

Bereft of Reason

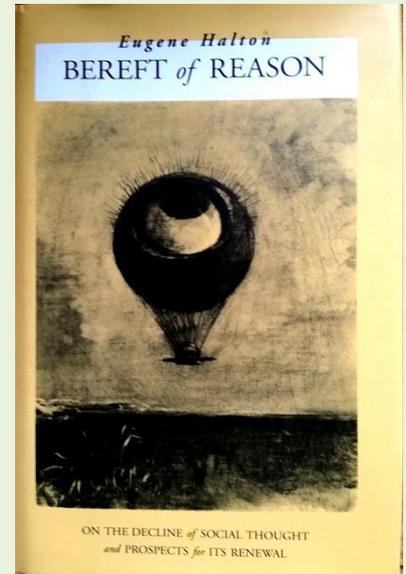
On the Decline of Social Thought and Prospects for its Renewal

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About the book:

In this radical critique of contemporary social thought, Eugene Halton argues that both modernism and postmodernism are damaged philosophies whose acceptance of the myths of the culture/nature dichotomy make them incapable of solving our social dilemmas. The recent vogue of social theory for the social sciences, literary and cultural studies, and philosophy, has brought with it the promise of breaking down unnecessary boundaries and overturning stale canons. Yet Halton claims that the dominant ideas today tend toward emaciated theories of meaning, viewing human conduct as consisting of talking heads, reading heads, of spectatorial heads reduced either to enacting a convention or acting out “differences” from conventions. Far from being able to confront the self-destroying calamities of our time, they form an intellectual opiate. From defenders of the modern project, such as Juergen Habermas, to postmodern critics such as Richard Rorty, Stanley Fish, Jean-Francois Lyotard, or James Clifford, there is all too often an uncritical acceptance of the nominalistic premisses of “the ghost in the machine.”

Bereft of Reason argues that the leading social theories of our time remain shackled to the modern myth of “the ghost in the machine.” In Halton’s view most contemporary attempts to provide better theories of rationality or alternative theories of antirationality assume the dichotomy of a spectral view of reason and mechanical view of materiality which underlies the modern era, and, in his words, “the modern error.”

In chapters ranging from the codification of social thought, to the concept of life, the cultic roots of culture, and so-called “neopragmatism,” Halton claims that contemporary thought has lost touch with the biosemiotic sources of reasonableness. Some neglected paths

in twentieth-century social thought and philosophy of the past century, particularly the work of Lewis Mumford and Charles Peirce--as well as someone very much in the contemporary picture, Vaclav Havel--together suggest an outline for a new and non-modern basis for contemporary thought. In the author's view a more fundamental questioning of the entrenched premisses of the modern era itself is urgently needed, which requires critically delving into the deeper sources of reasonableness, which modern thought has tended to deny or degrade. Modern culture reified physicality while etherealizing the perfusion of signs in which we humans live and by which we evolved into humankind: signs which bodied us forth from an organic nature which is far more mysterious than a mere machine, no matter how complex a machine nature is conceived to be.

The human person is far more than simply a form of knowledge, social construction, or contingent difference in Halton's perspective. Ultimately the self is an organic social being infused with the spontaneous passions of life, capable of feeling, experiencing, and empathically responding to the communicative environment, as well as rationally judging him or herself and the world, rightly and wrongly.

Bereft of Reason is a passionate plea for a fundamental reexamination of the entrenched assumptions of the modern era. Dealing with issues of vital concern to modern societies, it should appeal to readers across a number of disciplines.

Chapter 1: The Codification of Social Theory

Why Theory Now?

The comedians Mike Nichols and Elaine May used to have a routine going back to their days with the Second City Comedy Club in Chicago, in which they would toss words back and forth which would qualify as "cleans" and "dirties." For example, the term "Lake Michigan" is a clean, while "Lake Titicaca"--enunciated very slowly--is a dirty. "Sword" is a clean, while "rapier" is a dirty. Are you with me, dear reader? We can apply the same method to a number of terms in intellectual life today.

In this general mindset, contingency, pluralism, and social constructionism are cleans, while essences, foundations, experience, and universals are all dirties. "Reality" is a dirty while "fiction" is a clean. The "I" is a dirty, and so is "we." An "author" is a dirty, while a "text" is a clean. "The body," formerly a dirty, can be redefined as a text, and made into a clean. Local cultures are clean, while "humanity" is a dirty. "Privileging" and "valorizing" something is a dirty, while using the terms "privilege" and "valorize" as verbs is a clean. Postmodernism is a clean, while modernism is a dirty. Non-hierarchical multiculturalism is a clean, while a canon is a dirty. Both those who characterize certain people as "politically correct" and those who are so characterized agree that it is a dirty. John Dewey used to be a dirty for most post-world war II academic philosophers, but now that "the public intellectual" has become a clean, Dewey has become a clean. Even more remarkably, Dewey, the philosopher who lamented what he termed "the eclipse of community," has become a clean for many who also regard "communitarianism" as a dirty. Figure that one out!

Central to contemporary intellectual life is the assumption that "the big picture" traditionally sought by philosophy is a dirty, while "little pictures" are clean. I wish to claim that fallible big pictures are not only still possible but are requisite for comprehending the modern and postmodern world. Also central to

intellectual life today, although more problematically, is the assumption that organic nature is a dirty, while culture is a clean.

When the term nature is used in the context of ecology it can be put safely within a political context, and then regarded as a clean. But the idea that organic biology may have some direct and inward influence on persons, institutions, societies and civilizations, that human conduct cannot be completely reduced to socio-historical cultural constructions categorically distinct from nature--such an idea is a dirty, even if John Dewey, the newly reconstructed clean public intellectual, might have sought such a naturalistic basis for human conduct. That side of Dewey is declared a dirty, and consigned to the dungheap of history.

The term "public intellectual" is clearly a clean, while for many, the term "tenured radical" is a dirty. Philosophy is regarded by many today as a dirty, while social theory is a clean. There is, of course, a long tradition, going back at least to Marx's last thesis on Feuerbach, to call for the end of philosophy. But today... [end excerpt Chapter 1]

Chapter 2: Of Life and Social Thought

The old idea of the vitality of the universe was evolved long before history begins, and elaborated into a vast religion before we get a glimpse of it. When history does begin, in China or India, Egypt, Babylonia, even in the Pacific and in aboriginal America, we see evidence of one underlying religious idea: the conception of the vitality of the cosmos, the myriad vitalities in wild confusion, which still is held in some sort of array: and man, amid all the glowing welter, adventuring, struggling, striving for one thing, life, vitality, more vitality: to get into himself more and more of the gleaming vitality of the cosmos. That is the treasure. D.H. Lawrence

Do not be afraid of life!

