carries with it.<sup>11</sup>

Essentially the same reflection appears more than a hundred years later in Copernicus's *Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*:

And why are we not willing to acknowledge that the *appearance* of a daily revolution belongs to the heavens, its *actuality* to the earth? The relation is similar to that of which Virgil's Aeneas says, "We sail out of the harbour, and the countries and cities recede." For when a ship is sailing along quietly, everything which is outside of it will appear to those on board to have a motion corresponding to the movement of the ship; and the voyagers are of the erroneous opinion that they with all they have with them are at rest.<sup>12</sup>

Such reflection on perspective has ontological implications: it generates the distinction between appearance and reality, the former subjective and perspectival, the latter independent of the distortions of perspective and in this sense objective; at the same time, it has to dissociate reality and visibility. It should be clear that what Copernicus calls actuality and what I call objective reality can in principle not be seen as it is—for seeing is bound to the eye and thus to perspective; it can only be thought. Objective reality does not present itself; it is seized by us only in our own reconstructions. And must objective reality not be equated with reality? Most of us make this equation without giving it more thought than we do to the motion of the earth: in both cases what is readily admitted is quickly covered up by our involvement in everyday reality. But do we really doubt that the particles of which our physicists speak and which, we have been taught, make up reality, are colorless? The dissociation of reality and visibility is part of the ontology presupposed by our modern form of life. To repeat: on this view the truly real is invisible; and it is grasped only in structures of which we ourselves are the author.

This understanding of reality rests on a twofold reduction of experience. First of all and most of the time we find ourselves caught up in the world. The way we encounter things is tied to the activities in which we are engaged; their mode of presentation is bound up with mood and interest and the inevitable distortions to which they lead. A first reduction attempts to liberate thought from such all too personal perspectives: the self is disengaged from the world and made into a disinterested observer of what is. Being comes to be understood as mute presence to such a subject; the world is transformed into a meaningless picture.<sup>13</sup> As Schopenhauer points out, lost in that

<sup>11</sup> *De docta ignorantia*, II, 12. See Karsten Harries, "The Infinite Sphere: Comments on the History of a Metaphor," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13 (January 1975), 5–15.

<sup>12</sup> *De revolutionibus orbium celestium*, I, 9.

<sup>13</sup> See Martin Heidegger, "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," *Holzwege* (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1950) pp. 69–104.

reduction is the real significance of things, that “by virtue of which these pictures or images do not march past us, strange and meaningless, as they would otherwise inevitably do, but speak to us directly, are understood, and acquire an interest that engrosses our whole nature.”<sup>14</sup> No longer can nature be interpreted as a book to be read by us.

If the first reduction dissociates the meaningful and the sensible, the second reduction dissociates the sensible and the real. Once again the reflection on perspective provides the key: is the way we experience things not subject to a point of view that happens to be ours only because of the accident of our body’s spatial and temporal location? But the perspective assigned to us by our body is not a prison: not only can we move and gain different perspectives; in imagination we can put ourselves in different places even without moving; and we can go even further and demand descriptions that are free from all perspectives and a form of expression as free as possible from all that binds everyday discourse to particular perspectives and points of views. Mathematics offers the key to such a purer language.

One may object and insist that if the eyes do not see things as they are, the disembodied spirit sees even less; indeed, it does not see at all. Nietzsche thus suggests that we do not have an organ for the truth.<sup>15</sup> Such sceptical reflection may be said to frame modernity: Cusanus thus makes truth the privilege of God and the sceptics of the sixteenth century similarly tend to link man’s presumption to seize the truth with sin; to this scepticism that precedes the establishment of the modern world view corresponds a new scepticism that with increasing vigor would challenge that establishment, a scepticism that no longer knows anything of God or sin, but insists once again that the hope to seize reality as it is, is vain, as is the hope to secure a foundation on which we can confidently erect the edifice of knowledge. I shall return to this second post-modern scepticism. But we should not forget that modern science begins with the confidence that we are not shut off from the truth, that the constructions of science are not mere hypotheses, but representations of what is, that if reflection denies us what we naively believed to be the center, a stable ground on which to stand, it more than compensates us for what it has destroyed by leading us to the true center, by establishing a really secure ground. It was this confidence that separated Copernicus from Andreas Osiander, the Lutheran preacher whose notorious preface to Copernicus’s *Revolutions* sought to make the work acceptable by creating the impression that Copernicus never meant to claim truth for his theory, but was content to offer useful hypotheses. As Bruno and Kepler insisted, the phony preface constitutes a betrayal of the Copernican ethos. Without the confidence in man’s ability to comprehend the secrets of nature, modern science could not have progressed as it did.

