Prologue
The Definition of the Human

IF YOU TAKE THE LONG VIEW of the career of Western philosophy, you may be forgiven for yielding to the fiction that its continuous history confirms a legible thread of discovery spanning the speculations of the Ionians and Eleatics and our more baffled inquiries at the start of the twenty-first century. It hardly matters whether you believe the tale or trust it as an economy that cannot finally be toppled. In either case, I shall need your patience. I have the pieces of an imaginary history that yields a more than plausible sense of the entire human world by way of a sequence of conceptions that were never construed in quite the way I recommend. I *trust* that history, though I don't believe it to be strictly true.

Canonical history has it that Plato and Aristotle sought to reconcile changing and changeless being in the spirit of the Ionians and against the excessive strictures of Parmenides' dictum, which appears to make no allowance for the changing world though it addresses it insistently. If that dictum had never been contested, the whole of science and our grasp of the human condition might have remained hopelessly paradoxical—in the Eleatic way. I accept the usual reading, therefore, as the sparest narrative (fiction or not) that might be true. Except for two caveats: the first, that the actual lesson of the best work of classical philosophy could never have been formulated within the horizon of the Greek world anyway; the second, that what Plato and Aristotle accomplished in their heroic way remains distinctly uneasy, unfinished, uncompelling in their own time, just at the point they manage to harmonize the opposed notions of the changing and the changeless—that is, the point at which they simply compromise with Parmenides.

The intuitive evidence is this: If there are two distinct worlds—the one changing, the other changeless—it is hard to see why the changeless world would ever be needed to ensure the presence of the other; and if its own intelligibility presupposed that change "is" necessarily what it is only relative to what is changeless, then how could that be demonstrated if we ourselves are confined within the changing world? If our world is a fluxive world and we have no inkling of the changeless world—beyond Parmenides' dictum, or conjectures like those spawned in the *Republic* (provided by disputants who admit they do not know the changeless world), or like Aristotle's faulty paradoxes ranged against those who affirm the fluxive world—then the classical contribution must be more limited than history affirms. Otherwise, read more generously, the matter may have required conceptual resources the Greek world never dreamed of—possibilities discovered only in a later age.

If the changing world were not (not known to be) in need of a changeless stratum, we would hardly need to admit that human nature must itself be changeless or depend in some ineluctable way on a changeless world. That would already be a gain sizable enough to challenge two thousand years of quibble effectively. The world of the arts and culture in general, bear in mind, makes no sense except as a historied world; and such a world hardly appears in a legible form much before the end of the eighteenth century. Imagine that!

Plato and Aristotle seem to recognize Protagoras as the arch-foe of Parmenides—Plato in the *Theaetetus*, Aristotle in *Metaphysics* Gamma—where the arguments against Protagoras's relativism are singularly thin and uncompelling; though they are, it should be said, very nearly the whole of contemporary objections to modern forms of relativism.[1] At this point in my story, it's not the championing of relativism that counts but defending the coherence of the flux—*not* chaos, not the sheer absence of all order, but the discursibility of the changing world itself. Here Protagoras is surely more interesting than Heraclitus; read anachronistically, "Man is the measure" is very much ahead of its time, an idea at least as advanced as any the post-Kantians hit on—except for the small fact that like Plato and Aristotle, Protagoras lacked our modern conception of historicity, the historied nature of thought itself. But I admit straight out that to remedy the lack harbors no subversive intent at all: nothing that would undermine, for instance, the splendid achievement of the natural sciences or the coherence of the unnumbered single world in which we live our hybrid lives. The

recovery is meant only to provide a picture of a wider spread of conceptual resources than are usually acknowledged—an account, so to say, in which the theory of the arts and the sciences will be seen to be closer cousins than the usual idioms would be willing to admit.

I want to suggest that the narrative outcome of the classical phase of Western philosophy lies more with abandoning Parmenides' constraint altogether—placing it under a charge of irrelevance and arbitrariness—than with reaching a verbal compromise (any compromise) in the way Plato and Aristotle seem to have found impossible to avoid.