Alyosha, in *The Brothers Karamazov*

On the Problem of Going Beyond Life

Among the curious facts of intellectual life today is how peripheral the concept of life has become to most social theorists and philosophers. Despite a revival of Nietzsche, philosophical pragmatism, and the sociological "classics," contemporary social thought has tended to ignore the significance which the concept of life held for the late nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries, producing a major blind-spot in our understanding of the spirit of that age and of its import for ours. Considering how generalized the project of a philosophy of life had become at the turn-of-the-century, inextricably connected to the parallel project for a philosophy of meaning, the history of twentieth-century thought is notable for the ways it veered away from life in the name of meaning. One might argue that the term "life" is one of those intrinsically ungraspable phantoms, capable of meaning just about anything its beholder wishes it to mean. But so too are the concepts of "meaning" and "culture" which continue to be central concerns of social thinkers, and so something more than the imprecision of the term "life" is required to explain why conceiving life as a central feature of social theory no longer animates contemporary thought.

The attempts to formulate a conception of life were key symbols of the emerging twentieth-century mind, and provide a standard by which to evaluate contemporary thought. In its tendency to deny the

relevance of organic life for questions of meaning, much of contemporary intellectual life may be viewed as part of a larger metaphysic which involves the escape from organic life through rationalization. Conversely, the tendency to deny the irreducible significance of mind and its capacities to generalize and actualize reason, a denial manifest in various forms of biological reductionism, bespeaks a larger metaphysic of automatism. Together these two outlooks--roughly rationalism or idealism on the one hand and automatism or materialism on the other--express the modern ideology of the ghost in the machine.

Despite widely varying meanings of the term "life," the concept of life emerged as a central topic for the leading thinkers of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century, although that fact has also been ignored and virtually consigned to oblivion. A possible exception to this forgetting might be the traditions of Lebensphilosophie and Philosophical Anthropology, terms which are today usually associated with the German thought. The terms may be German, but it is important to remember that the ideas comprising these schools of thought were pervasive throughout Europe and America in the early part of the century. The publication of Darwin's *The Origin of Species* had an immediate impact on social theorists, as one sees in Marx's admiration for Darwin's observations, despite his critique that Darwin projected the ideology of his English class-structured society onto nature....

When we remember thinkers as diverse as Kropotkin of Russia, Bergson of France, Spencer and the Darwinians of Britain, and Samuel Butler and later Patrick Geddes, Samuel Alexander, C.Lloyd Morgan, L. T. Hobhouse and others, the American pragmatists Peirce, James, Dewey and Mead, as well as Charles Horton Cooley, Alfred North Whitehead, Nietzsche, Dilthey, Rudolph Eucken, and Sigmund Freud, we are reminded of how pervasive the questions of life, nature, and evolution were. These thinkers and others all considered it important to include a conception of life in their general philosophy or framework. When we broaden further to remember writers such as William Morris and George Bernard Shaw, Strindberg, Butler's fictional works, the whole art nouveau movement, architects such as Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright and Antonio Gaudi, we are reminded that "life," whatever it meant, was the virtual pivot of the age. The turn to the concept of life by intellectuals was parallel to the artistic movement variously called art nouveau, Jugendstil, or arts and crafts, which sprang forth near the end of the nineteenth century with a program that placed the representation of life and organic form at its center....

...In his 1918 essay, "The Conflict in Modern Culture," Georg Simmel pointed out the significance of the concept of life for twentieth-century culture. He saw in the rise of artistic expressionism and in the prevalence of Lebensphilosophie itself, especially philosophical pragmatism, a new cultural paradox. In Simmel's view, as we will see, human cultures are marked by an ever-present dialectical tension between form and life. Yet this dialectic between form and fluid vitality had reached a peculiar turning point by the turn-of-the-century: the form of the twentieth-century was revealing itself as life itself. Simmel drew attention to the paradox that life, inherently formless, was becoming the form of the age--a formless form. His examples included expressionism in art and pragmatism in philosophy. In Kandinsky's works of the period in which Simmel was writing, color is liberated from form to become expressive in its own right. Jamesian pragmatism, with its elevation of vital existence over immovable truth, struck Simmel as a key indicator of the paradoxical transposition of life to form. One might add that Simmel himself, though still a formalist, drew from the same spirit of the time in turning to Lebensphilosophie. Unfortunately he did not see the other half of the paradox, the formalization of life itself, resulting in lifeless life. Instead of a dialectical tension between life and form, a strange inversion was occurring, producing lifeless life and formless form, each, in effect, cancelling the other out instead of transforming it.

The physicists say that should a piece of matter encounter a piece of antimatter, a tremendous explosion would result. With hindsight we can see the cultural equivalent in the explosive artistic, intellectual, social, and political forces released in the twentieth-century, illustrating the problematic relationship which life and form had assumed. Life was central to the emerging social theories and

philosophies of the early twentieth century, yet one can scarcely appreciate its importance in contemporary sanitized reconstructions of the thought of that time. The other, missing half of Simmel's equation, formalization, has frozen the life out of the current canon of social theorists and philosophers. Yet the concept of life, so indeterminate in its variegated meanings, nevertheless provides the hidden key to the critical understanding of our age, and perhaps the means to open the door to the next one....

Chapter 3: The Cultic Roots of Culture

...By beginning with a brief tour of the contemporary landscape of culture theory, I hope to show how current conceptions of meaning and culture tend toward extreme forms of disembodied abstraction, indicating an alienation from the original, earthy meaning of the word culture. I will then turn to the earlier meanings of the word and why the "cultic," the living impulse to meaning, was and remains essential to a conception of culture as semeiosis or sign-action. Culture and biology are often treated by social scientists as though they were oil and water, not to be mixed. I am fully aware of the assumed nature-culture dichotomy, but I reject it, not because I am a sociobiologist, quite the contrary, but rather because I am a semiotician, and my studies of signs have led me toward a critical reconstruction of the concepts of nature and culture. In my perspective, culture is a living, social metaboly of signs, not limited to a convention but in transaction with the inmost recesses of the person, and with the qualitative, physical, and significant environment. The question is not whether culture is a "system" or not, but whether we shall continue to conceive of culture as an inert, mechanical system or code, incapable of self-critical cultivation, or as a "living system"--a way of living--fully open to contingency, spontaneity, purposive growth and decay.