Descartes sought to support such confidence by thematizing its ontological presuppositions. Descartes’s metaphysics of nature, his determination of the being of nature as extended substance and as such intelligible, was to justify the cognitive optimism of the new science. Descartes knew that his metaphysics of nature was itself in need of a foundation, that the ontology of extended substance called for a more fundamental ontology, which is provided by the metaphysics of the soul: the determination of the being of man as thinking substance was to ground the determination of the being of nature as extended substance. The self is purified by being brought to the realiza-

<sup>14</sup> *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vol. I, par. 17, tr. E. F. J. Payne.

<sup>15</sup> *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, par. 354.

tion that the body and the senses are not essential to its being. This angelically pure self is made the measure of what presents itself to us.<sup>16</sup> Using that measure the world of the senses has to be judged mere appearance.

We may well wonder whether the confidence that the thinking subject alone gives us adequate access to what is has at all been justified. Have the sceptics really been refuted? To dispel such doubts Descartes attempts to prove the existence of a God who is not a deceiver. His metaphysics, too, culminates in a philosophical theology. This theology, however, cannot be divorced from a humanist anthropocentrism: in it the Copernican confidence that we are not lost in an immense reality, that the means that will allow us to transform the world into our home are to be found within the human spirit, finds expression. It is this confidence that lets Descartes promise a

. . . practical philosophy by means of which, knowing the force and action of fire, water, air, the stars, heavens and all bodies that environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of the artisans, we can in the same way employ them in all those uses to which they are adapted and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature.<sup>17</sup>

The last words are particularly significant: characteristic of modern science and technology is this association of cognition and aggression: nature is to be conquered and possessed. So understood, the cognitive impulse is inseparable from our need for security: in dread of what we cannot control, we refuse to accept things as they offer themselves in unreliable profusion and evanescence. Things are to be appropriated. It is significant that the model of knowledge to which Descartes here points is provided by the artisan's know-how. To understand something is not just to be able to offer a mathematical reconstruction, but is to know how to actually make it. To fully understand a human being is to be able to make one. To fully understand nature is to be able to recreate it.<sup>18</sup>

We may well want to insist that this characterization fails to do justice to the cognitive impulse as such, that there is a desire to know for the sake of knowing and not for the sake of power, but an intimate bond between knowledge and power is presupposed by modern science and technology. And their continued progress demonstrates that Descartes's promise was not idle; much of it today has become reality. We have had to pay for the power that this "practical philosophy" has given us. The price is hidden in the two reductions of which I have spoken: the first reduction must rob things of what lets them speak to us and engage our interest; no longer are they infused with our emotions, interests, and values. No longer a book addressed to man, nature has become a mute collection of contingent facts. The second reduction robs things of their sensuous presence: what we see is interpreted as the mere appearance of a reality that is essentially invisible and best described in the language of mathematics. As Nietzsche saw, so understood the pursuit of truth is nihilistic in its very essence.

But with such a valueless reality we cannot live; and if it must be identified with

<sup>16</sup>See Karsten Harries, "Descartes, Perspective, and the Angelic Eye," *Yale French Studies*, no. 49 (1973), 28-42.

<sup>17</sup>*Discourse on Method*, VI, tr. E. S. Haldane and G. R. T. Ross.

<sup>18</sup>Presupposed is an understanding of finite being as created being. Proper access to such being is gained not by pure theory but by theory tied to technological practice. Idle curiosity does not yield insight; insight requires work.

reality, reality must be disguised. This gives weight to Nietzsche's claim "We possess art lest we perish of the truth."<sup>19</sup> Could we, should we also say, perhaps appealing to Carnap, that we possess metaphysics lest we perish of the truth?

### III

Nietzsche understands Copernicus as one of those thinkers who helped to destroy the dignity that had been thought to belong to man because God had placed him at the center of the cosmos: destroying the geocentric cosmos of the medievals, Copernicus is thought to have undermined also our natural anthropocentrism. As I have pointed out, this reading would have surprised Copernicus: while he did indeed deny man his central place in the cosmos, he was also convinced that the accident of our location does not deny the dignity of man; nor does it shut him off from the truth. Copernicus took pride in the fact that he did his work in an obscure and peripheral corner of Europe. Such eccentricity did not seem to him to challenge the dignity of the thinker; quite the opposite: that dignity manifests itself in his ability to overcome the consequences of the accident of location. We are not imprisoned in a labyrinth of perspectives. Our mind, if not our eye, is equal to the mysteries of nature.