Putting the "cult" back into culture requires a reconception of the relations between human biology and meaning, and between non-discursive, non-rational reason and modern rationality. Such a reconception involves considering how the technics of the biosocial human body itself form the primary source of culture. In contemporary modern culture in general, and intellectual culture in particular, we have unnecessarily narrowed our conceptions of meaning and culture. By outlining a broad historical reconstruction of human consciousness and communication--that is, by reopening the questions of evolution and philosophical anthropology, which have been pushed to the periphery of social theory--we can see why culture seeps into our very biological constitution: cultus, the impulse to meaning.

To the extent that we deny our organic apehood, we remain ignorant of what we are most assured--our deeply embedded signifying nature--and become not much more than Kafka's thoroughly civilized, yet utterly devitalized, ape.

.....

We need to find the means out of our post-human world back to being human again. The modern age of "humanism" resulted, paradoxically enough, in an ever-growing dehumanization, which crystallized in the twentieth-century. Today, postmodernists extol anti-humanism, in favor of "decentered" selves who are but instances of conventions. Hence the author is dead and the poet is but an ideologue and politician, and the qualitatively unique individual is merely a fiction. Such views can be seen as part of the quest to eradicate the human person, which was the underlying ethos of the mechanical world-view. Being human is something we have been all too easily surrendering. But being human in the modern humanist's sense is itself no longer adequate for a world undergoing ecological disaster because of the exercise of human

power and will. Though it remains opaque to those still committed to the ghost in the machine, being human involves, among other things, being a living creature in continuity with organic life and with forms of reason we do not yet know, either because they are too deeply embedded in our consciousness, or because we have not yet brought them to life.

The human penchant for dream and play and ritual and myth and religion--and for what is now pejoratively called metaphysics—cannot be rationalized as a vestige of primitive creatures, now obsolete because they were insufficiently clear-sighted with the lights of rationality and postrationality as their guide. Instead, the urge for transcendence is basic to being human. We remain neotenic mammals, dream creatures fundamentally shaped by the mammalian characteristics of intense mother-infant bonding, play, and rapid eye movement dreaming. These ecstatic forms of communication remain deeply and unavoidably embedded in our biosemeiotic nature, and it is through the meeting of these communicative capacities with the general laws of nature, out of which our brainy bodies are made, that we can enter into the ongoing creation of the universe. As “degenerate monkeys, with a paranoid talent for self-satisfaction,” as Peirce put it, who must reason much of what other creatures do with unerring instinct, we have also achieved the power--and have too many times betrayed the will--to destroy our little portion of the universe. Would the world be a better place without humans? Perhaps. But if the world means more than dead matter and meaningless spawning, if the development of reason is a real, though not inevitable, process of the living world, then we must hope that our inescapable impulses to meaning can still find viable expression in that process.

The evolution of humans is marked by various anatomical changes, such as the development of the upright stance, the radical enlargement of the cranium and specifically, for anatomically modern homo sapiens sapiens, the fore-brain, and the creation of a vocal cavity with lowered larynx and subtle tongue and lip movements capable of producing an enormous variety of utterances. Clearly speech is one achievement of this process that uniquely identifies us as humans. But so too, for that matter, is artistic expression. Both are sign-practices dependent on, and probably generative of, the achievement of symbolic representation, and both reveal how to be human is to be a living, communicative symbol. In the case of the symbolic sign, as distinguished from iconic or indexical signs, the process of interpretation comes to the foreground, and from a cultural perspective, this is to say that to be human is to be an interpreter. The very achievement of symbolic signification stands upon the vast capacities for pre- and proto-symbolic communication developed by our forerunners and tempered into our physical organisms. Dreams, to give one example, may very well have provided the inner drama necessary to provoke us into interpretation by presenting our distant ancestors with images of a phantasmagoric “here and now” which break into and color the habits of everyday life. Dreams emanate from a liminal realm where social relations of the wildest sort are possible, where animals talk and dead relatives live, where the marvelous and horrific conspire to present a baffling inner landscape that must have seemed as real to early humans as the day world, if not more.

Perhaps the symbol itself, as the distinguishing medium of human consciousness, is so constituted, both in its freedom grounded in human conventions and in its mysterious relations to the central and autonomic nervous systems, that it needs to be connected to perceptive and critical, that is, lived, experience. Contrary to celebrated views of the symbol (or sign in Saussure’s terminology) as completely “unmotivated” or arbitrary, I claim, the symbol is that sign most dependent on vital and critical experience for its continued development.

We live in signs and they live through us, in a reciprocal process of cultivation that I have elsewhere termed critical animism. If most tribal peoples and even many civilizational peoples have traditionally lived in a world of personified forces--or animism--and if this general outlook was evicted by the modern "enlightened" view of critical rationality and its "disenchanted" world view, then I am proposing a new form of re-enchantment, or marriage, of these opposites. Critical animism suggests that rational sign-practices, though necessary to contemporary complex culture and human freedom, do not exhaust the "critical" and that the human impulse to meaning springs from extrarational and acritical sources of bodily social intelligence.

The evolution of protohumans, though marked by the greater reliance on symbolic intelligence, did not necessarily mean the complete loss of instinctive intelligence as theorists such as Gehlen have implied. On the contrary, one key aspect of the emerging symbolic intelligence "in the dreamtime long ago" may very well have been an instinctive, yet highly plastic or generalized, ability to listen to and learn from the rich instinctual intelligence of the surrounding environment. The close observation of birds, not only as prey for eating or ornament but also as sources of delight, could also help to inform one of an approaching cold spell or severe winter.

A better example might be the empathic relations to animals and natural phenomena shared by many tribal peoples. One frequently sees an identification with an animal or plant related to the practices of a people, such as the cult of the whale for fishing peoples, and a choice of an object that somehow symbolizes a central belief of a people, such as the white mudyi tree as a symbol of the milk of the matrilineally rooted Ndembu of Africa. There exists then a range from a practical, informing relationship to nature, or a fantastic elaboration of that relationship, to a purely symbolic relationship to the environment that either may be unrelated to the surrounding instinctual intelligence or that might even function as a kind of veil to obscure the informing properties of the environment. These relationships were crucial to the emergence of humankind: the deeply felt relationship to the organic, variegated biosphere, which was manifest in those natural signs or instincts of other species, and the corresponding pull away from the certainties of instinctual intelligence toward belief, toward humanly produced symbols that created a new order of reality, and in doing so, both amplified and layered over the voices of nature.

Through mimesis, emerging humankind could become a plant or bird or reindeer, and thereby attune itself to the cycles of nature through the perceptions of these beings. A mimetic understanding also involves the generalizing of nature into symbolic form. A man dressed as a raven or bear at the head of a Kwakiutl fishing boat and the lion-headed human figurine dating back thirty-two thousand years found in Germany (a very early find possibly suggesting interaction between Neanderthals and anatomically modern humans) signify the symbolic incorporation of animal qualities into human activities and provoke human reflection, through what William James called the "law of dissociation," on the meaning of human activities.

Dreaming is central to mimesis, and dreaming itself may be seen as an in-built form of "recombinant mimetics"--with all the power and danger of recombinant genetics--in which fantastic juxtapositions of neural pathways and cultural images and associations take place. Dreaming is perhaps the primal "rite of passage," through cult, to culture.

In the brain-mind dialogue of dreaming we see a domain that bridges nature and culture, which may have been essential to the emergence of human symbolic culture and may remain essential to its continued development. In that sense dreaming opens an unexpected window onto the cultic roots of culture: the spontaneous springing forth of belief. And if Mumford's idea that dreaming may have impelled us toward a technics of symbolism both to control the anxieties produced by the inner world and to be animated by its image-making powers is on the mark, then perhaps we can see another way of connecting body, brain, and culture with the ritual symbol and the drama of communication which emerged from it, one resonant with

Turner.

In suggesting the semeiotic line of evolution we big-brained apes must have followed in entering and establishing the human world, one conceivable consequence has, I hope, become somewhat clearer. The impulse to meaning is both original to our nature and ineradicable. The origins of culture are to be found in those communicative practices through which emergent humanity literally bodied itself forth, creating a forebrain with language, speech, and personality capacities, creating a tongue, larynx, and throat capable of articulate speech, creating forms of inward and outward expression, rituals of affliction and celebration, dramas of mythic, social, and personal communication, and stable institutions such as agriculture, villages, and later, cities, which have endured from Neolithic times to the present. The very expression “the culture and manurance of minds” may reflect the invention of manuring and its connection, through agriculture, to the development of permanent villages and proto-cities in the Neolithic Age. In other words, the very concept of culture may be an achievement and legacy of the Neolithic Age. Contemporary culture and culture theory seem to be intent on etherealizing these achievements out of existence and may very well succeed...

Chapter 4: Lewis Mumford’s Organic Worldview

...One half of a century ago Mumford was at Stanford calling for an inclusiveness quite similar to that demanded by many multiculturalists today. But his reason for including non-western sources at Stanford, namely that these were works which transcended the cultures and civilizations in which they arose, was diametrically opposed to the relativistic premisses of many contemporary multiculturalists. One possibly legitimate critique of Mumford by contemporary multiculturalists might be an underemphasis on ethnic, class, and gender diversities in portraying American culture and history in general. Here the crucial question is what role do these factors play within the civilizational context.

Mumford was calling for a general education which would make a big picture of the varieties and continuities of humanity available to students, because he believed that a deep sense of history, cultural diversity, and common humanity was essential both to a humanistic education, and to a world culture in the making, and that a humanistic education must address the whole person, not simply the intellectual portion. His outlook could not be more at odds with the postmodern temper and its view that everything is a question of ideology.

Again the emotions, as well as aesthetic and moral standards of discrimination and judgment weighed heavily in Mumford’s view of education:

If we are to create balanced human beings, capable of entering into world-wide co-operation with all other men of good will--and that is the supreme task of our generation, and the foundation of all its other potential achievements--we must give as much weight to the arousal of the emotions and to the expression of moral and esthetic values as we now give to science, to invention, to practical organization. One without the other is impotent. And values do not come ready-made: they are achieved by a resolute attempt to square the facts of one’s own experience with the historic patterns formed in the past by those who devoted their whole lives to achieving and expressing values. If we are to express the love in our own hearts, we must also understand what love meant to Socrates and Saint Francis, to Dante and Shakespeare, to Emily Dickinson and Christina Rossetti, to the explorer Shackleton and to the intrepid physicians who deliberately exposed themselves to yellow fever. These historic manifestations of love are not recorded in the day’s newspaper or the current radio program: they are hidden to people who possess only fashionable minds. Virtue is not a chemical product, as Taine once described it: it is a historic product, like language and literature; and this means that if we cease to care about it, cease to cultivate it, cease to transmit its

funded values, a large part of it will become meaningless, like a dead language to which we have lost the key. That, I submit, is what has happened in our own lifetime.

The cultivation of moral and aesthetic values and emotions became a hot potato in twentieth-century educational life in America. Public schools, from kindergarten through college, absorbed many of the tasks formerly centered in the Church and family. But the cultivation of values and virtues in universities was taken to be primarily an intellectual task, rather than also moral and aesthetic. Hence the cultivation of passions and standards of discrimination and discipline requisite for passionate living were too often relegated to “physical education,” or worse, to collegiate spectator sport. Values and emotions were either etherealized into abstract mind, whether modern or postmodern, or materialized into gladiatorial spectacle, into Ariel or Caliban. There is little place for a Prospero, the agent and mediator of values and emotional life, in such an educational system.

Mumford’s lament in 1946 that virtue has become meaningless, “like a dead language to which we have lost the key,” resonates with the recent work of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in his 1981 book, *After Virtue*, and subsequent works. MacIntyre’s critique of the fragmentation of moral reasoning and language and his defense of the virtues as real components of the human self so grates against contemporary intellectual life that he begins *After Virtue* using the metaphor of a catastrophe which has gone virtually unrecognized. He shows how the conception of morality as involving a whole self, that is, one embedded within a variety of social groups and a cultural tradition and also capable of acting from, while cultivating, the goal of a good life, “is something that ceases to be generally available at some point in the progress--if we can call it such--towards and into modernity.” In place of a whole self oriented by the goal of a good life, contemporary social life in MacIntyre’s view is the realization of the bifurcated modern world depicted earlier by Max Weber, characterized by an organizational realm whose depersonalized rational ends are taken for granted and a personal realm of the “emotivist self,” whose subjectivist ends are ultimately criterionless.