Nietzsche might have replied that if Copernicus did in fact cling to such a cognitive optimism, he was himself insufficiently Copernican. And indeed, further Copernican revolutions have shaken such humanistic faith and its ontology. The most famous of these successor revolutions is Kant's, although, initially at least, it may not at all be clear in what sense this escalation of the Copernican revolution should be thought of as in any way undermining the humanist anthropocentrism of a Copernicus. Was Kant's Copernican revolution not intended to recast the metaphysics of nature in a way that would rid it once and for all of all sceptical doubts, thus succeeding where the dogmatic metaphysics of a Descartes with its appeal to God had failed? Consider the often cited passage in which Kant invokes the authority of Copernicus:

We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely, that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects *a priori*, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus's first thought. Failing of satisfactory progress in explaining the movements of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that they all revolved around the spectator, he tried whether he might not have better success if he made the spectator to revolve and the stars to remain at rest. A similar experiment can be tried in metaphysics.<sup>20</sup>

Just as Kant believed Kepler and Newton to have established the truth of the Copernican experiment, so he was convinced that his own *Critique*, especially the exposition of the antinomies, had proved his Copernican conjecture and once and for all established the course that any future metaphysics deserving the name of science would have to follow. Kant may thus be thought of as having established a new paradigm, powerful enough to establish metaphysics as a normal science. We have to keep in mind, however, that if Kant did in fact succeed in his attempt to reform meta-

<sup>19</sup> *Der Wille zur Macht*, no. 822, tr. Walter Kaufmann.

<sup>20</sup> *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B XVI, tr. Norman Kemp Smith.

physics, then his success leaves little for future metaphysicians to do. The recasting of metaphysics heralds its imminent completion and end. Kant himself expected this completion to have been accomplished “in a short time,” before the end of his century.<sup>21</sup> Modernity appears here as the age, which, having finally found the foundation of all theoretical inquiry in a critically purified metaphysics of nature, has no further need for it and can go confidently about the business of understanding and mastering nature.

There is an easy objection: who today still is able to accept Kant’s claim to have put an end to speculative metaphysics by its critical transformation and to have circumscribed the territory of science once and for all? Have further evolutions in science and mathematics not proven him wrong? Was Kant’s Copernican revolution, like that of his predecessor, not governed by a naive trust in scientific reason? Did Kant not quite uncritically absolutize his own culturally conditioned point of view? Must we not charge Kant, too, with having been insufficiently Copernican?

But in what sense is Kant’s revolution Copernican at all? Is Kant’s suggestion that it is not man’s knowledge that has to accommodate itself to external objects, but rather those objects which have to accommodate themselves to man’s faculty of knowledge, not the inverse of what Copernicus achieved when he denied man his privileged place at the cosmic center, assigning that place, not to the earth, but to the sun? To be sure, in both cases we can speak of a shift of the center, but do these shifts not run in opposite rather than parallel direction? Consider once more Nietzsche’s nihilistic reading of Copernicus:

Has the self-belittlement of man, his *will* to self-belittlement not progressed irresistibly since Copernicus? Alas, the faith in the dignity and uniqueness of man, in his irreplaceability in the great chain of Being, is a thing of the past—he has become an animal, literally and without qualification, he who was, according to his own faith, almost God (“child of God,” “Godman”).<sup>22</sup>

The attack on geocentrism is linked to an attack on anthropocentrism. Following such a reading, Darwin and Freud, Marx, and Nietzsche himself may be understood as having continued the Copernican revolution by showing that the traditional picture of man which exempts him from natural processes is untenable. Copernican reflection is taken here to lead to the progressive naturalization of man.

Such a reading, however, does violence to the anthropocentric humanism that gave Copernicus the confidence that God had not kept the truth for himself, that human understanding is sufficiently godlike to grasp what is as it is. Much of this anthropocentrism is preserved by Kant’s appeal to Copernicus. Consider once more the passage quoted above: having raised the question why metaphysics had not yet been established as a science, as had logic, mathematics, and finally natural science, the last establishment belonging to the modern period, Kant makes the suggestion that we might do well to consider how the study of nature came to be established as a science. It is in this context that the Copernican revolution gains paradigmatic significance. What interests Kant is not so much what Copernicus thought as his mode of thinking it: Copernicus helped to establish natural science by recognizing the necessity of go-

<sup>21</sup> See, e.g., *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A XX, B XXIV and *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft*, A XV.

<sup>22</sup> *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, III, 25 tr. Walter Kaufmann.

ing beyond the realm of subjective appearance to an objective reality whose structure could not simply be read off the evidence presented by the senses. Access to that reality would be gained only if man subjected his senses to the understanding and learned to replace the subjective appearances presented by the former with objective reconstructions. But if Copernicus thought that reality is such that it can be seized by the human spirit as it is, Kant recognized that the turn from sense to understanding does not imply an escape from perspective altogether, but only raises the problem to a second, higher level. His transcendental philosophy lets us see the understanding as a faculty governed by its own point of view, higher, to be sure, but still a point of view. This reduces the objective reality, revealed by the new science, to a realm of mere phenomena. Scientific truth is relativized.

Once again, to be aware of a perspective as a perspective and of the limitations imposed by a particular point of view, is to be, at least in thought, already beyond these limitations. Reason reaches beyond the understanding; beyond the realm of phenomena lies the realm of things in themselves. Not that, according to Kant, a theoretical grasp of this realm is possible. Thus, while justifying the new science's confidence in its ability to master the phenomena of nature, Kant yet rules out the identification of objective reality with reality as such. Thus he offers an escape from that nihilism which Nietzsche takes to be inseparable from the ontology presupposed by modern science. I do not want to argue for Kant's opposition of a metaphysics of nature and a metaphysics of morals. That opposition opens up an unacceptable ontological split. But Kant does teach us that the metaphysics of nature presupposed by modern science rests on a reduction. Experience, as Kant understands it in the first *Critique*, is already a doubly reduced experience. The understanding of being presupposed by modern science must be transcended if life is to have a meaning. A richer metaphysics is needed, able to encompass the metaphysics of nature and to assign it its proper place. Kant teaches us also that we cannot demand objective truth of such a richer metaphysics. Absolutized, the commitment to objective truth leads to nihilism.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV

Kant's turn to the subject was to secure and yet limit modernity's trust in objectivity. But does Kant succeed any better than Descartes in his attempt to secure such trust? Is objectivity not a mere fiction? Consider the following statement by Roland Barthes:

Every utterance implies its own subject, whether this subject be expressed in apparently direct fashion, by the use of 'I', or indirectly, by being referred to as 'he' or avoided altogether by means of impersonal constructions. They are purely grammatical decoys which do no more than vary the way in which the subject is constituted within the discourse, that is, the way he gives himself to others, theatrically or as a phantasm; they all refer to forms of

<sup>23</sup>Following Kant, I understand objective truth as the agreement of our thoughts or propositions with the objects. But since the objects do not present themselves to us as they are *an sich*, but only their perspectival appearances, the idea of the object *an sich* (not to be confused with that of the thing in itself) functions only as a regulative ideal to be approximated by our constructions. Thus while the meaning of objective truth may be said to be correspondence, its test is coherence. That we cannot reduce all that deserves to be called "truth" to objective truth thus understood is evident. Not all knowledge concerns what is the case. Mathematical truths and truths of reflection demand thus a different account. See *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 70 Anm.

the imaginary. The most specious of these is the privative, the very one normally practiced by scientific discourse, from which the scientist excludes himself because of his concern for objectivity. What is excluded, however, is always only the 'person', psychological, emotional, or biological, certainly not the subject. It could be said moreover that this subject is heavy with the spectacular exclusion that it has imposed on its person, so that, on the discursive level—one, be it remembered, which cannot be avoided—objectivity is as imaginary as anything else.<sup>24</sup>

This is to say: science is as imaginary as poetry.

Barthes's remarks are representative of a radicalization of Kant's Copernican revolution that has shaped twentieth-century philosophy and turned against Kant himself. Barthes is hardly alone in questioning the spectacular exclusion of the person and in insisting that the objectivity it yields is fantastic or imaginary. Heidegger, for example, claims that in appealing to an idealized subject, to a pure ego, or to an ideal observer, we illegitimately read the traditional understanding of God into the human subject.<sup>25</sup> Because of Kant's failure to realize how much he had taken from his theological precursors, because of his failure to subject his understanding of the transcendental subject and with it of objectivity and truth to sufficiently critical attention, his Copernican revolution remained incomplete.