MacIntyre believes that this modern world-view must be rejected through a renewal of local community and the practices which contribute to making the good life in Aristotle’s sense. He urges a retreat from “the new dark ages” we have entered similar to that undertaken at the end of the Roman imperium, and in this echoes Mumford’s call in 1970 to withdraw from “the pentagon of power.” Yet Mumford, despite his pessimism concerning the power complex, hoped for more than the endurance of the tradition of the virtues:

How long, those who are now awake must ask themselves, how long can the physical structure of an advanced technology hold together when all its human foundations are crumbling away? ...The human institutions and moral convictions that have taken thousands of years to achieve even minimal efficacy have disappeared before our eyes: so completely that the next generation will scarcely believe they ever existed.... The Roman empire in the East won a new lease on life by coming to terms with Christianity... But it must be remembered that this intermixture of Roman and Christian institutions was achieved at the expense of creativity. So until the disintegration of our own society has gone even further, there is reason to look for a more vigorous life-promoting solution. Whether such a response is possible depends upon an unknown factor: how viable are the formative ideas that are now in the air, and how ready are our contemporaries to undertake the efforts and sacrifices that are essential for human renewal?... Has Western civilization reached the point in etherialization where detachment and withdrawal will lead to the assemblage of an organic world picture, in which the human personality in all its dimensions will have primacy over its biological needs and technological pressures?... When the moment comes to replace power with plenitude, compulsive external rituals with internal, self-imposed discipline, depersonalization with individuation, automation with autonomy, we shall find that the necessary change of attitude has

been going on beneath the surface during the last century, and the long buried seeds of a richer human culture are now ready to strike root and grow, as soon as the ice breaks up and the sun reaches them. If that growth is to prosper, it will draw freely on the compost from many previous cultures...

Chapter 5: The Transilluminated Vision of Charles Peirce

...Given the “progress” of twentieth-century philosophy into a cul-de-sac of its own making, it is no wonder that Peirce’s general philosophy has only recently begun to attract increasing attention. Peirce’s writing is difficult, though in my opinion always clear, but this only partly explains his marginal status until recently. The deeper reason why Peirce has remained obscured in the thought of the twentieth-century, I claim, is that he represented a new and non-modern mind struggling to form, one in which Rational mind, the motive source and aim of the modern era, is transilluminated by Instinctive mind: a new configuration of reason occulted by and contrary to the twentieth-century and its excessive rationalism.

From the standpoint of the contemporary mind of the late modern era, Peirce’s concepts and forms of expression often seem contradictory or baffling. He chooses his words with a mathematician’s precision and an etymologist’s passion, retaining meanings to words such as “reality,” “observation,” and “pragmatism” that clash with current use. His semeiotic is frequently cited as a forerunner of language philosophy, and when he says, “Thus my language is the sum total of myself; for the man is the thought,” one can see why Peirce might be identified with Wittgenstein’s “language game” perspective. Yet Peirce also insisted that language does not exhaust intelligent signification, and that interpretation, including scientific interpretation, involves modes of signification transcending language conventions and rationality.

In a revealing critique of Hume’s empiricism and concept of “balancing likelihoods,” Peirce showed why both conjecture and experience are necessary yet not alone independently sufficient for science: Against Hume’s arguments for experience as the sole source of knowledge and induction as the only way to pass from the “known to the unknown,” Peirce said, “Not only is our knowledge not exclusively derived from experience, but every item of science came originally from conjecture, which has only been pruned down by experience....The entire matter of our works of solid science consists of conjectures checked by experience. The entire matter of those works which have been written upon the method of judging of testimony by balancing likelihoods consists of conjecture running rough-shod over the pertinent facts.” Or as William Blake put it at the beginning of the nineteenth century in one of his Proverbs of Hell: “What is now proved was once only imagined.” As simple as Blake’s proverb is, it nevertheless expresses the reality of imagination as a vital source of intelligence that is neither rational or critical, nor empirical. What Blake termed the “Poetic Imagination,” is as crucial to Blake’s romantic world-view as it is to Peirce’s logic of science. It is precisely this generative modality of intelligence that was increasingly devalued and denied by the rise of Western nominalistic science and culture, because no place could be found for it within the ghost in the machine. Consider too Peirce’s appreciation for the conjecture-like power of memory: “Memory would be nothing but a dream if it were not that predictions are based on it that get verified. When we think how slight and entangled must be the ultimate bits of feeling out of which memory constructs her mosaic, we are compelled to liken it to conjecture. It is a wonderful power of constructing quasi-conjectures or dreams that will get borne out by future experience. The power of performing this feat, which is the power of the past, is a gentle compulsiveness”. [7.667]

Peirce also claimed that interpretation is guided by the summum bonum, Beauty, Goodness, and Truth, which are utterly unfashionable today, even in uncapitalized form. In his classification of the normative sciences logic is conceived not as rational calculation, but as self-controlled thought, which is a sub-species of self-controlled conduct, or ethics, which in turn is dependent upon the intrinsically admirable, or

aesthetics. Though himself a master logician, Peirce's classification reverses the tendency in modern thought to make ethics and esthetics separate from or subsidiary to logic

Chapter 6: Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Etherealization

Mythical World-Views and the Structuralist Myth

...In the first chapter of Volume One (of TCA), Habermas attempts to come to terms with the concept of rationality in a number of ways, including extended sections on myth and action. He turns to "mythical world-views" because they represent, in his view, an antithesis to the modern understanding of the world, and thereby provide a mirror of otherness through which we can reflect upon the modern world. Habermas claims that this way of proceeding has the advantage of forcing him to turn from conceptual to empirical analysis, by which he means that, as he puts it, "for the sake of simplicity," he confines himself to the results of two structuralists, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Maurice Godelier. He uses these two exemplars of twentieth-century French rationalism as the sole representatives of mythic thought, and assiduously avoids any concrete discussion of a single myth in his "empirical" review. At least Lévi-Strauss, the "cerebral savage" as Clifford Geertz termed him, spent time studying specific myths, even if he did then divest them of their specific qualities in attempting to reveal an abstract universal structure of binary logic. But here and throughout TCA Habermas never engages in specific analyses of ethnographic, historical, or empirical data and never goes back to the source materials used by Lévi-Strauss, Piaget, Weber, or others that he draws on.