Similar objections had been raised already by Hamann and Herder.<sup>26</sup> In his "Metacritique to the Critique of Pure Reason" (1799) the latter protests both the elision of the person and the elision of language that occurs in the *Critique*. Herder insists that we think with words, not with abstract concepts, and that we cannot think in a language other than our own. Instead of a critique of pure reason what is needed is a study of language as it is. The life-world is a house (or perhaps a prison) built by language. It is an argument that has been repeated in different form by Nietzsche and Heidegger, by Wittgenstein and Derrida, and by their many followers. The linguistic twist given to Kant's Copernican revolution is one of the most characteristic features of modern philosophy. What matters here is the denial of the claim that behind or beyond ordinary language we can discover a pure language, or rather not a language at all, but the timeless essence of language, the *logos*. Because human understanding is always bound to a historical language, because it is always burdened and shaped by the language in which the individual has been raised, language can never become pure or innocent. Essentially the same argument challenges the attempt to oppose to the person an ideal or transcendental subject.

Must we then not become more radically Copernican than Kant and free his insight into the way the human subject is constitutive of the phenomena that it encounters from what remains of the Christian understanding of truth as founded in the creative and aperspectival vision of God? And will this not force us to submerge both subject and reason in the world, subject both to time and thus to history? Inseparably intertwined with the linguistic turn is what we can call the historicistic turn. Gadamer's

<sup>24</sup>Roland Barthes, "Science versus Literature," *Introduction to Structuralism*, ed. Michael Lane (New York: 1971), p. 414. See also Karsten Harries, "Meta-Criticism and Meta-poetry: A Critique of Theoretical Anarchy," *Research in Phenomenology*, 9 (1979), 54–73.

<sup>25</sup>Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 7th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1953), p. 229.

<sup>26</sup>See Johann Georg Hamann, "Kritik der reinen Vernunft" (1781) and "Metakritik über den Purismus der Vernunft" (1784) in *Schriften zur Sprache*, int. Josef Simon (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967) and Johann Gottfried Herder, "Eine Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft," (1799) from *Verstand und Erfahrung in Sprachphilosophie*, ed. Erich Heintel (Hamburg: Meiner, 1960).

often cited claim that the enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice was just that, another prejudice, captures the essence of what we may call a third Copernican revolution. Kant's Copernican revolution is radicalized with the question: where do we find an intuition, a sense free from the distortions of perspective, a presence not hopelessly entangled with absence? And where do we find language unburdened by past prejudice? Must our thinking not always reflect the limits imposed by our situation, including the language-games in which we happen to be caught up? Was it not Nietzsche's great insight that there is no escape from perspective? If, following these suggestions, we bring Kant's transcendental subject down to earth and replace his supposedly timeless categoreal scheme with concrete historical language, we are also forced to deny what on the Kantian or the Cartesian account separates the objects and their merely subjective appearance. With the idea of a pure or transcendental subject that of a reality transcending our inescapably perspectival grasp also has to collapse. With this collapse language loses its measure and becomes free play. A physics text comes to be looked at as just another text, no less fictional than, let us say, a novel.

The third Copernican revolution turns Copernican reflection against Copernican faith in man's ability to grasp what is as it is. And if, as I have insisted, together with such reflection such faith lies at the origin of the modern world and of its nihilism, does such destruction not promise a post-modern humanism that has "blown the cover of reified or superobjective thinking," freed itself from modern logocentrism, and rendered theory once again playful and fun?<sup>27</sup>

Modern romantics may dream of such a post-modern paradise where theory turns poetic and the rift that separates the sciences and the humanities is healed in a higher play; unfortunately the realities of the world we live in argue differently. We only have to think of the profoundly ambiguous achievement of our technology to be awakened from such dreams. To the extent that the humanities surrender themselves to such play they render themselves ineffective and peripheral; they become part of the attempt to cover up an increasingly unbearable reality. We can of course flee from our frightening modern reality, which pushes the humanities more and more on the defensive, into dreams of the humanities and the arts conquering the sciences. But these remain dreams. The humanities have to understand and respect the gap that separates discourse committed to objectivity from discourse committed to the preservation of humanity; that is to say also that they have to recognize the legitimacy of science and of modernity if they are to have a genuinely critical function. This, however, takes for granted that the third Copernican revolution and its attack on the ideal of objectivity, on the ontology that has shaped and continues to shape the modern world, have failed. But is this presupposition justified?

## V

Consider once more what argues against it. Crucial is the claim that reality will never present itself to us in a way that is uncontaminated by perspective, that there will never be descriptions free from prejudice. Both must, I think, be granted. The presencing of things is never a presencing of these things as they are in themselves, but subject to more or less arbitrary perspectives, more or less accidental points of view. Must any understanding of objective truth as a correspondence of our thoughts

<sup>27</sup> Geoffrey Hartmann, "Literary Criticism and Its Discontents," *Critical Inquiry*, 3 (1976), 216.

or propositions and the objects themselves not collapse with the recognition that the idea of such objects is only an ideal that we ourselves have constructed? But from this it does *not* follow that we cannot demand objectivity and state criteria that allow us to distinguish the more from the less objective account. As a regulative ideal correspondence retains its significance. The enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice was more than just another prejudice; it only reaffirmed a commitment that is inseparable from the life of reflection.

Consider once more Heidegger's suggestion that the appeal to an idealized subject to ground objectivity relies illegitimately on the traditional understanding of God, attributing to the human subject divine attributes. That there is both a historical and a systematic connection between the idea of God and that of a transcendental subject cannot be denied. But why should this discredit the latter? We should ask rather, how was it ever possible for human beings to think God as an aperspectival knower? Just this possibility is sufficient to force a revision of Heidegger's determinations of *Dasein* and of truth. Heidegger does not take seriously enough the power of reflection. There is something profoundly right about the traditional view that makes an aperspectival knower the measure of the finite and perspective-bound human knower. The legitimacy of this view is established in a reflection on the meaning of knowing as old as philosophy itself. Heidegger's analysis of the ecstatic being of *Dasein* fails to do justice to man's ability to transcend himself in reflection. The ideal of objectivity, an ideal inseparable from the traditional understanding of truth, has its foundation in the self-transcendence or the self-elevation of the human spirit.<sup>28</sup>

This ideal has given and continues to give direction to knowledge, and more especially to our knowledge of nature. We do not know what revolutions still lie ahead of science, but it is inconceivable that science will retreat from the commitment to objectivity, that it will cease to speak the language of mathematics, which is not to say that a retreat from science, which would mean also a retreat from the enlightenment, is not conceivable. But there is an unambiguous sense in which simply by virtue of its form of description, and that is to say because of its greater objectivity, modern science may be said to have progressed beyond the Aristotelian science that preceded it. To say this is to say also that our modern culture is not just another culture, which may now be drawing to its end, that it is not just chauvinistic prejudice that lets modernity interpret itself as the epoch towards which all of history has been tending, that Hegel was right to insist that there is a progress to reflection and that this progress has shaped the progress of history. It is hardly an accident that the whole world is succumbing to western culture, that there is no other culture that offers effective resistance, much as we may hope that this were so, just as we may hope that the attacks on objectivity launched from so many different quarters today were more effective than they are. The concern and the seriousness behind this hope must be honored. As Nietzsche saw, the other side of the progress that celebrates its triumphs in modern science and technology is nihilism; the price of the pursuit of objectivity appears to be the progressive loss of whatever gives significance to human existence. Small wonder that dreams of post-modernism have long been part of modernity.

But are these last remarks not just another example of the pre-Copernican illusion that we are lucky or perhaps unfortunate enough to be standing at the center? Should historical reflection not have made such cultural chauvinism impossible by now? Is it

<sup>28</sup> See Theodor Litt, *Mensch und Welt. Grundlinien einer Philosophie des Geistes* (München: Federmann, 1948), pp. 214–231.

not a sign that we still have not become Copernican enough? To be sure, in our attempt to ground our understanding of what is, we will always appeal to centers, seek the true elements, search for the foundation that will support the edifice of knowledge. But has the immensity of space and time not denied us every center? Has not every element crumbled, demanding that the search for the true elements be renewed once again? Has not every foundation given way under further reflection?

But if this must be admitted, this is not to say that the pursuit of objective reality has been fruitless. It has liberated our understanding, given us a freer, if not a completely free access to what is, and granted us a more adequate understanding of the workings of nature. Technology demonstrates daily the power that the pursuit of objectivity has granted us. And if we see with ever clearer eyes the frightening dimensions of such power, we abdicate our responsibility of meeting that threat when we seek refuge in a rhetoric that suggests that our science is not really superior to all science that has gone before it or that our technological way of life is just another.