Habermas relies in particular on Maurice Godelier, a structuralist Marxist who appropriates the side of Marxism in which determining conditions of social life are "invisible," not consciously known in experience. As a structuralist, Godelier must deny what is essential to Marx: that there can be meaning in praxis. Structuralism denies meaning to "surface" phenomena, such as parole or speech, because it views meaning as a "faculty" of langue or deep structure not susceptible to modification through experience. From a structuralist perspective, myth is only interesting as a manifestation of the underlying logic of the system, not as a voicing and bodying forth of the inner life of humanity, of its achievements and tragedies, of recurrent experiences with wondrous and terrifying forces and movements of nature, and least of all, of the drama inherent in human communication.

Structuralism denies meaning to praxis, and hence it is rather odd, to say the least, for someone like Habermas concerned with a broad-based theory of "communicative action" as means to a free social life, to limit himself "for the sake of simplicity" to structuralist technicians who deny meaning at the level of action and who represent perhaps the most intellectualistic and abstracted approach to myth within the much broader spectrum of schools of thought. Strange also is his reliance on what I will call a totalitarian way of thinking: structuralism denies that flesh and blood human beings embody and body forth meaning and can criticize and revise the "code" of meaning, because it holds meaning and structure to be purely "skeletal," merely the property of a single underlying universal and unchanging code of binary opposition, to be found in all human endeavor regardless of time, place, or circumstance. There is a myth to be found here, but it is the myth of twentieth-century binary thinking, itself the legacy of cultural nominalism.

Structuralism reproduces the nominalist tendency to begin with a false dichotomy requiring synthesis. It projects this view on to the world as an "objective" theory: nature and culture are clear and distinct categories, surface phenomena and deep structure are clear and distinct categories, individual versus social are clear and distinct categories, logic is a rational, binary system.

One gets the impression in Habermas's discussion of myth that those who live within mythic belief are extremely limited by our standards, that myth is a fuzzy and backward form of thought. Habermas uses the dichotomous premisses of modern thought as found in structuralism and semantics to criticize myth as merely vague, as having "a deficient differentiation between language and world."

That the primary purpose of myths might be precisely to express intensely felt relationships to the world--meaning "felt relationship" as that quality that literally lives in the transaction between person and world and not in system or logic or brain--escapes Habermas's single-visioned view. The entire discussion of myth can be read as an example of how rationalism denigrates those "divine deep waters," as the Babylonians said, in which living myth swims: modalities of intelligence not reducible to the thin filmy surface of rationality. Habermas's two primary criticisms of mythical worldviews are that they are marked by: "insufficient differentiation among fundamental attitudes to the objective, social, and subjective worlds; and the lack of reflexivity in worldviews that cannot be identified as worldviews, as cultural traditions. Mythical worldviews are not understood by members as interpretive systems that are attached to cultural traditions, constituted by internal interrelations of meaning, symbolically related to reality, and connected with validity claims--and thus exposed to criticism and open to revision."

Both of these criticisms reveal a shallow ethnocentrism which disallows the voice of mythical worldviews as dialogical "other" in communicative debate. But even if one were to concede Habermas's criticisms, they still reveal the superiority of mythic to rational "communicative" thought. Mythic "thought" indeed does not view objective, social, and subjective worlds as autonomous in Habermas's sense, but rather as fluid and continuous. And there is no reason why mythic thought should radically differentiate these three spheres, because these spheres, as I will argue later, have their existence within the cultural nominalism of modernity, and are mere distortions, mentally skewed forms of communicative action rather than constituent features of it or the world.

Habermas's second criticism is that mythical understanding acts as a form of reification, and one not subject to criticism: How can one criticize the myth one believes in when one believes in it as reality itself? Although the possibility of critical perspective and of criticism itself is undeniably an important consideration in modern society, Habermas neglects the ways in which even a single mythic world-view allows for critical conflict and ambiguity of interpretation, as almost any of the Greek myths attest and as a close look at traditional village life will reveal. More fundamentally, he neglects the facts that belief comes first and doubt comes after belief, and that myth and ritual involve more than just belief.

We should remember that myth and ritual are living forms which transformed us into humans, a fundamental fact which never penetrates Habermas's rationalistic armor. In Habermas's evolutionary perspective, earlier embodiments of human communication are absolutely "aufgehoben," that is, overcome or superseded by a seemingly ever-expanding rationality. Ritually-based societies did and do place severe limitations on personal autonomy, but ritual, contra Habermas, was perhaps the original means of "reflexivity." This was not the dispassionate reflexivity of rational communicators who know what their validity claims are about, but the humble reflexivity of humans confronted with a baffling world and a deeply-felt need to give it voice. By their very restricted and repetitive natures ritual action and myth gradually peeled emergent humankind from pure participation and impelled us toward belief, toward the good and bad aspects of human belief. This process brought about the enlargement of imagination, but also the encasing of human perception within new webs constructed by these imaginings.

If emerging humankind had only possessed Habermas's communicative action instead of ritual and mythic action, it could never have coped with the enormous anxieties produced by its surplus brain energy, it could never have unself-consciously formed the artistic expressions of the human psyche, the utterances of speech, the structures of language: it could never have become human. Rather than characterizing mythic-bound cultures as having "deficient differentiation," Habermas should have considered how they could have been so extraordinarily efficient, creating vital societies that often endured for millenia, creating

art and language in paleolithic culture, developing the basis of virtually all modern grains in the neolithic age, inventing mathematics and astronomy in Babylonian civilization, giving birth to philosophy in ancient Greece. The real question Habermas never asks is whether and in what ways myth might enhance rather than hinder communicative reason.

Habermas does not allow the possibility of a non-critical yet perceptive and self-illuminating narrative...

Chapter 7: The Neopragmatic Acquiescence: Between Habermas and Rorty

...Pragmatism Versus Fragmatism

Peirce distinguished his pragmatism from what he considered distortions of the doctrine in James and others, by renaming it “pragmaticism,” as a more specialized doctrine. In order to avoid further confusion of Rorty and Habermas’s positions with that of the spirit of pragmatism, I shall announce the birth of a new term, Fragmatism, which, like Peirce’s term, is not without its rhyme or reason. The term denotes in particular the relativism of Rorty (and like-minded so-called neopragmatists), expressed in his idealization of contingency and unquestioning belief in the incommensurability of belief communities. Fragmatism is the reason why Rorty can see nothing of value in Peirce’s pragmatism except that he gave it its name, and pragmatism is the more proper name for Rorty’s own brand of “pluralism.” In a broader context fragmatism is a synonym for late twentieth-century “postmodernism,” and therefore includes those poststructuralists, such as Jacques Derrida, who react against the totalistic outlook of French structuralism with a seemingly antithetical view of the continual “fissioning” and “creativity” of arbitrary signs. This outlook continues the antinaturalistic, antipersonal, and binary view of meaning characteristic of structuralism, but merely swings the pendulum from a single, all-encompassing standard--the deep code--to the opposite view that one standard is as good as any other. Habermas’s clear-headed critiques of this position--Rorty’s as well as poststructuralists--would seem to put him at odds with fragmatism. Yet in Habermas’s tendencies toward Kantian compartmentalization we see what I will venture to call *Transcendental Fragmatism*.

Both Habermas and Rorty, in their opposing ways, make language to be the basis for public life, as well as the medium of science and human belief. Though Rorty claims to be against the Enlightenment view of reason, he and Habermas share the Enlightenment endorsement for the “disenchantment” of the world, for the progressive unfettering of human institutions and habits of conduct from overarching religious or metaphysical world views. Yet between their common enthusiasm for modern disenchantment lies a vast difference of opinion and even of temperament. Habermas seeks to overcome the tendencies toward a subjectivist, consciousness-based outlook in modern social theory, by building a truly intersubjective theory of “communicative action/rationality.” His aims are grand: to rescue the modern project of establishing universal norms for rational conduct, and thereby to further the goal of emancipating human societies from unreasonable practices and institutions.

Rorty's postmodern pragmatism is quite different from Habermas's transcendental pragmatism. Rorty is skeptical of tight divisions between forms of rationality, or of distinct disciplinary boundaries, but he thinks that the disenchantment of the world in the sense of a release from fixed foundational moorings is part of the progressive development of any free society. "Disenchantment" thus works in opposite directions to enable the rational foundations of Habermas's ideal society to be established, and to make possible the destruction of rational foundations in Rorty's ideal society. Rorty believes that the very idea of a universal reason--the whole idea that there are logically valid, universal norms--is the great fallacy of modern thought. He repeatedly states that norms are made, not discovered, and therefore would consign the very attempt to discover universal norms to the dungheap of historical contingency. He believes further that human creativity is revealed in original acts of private consciousness, which distinguish the creative ones--the "poets" and "revolutionaries"--from socially binding conventions and the hoi polloi.

Where Habermas is earnest and heavy in temperament, Rorty is frequently casual and light. Who could be further apart: Habermas, the arch defender of rationality, Rorty, the carefree attacker of rationality? Yet between their opposed positions are some common assumptions which perhaps help to explain why they have held such a fascination for contemporary philosophers and social theorists. Though both thinkers seek justice and freedom in their theories of public life, their conceptualist premisses frustrate the conditions for a flourishing contemporary culture and remain inadequate to meet the needs for contemporary theory. In their overreliance on conventionalist theories of language and meaning, I claim that one sees the desiccating effects in the late twentieth-century of what William James termed "vicious intellectualism" ...

Chapter 8: The Modern Error and the Renewal of Social Thought

...Kundera, Lessing, Melville, and Lawrence all point to the paradoxical tragedies of modern life: the development of rational capacities oversteps boundaries and parasitically feeds on the emotional sources of rational life. Rationality is itself one capacity among others, which becomes destructive when taken to be the sovereign of reason.

Though we humans possess rationality, we are not rational beings and cannot become rational beings. Or let me modify that. The moment we truly become rational creatures is the moment when Ahab is lashed to the whale, when he, as the rational isolated subject, attains a final unity with the narcissistic object of his rationalization, his death. It is the moment of Raskolnikov's rational murder. That moment of the realization of the rational creature is the "interesting age" in which we now are living.

We humans are passionate beings, whether we are modern workers in a rationalized factory or computer terminal, or Realpolitik calculators planning how to maximize our individual strategic interests, or scientists inquiring into the origins of the physical universe, or philosophers inquiring into the sources and ends of public life. We are beings of passion

currently possessed by a singular passion for being rational. This rational passion, having exalted itself above creation in the name of “God,” “Science,” “Reason,” “Critical theory,” “Modernity,” and even, in unconscious self-alienation, “Postmodernity,” has blinded its adherents to the inner community of passions which are necessary to human sanity, and to the passional relation to the outer world of nature and experience, mediated through an integrated self. In the quest to attain universal intellect at any expense, we have committed the “Unpardonable Sin,” as Hawthorne put it, of rationally possessed hubris, and have become severed from the universal “heartthrob” of humanity. We moderns have become the fiendish Frankenstein monsters, Ethan Brands, Ahab, Raskolnikovs, Mr. Kurtz, and Adrian Leverkühns, presciently felt and imagined by those writers sensitive to the drift of modern culture.

The contemporary intellectual landscape is still dominated by those who believe that all we need to do is improve our critical rationality, science, or technology, or to include multiple “modes of authority” in our methods and theories. Yet, as Coleridge said, “deep thinking is attainable only by a man of deep feeling”--today, of course, we would say “by a man or woman of deep feeling”-- and those who, living from the head alone, have lost the capacity to feel deeply are not likely to point the way toward a renewal of thought and culture.

As the twilight of the twentieth-century begins to set, neither a rationalist such as Habermas nor even a postmodern antirationalist such as Rorty--nor the majority of theorists, it is fair to say--face up to the fact that the dream of the modern age to create rationally grounded societies has long since revealed itself to be a nightmare, the hydra-headed nightmare of bureaucratic totalitarianism and bureaucratic capitalism, of mass Isolationism. Human life, which developed through the enlargement and subtilization of the mammalian traits of REM dreaming, powerful mother-infant bonding and nurturance, and play, expressed in the development of ritual observances, emotionally rich linguistic communication, and the fluorescence of fantastic symbolic forms in body decoration, painting, and even practical artifacts, is reduced to the rote, to lifeless formalism and its opposite: contingent sensationalism. The human person, who was the living incarnation of evolutionary reasonableness, was rendered into a cog of devitalized systems--whether politically as the mass man of brutal Communist and Nazi systems or of the control-by-reward consumer societies, or through general rational bureaucracy itself and various “systems” and behaviorist theories, or as psychological man--an isolate subject possessed of “subjective values” and incapable of touching the objective world. If modernity began with the celebration of the person in humanism, it ended in the twentieth-century with a “posthuman” world from which the organic human person had been dispossessed.