But we abdicate our responsibility also when we view technology as an autonomous force, a dictator who will dispose of our lives, regardless of our wishes. To be sure, technology is not just a simple tool that leaves us fully in charge. It is a force that threatens to reduce all things, including human beings, to material to be organized by and subjected to technological planning. But this is a tendency, not a fate to which we have to submit. That tendency is supported by an ontology that makes man's ability to understand and to master, and, that is to say, to remake things, the measure of their being. A different and richer ontology is needed if there is to be a responsible critique of science and technology.

Not that such an ontology should invite us to take leave from the technological world. To do so would be altogether irresponsible. There are still countless problems that await technological answers. But the idea of boundless technological progress must be questioned. We have little choice but to put technology in its place, to affirm it, even to welcome it; and yet, at the same time we must keep our distance from it so that working with machines will not give us a machine heart.

If technology today threatens to gain dominion even over man himself, this is only because he himself wants it, because the power and security it promises are valued more than the threat it poses is feared. Life, however, loses its meaning when nature and man are reduced to no more than material for the technological process. To recognize that there is meaning only where there is respect is to know also that the task facing us is not simply that of guiding technological progress, but the much more difficult task of establishing the boundaries of that progress. And to the extent that the shape of the modern world is determined by the Cartesian promise that our science will make us the masters and possessors, not only of nature, but even of our own nature, that task can be met only if we find the strength to renounce that promise and to overcome the dread of insecurity and death that supports it. Such renunciation promises and calls for a new ontology.

## VI

I began with Baumgarten's analogy between poetry and metaphysics and I would like to conclude with it: that analogy is founded on the view that both the poem and the cosmos are perfectly ordered wholes, having their *foci perfectionis* in the poem's theme and in God respectively. Both represent beings in such a way that they appear

as having to be as they now present themselves. Both deliver us from the dread of contingency awakened by Copernican reflection.

Metaphysics and poetry, on Baumgarten's view, differ most obviously in their forms of representation. Of metaphysics Baumgarten demands truth, and truth demands clarity and distinctness or intensive clarity. Of poetry Baumgarten demands a different kind of clarity addressed to sense and imagination, a clarity that may be forceful but never distinct in the Cartesian sense. Baumgarten speaks of extensive clarity.<sup>29</sup> Extensive clarity loses in distinctness as it gains in extension, while intensive clarity loses in extension as it gains in distinctness. According to Baumgarten, the finitude of the human intellect makes it impossible for it to combine intensive and extensive clarity. Only God possesses such knowledge.

Baumgarten seems to me right when he insists that we will never be able to marry the clear presence of sensation and the distinctness of objectifying thought. The greater the power of abstraction, the less is preserved of the texture of reality; and the richer the poet's vision, the more decisively it will discourage the demand for objective truth. As we move towards either extreme gain also means sacrifice. Theory and poetry grant different kinds of access to reality, both inadequate, both supplementary. Neither can be given ontological primacy; neither can be used to ground the other.

This point can be generalized. Quite uncritically Baumgarten presupposes and takes for granted the first of my two reductions. His paradigm of experience is furnished by disinterested perception. But is it clear that disinterested awareness provides more adequate access to things than interested awareness? More adequate by what standard? Do Fichte and Schopenhauer not have a point when they claim that disinterested objectivity lets us lose touch with reality? Does a lover's love not reveal even as it conceals? Once more gain is balanced by loss as awareness becomes either less or more interested. In this case, too, it is impossible to ground one type of awareness in the other. We do not possess some single privileged or proper access to what is.

Baumgarten presents a much more modest challenge to Cartesian reason. By insisting that there can be no clear and distinct understanding of reality in all its concreteness, he forces his readers to question the claim that scientific understanding can give us fully adequate access to reality. But that challenge is not nearly as vigorous as it should be. With Kant I would insist that the pursuit of objective truth requires greater sacrifices than Baumgarten thinks necessary. Like Hume, Baumgarten links sensibility and understanding as modes of perception, although, while for Hume ideas and thoughts are but less lively sensations, Baumgarten understands sensations as clear, but indistinct ideas. Baumgarten thus preserves a view that makes thinking a kind of perceiving, a view that has the support of the traditional metaphor of sight for knowledge. Given such a view it makes sense to speak of clear and distinct perception, of an access to reality that at the price of extensive clarity frees us from the distortions of perspective, while it yet preserves the presence that belongs to sensation. Such perceptions should furnish knowledge with a firm ground. It would seem then that the snake did not deceive Adam and Eve altogether when it promised them godlike understanding. But as epistemologists and metaphysicians too, we have to take seriously the doctrine of the fall. Can we make sense of an aperspectival seeing, of an intuition that furnishes knowledge with a firm ground? In the end Copernican

<sup>29</sup> *Reflections on Poetry*, pars. 14–18.

reflection on the power of point of view must render every such ground problematic.

That also goes for the principle of sufficient reason that supports Baumgarten's interpretation of the cosmos as a perfect whole. That principle can only furnish a very precarious foundation. We have no clear and distinct intuition of such a principle. Nor does reflection show the principle of sufficient reason to be a condition of the very possibility of experience, as Kant claims, not altogether convincingly, for that principle's more modest sister, the category of causality. The principle of sufficient reason rests on and articulates a Copernican faith in the power of the human spirit to penetrate the secrets of reality. In keeping with such faith Baumgarten makes the principle of sufficient reason constitutive of being.

We have no right to such faith. No intuition and no transcendental argument can ground the principle of sufficient reason. Just this allows us to speak of Copernican *faith*, a faith that counteracts the decentering power of Copernican reflection. As Kant shows, some such faith is presupposed by science.<sup>30</sup> As a regulative principle the principle of sufficient reason has presided and continues to preside over science's reconstruction of nature in the image of reason. But, to repeat, it is a matter of faith, inseparable from that courage to know that according to Kant defines true enlightenment. To dismiss Copernicus's humanistic faith that God does not keep the truth to himself, but allows us to share in it as no more than a naive prejudice is to render our culture unintelligible.

Like the enlightenment, such faith occupies the treshold of what the tradition calls pride. The principle of sufficient reason invites us to consider all that is, not just as a product of art, but of a rational art. Rational construction is made the measure of what is. And when reason is equated with human reason—and how can we avoid the equation?; do we know any other reason?—the ideal scientist or the ideal community of scientific researchers is given the place the tradition had assigned to God. Here we come to the source of the hold that an ontology that reduces things to matter for scientific or technological reconstruction has on us, to a pride that is the other side of the inability to accept that we are not master of our own being, that we are hungry, vulnerable, and mortal. But such an ontology has to strip being of value. Pride is the origin of nihilism.

An ontology is needed that is not born of pride. Or, if that term seems too burdened by a tradition that has lost much of its authority, an ontology is needed free from what Nietzsche calls the spirit of revenge, free from the will's ill will against time. To put the same point yet a third way: an ontology is needed born of strength to accept what Heidegger calls *Dasein's* guilt. Such an ontology will refuse to make our ability to appropriate things the measure of their being. Similarly it will refuse to equate being with some form of perceptible presence.

Such an ontology will allow for the necessarily precarious renewal of the attempt to interpret nature as one might a book or perhaps a poem. We need a metaphysics capable of offering a reading of nature strong enough to defeat contingency. That such a metaphysics will not be able to claim objective truth for its reading is evident. The claim to such truth presupposes a particular ontology, an understanding of being governed by the twofold reduction of the world first into a picture and then into a ghostly collection of invisible facts. But this is not to say that such an edifying metaphysics would be, as Carnap suggests, mere poetry. What distinguishes it from

<sup>30</sup> See *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, B XXV/A XXIII, B XXXVIII/A XXXVI.

poetry would be its respect both for objective truths which help furnish the text to be interpreted, and for disciplined reflection.<sup>31</sup> But reflection on the facts alone does not suffice to let us understand these facts as parts of a meaningful whole. That requires a creative reading born of faith or love.

<sup>31</sup> Similarly we demand objective truth of the facts that are part of the stories told by historians. The same, however, is not true of the stories themselves; their task is to offer an intersubjectively acceptable reading of the meaning of these facts, which is also an interpretation of our inheritance and thus of who we are. Hermann Lübbe speaks of the "consensus objectivity" (*Konsensobjektivität*) of such stories. Metaphysics, too, must claim objectivity in this second sense. It gives a reading of the meaning of what is the case and of our place in the midst of things. But such objectivity must be distinguished from scientific objectivity. See Hermann Lübbe, "Die Identitätspräsentationsfunktion der Historie," in *Praxis der Philosophie, Praktische Philosophie, Geschichtstheorie* (Stuttgart: Reclam 1978), pp. 97–122.