The true utopia of the power-mongers and rational calculators--not to mention the Arnold Gehlens and sociobiologists--is that of the bee-hive, one of the earliest manifestations of the megamachine. Sixty million years ago bees and ants achieved highly efficient societies that would be the envy of the leading economic powers and systems theorists of today.

Let me emphasize that I am not rejecting rationality per se, but simply the dominant tendencies of modern culture toward an ever more rational world. One of my basic premisses is

that the progressive development and release of rational capacities in modern culture and its institutions have been possible because of the legacy of the many forms of non-rational reasonableness embedded in Western Civilization, a legacy by no means obsolete. In its ever greater expansion the rational mind increasingly devalued that which was not rational, and claimed that reason was synonymous with the rational. It was only able to do so, in my opinion, because of the rich, hybrid compost of organic intelligence on which it was based and which fueled it, a reasonableness developed out of pre-western, non-western, and precivilizational, and even prehistoric sources. Emotions can develop or atrophy, both individually and institutionally, and can range from fleeting sensations to instinctive proclivities whose forms, however variously expressed, remain deeply engrained aspects of being human. Those patterns of ritual expression and forms of feeling in the human constitution, such as dreaming, play, and intense mother-infant bonding, reach back to deeply embedded biological sources--to prehuman and ecstatic mammalian sources--which were pivotal to the emergence of human beings and which continue to animate human conduct at the highest levels as well as the lowest.

The casting off of archaic culture, of traditional customs, mores, and beliefs, of localized community in the development of modern culture, not only produced positive energies in the development of the modern autonomous self, but also had the unenlightening consequence of jettisoning the checks and balances of the human person, leaving the individual much more dependent on singular sources of socialization. "Enlightenment" was supposed to replace the chaotic dark regions of the mythologizing psyche with sober modern reason, a project which neglected the possibility that mythic narratives might be expressions of a deeper relatedness with the powers that move humans than rational consciousness can touch....

Consumer culture today is the chief socializing agent of the modern ghost in the machine, promising freedom and autonomy and immediate gratification while relentlessly colonizing both the civic community and the very structure of the self, from infancy on, like a retro-virus: a retro-virus which says, "buy me, drink me, eat me, dream me, desire me, and you will be yourself." In the virtual reality of consumption culture anything goes if people will buy it, only the real cost for the delusion of endless possession is a loss of self-possession. The endless parade of consumptive fantasies becomes a way of life: the self can be endlessly redescribed, like new clothing. Between the Big System and pure chance contingencies stands the hollow self, with its glorious hypertrophied freedoms to choose and idealize, unburdened by its organic needs and limitations, by spontaneous empathy, or by purposes or commitments which transcend its singular existence.

If, as Marshall Berman points out so well, Faust was the embodiment of the myth of development and modernization, postmodern Post-Faustian Person, driven by the irrational march of rational images and fantasies instead of the Grand March of history, is perhaps the logical terminus of the Faustian myth: the complete colonization of the inner life of humanity and the "wide world outside" by the ghost in the machine....

On *Bereft of Reason*:

“This is an original, incisive, and badly needed book. In prose as vigorous as his argument, Halton addresses issues urgent in many disciplines, as well as in our common culture.”

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“Without wishing to descend into hyperbole, I cannot recommend this book any more strongly. Halton has accomplished a *tour de force*...His passionate, articulate prose is a welcome antidote to the scientific, jargon-ridden norm. The physical qualities of the book, its binding, typesetting, and overall design, match in quality its intellectual content. *Bereft of Reason* deserves the widest readership: there has been no stronger or more telling critique since [C. Wright Mills’s] *The Sociological Imagination*.” --Michael Keaney, *Cultural Dynamics*

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“My positive responses were largely to the criticisms of contemporary social and sociological theory, my negative ones to the harangues against the modern condition....The ups and downs of my reaction to the book ended with the final chapter, in which admiring assent displaced even strong approval. When Halton writes that ‘rational maturity means living in the gap between rational comprehension and the *sense of things* which never gets completely comprehended’ (his emphasis) I can only marvel at the sheer rightness of the statement.” --Dennis Wrong, *Contemporary Sociology*

“Halton undertakes to challenge numerous assumptions common to both defenders of modernity and its postmodern critics as well as to set a new direction for social theory. Its extensive critical commentary is directed not only to much of the contemporary philosophical scene, but in general to the broader intellectual ethos of our times, including various currents within the arts and social sciences. The principal object of Halton’s critique is something that he terms ‘cultural nominalism,’ a view which he asserts is pervasive throughout modern culture and which entangles much of our thought within dubious and outworn dichotomies.

What is urgently needed, he proposes, is the abandonment of these and other standard dichotomies of modern thought and the formulation of a pragmatic, nonfoundationalist conception of reasonableness. Halton argues that virtually all of modern social thought has its roots within a falsely dichotomous worldview, and that providing for its renewal requires

nothing less than ‘a more fundamental questioning of the entrenched premises of the modern era itself.’

Social theory, Halton argues, must remain mindful of the manner in which culture and the self remain continuous with natural processes, as well as the manner in which reason itself remains irrevocably tied to sentiment, imagination, and organic life. Reason must retain a broader connotation than mere ‘rationality’ understood along positivistic, utilitarian, or even critical theoretic lines. It is a human capacity intimately associated with the passions and with mythic and metaphorical modes of comprehension. A proper account of social reason includes forms of reasonableness reminiscent both of organic philosophy and of the pragmatic tradition.”

Paul Fairfield, *Philosophical Books*, 1997

“This bold, important book challenges the fundamental assumptions of current social theory, identifies the vital contributions of recent thinkers who have been consigned to ‘intellectual oblivion,’ and indicates promising prospects for the renewal of thought and culture. It merits serious attention and invites response.” --Frank G. Novak, Jr. *Clio: A Journal of Literature, History, and the Philosophy of History*