The truth remains that their best compromise could never reach what was needed to catch and hold the minimal distinction of the human world. You'll say that's hubris, but it's not, though to admit it signifies that we live in a conceptual desert deprived for more than two thousand years of a proper understanding of the sui generis history of human being. Of course, *we* see ("ontologically") the human world *in* Plato and Aristotle and Protagoras—and even Parmenides. But strange as it may seem, the Greeks never understood what it was they saw, if since the end of the eighteenth century and the start of the nineteenth, what emergently was always metaphysically present in the human way was first made conceptually palpable in the work shared by Kant and the idealists, especially in the work of Hegel. I think it is no accident that the discoveries I have in mind are coeval with the fledgling labor of the philosophy of art, which in Kant shows every prospect of losing its way, even as Kant turns from nature to art,[2] until the philosophy of art moves on from Kant to Hegel. The change requires two distinct moments: one, to displace invariance with the flux of history—which means displacing Kant himself, the other, to fill the space of change with the specific resources of cultural constitution, that is, language, *Bildung*, self-consciousness, freedom, effective and creative action—which means embracing Hegel's dialectical intuition (if not his actual doctrine). There's the point of the story.

In short, the upshot of the contest between Plato and Aristotle and Parmenides is not so much the classic compromise they wrest from Parmenides (which has dominated Western philosophy down to our own day) as it is to experiment with the complete abandonment of the invariances of thought and being by exploring the new vision that begins to find its voice (and conceptual adequacy) in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries—in, say, its first full incarnation in Hegel's encultured and historicized empiricism, that is, in Hegel's phenomenology.[3]

The Greeks were simply disadvantaged, struggling in Parmenides' shadow, because they lacked the conceptual resources that might have helped them escape—as those resources helped Hegel in his own attempt to escape the corresponding fixities of Kant's transcendentalism. They lacked what we now realize is a novel conception of the regularities of ordinary cultural life—with which perfectly ordinary people are now acquainted, without exceptional training—just the reverse of what would be true of the Platonic Forms, or "what is" in Parmenides' sense, or the essences of natural things directly grasped by *nous*, or the powers of transcendental understanding or of pure phenomenology in Husserl's sense,[4] or anything else of such a crazy kind. Hence, I suggest the Greeks were literally unable to construct an adequate account of what it is to be a human being—beyond, say, the rather comic biology Plato offers in the *Statesman* or, more earnestly though by the same sort of fumbling, in the quasi-divine biology of Plato's *psyche* and Aristotle's *nous*.

We learn that if *we* mean to define what a human being is, we must somehow settle first the ancient question of the conceptual or, more grandly stated, the ontological linkage between the changing and the changeless. For, of course, Parmenides' conception of thinking is inseparable from his conception of being (or reality), as is true in a more ingenious way in Kant and the post-Kantians. I need to assure you here that in speaking of the "ontological," I have no intention of invoking any privileged sources of knowledge or assurances about any secret changeless order of reality indiscernible by ordinary means, without a knowledge of which we could never confirm the validity of our beliefs. Once we give up all such baggage, "metaphysics" or "ontology" is little more than a benign abstraction from the world we claim to know. Nothing quarrelsome hangs on the term.

If this line of thinking leads us well enough out of the ancient labyrinth, then we may claim to have grasped the defect of classical philosophy: the fact that, for the Greeks, faute de mieux, human nature must embody a changeless (or necessary) structure of its own that could account, in principle, for the intelligent grasp and application in thought and act and productive labor of the changing world. The Greek solution is no more than a deus ex machina that falls back to its compromise with Parmenides. It misperceives the sui generis nature of the human, which is fluxive and artifactual or hybrid. That, at any rate, is my charge.

If this is a fair assessment, it is a stunning truth that affirms that an adequate conception of the human—in a sense we now think impossible

to ignore—cannot have been philosophically available before (or much before) the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries. Alternatively put: the concepts of historicity and enculturation—on which, as I suggest, the very prospect of grasping the unique features of "human being" and the whole of the human world (including the arts) depends—may be, indeed *are*, the gift of a very small interval of discovery confined within the span of Western thought, fashioned a mere two hundred years ago. By now these notions belong to the entire world, of course. But I draw your attention to their first appearance in order to remind you that the definition of the human is itself a historicized undertaking subject to the evolving conceptual resources and saliencies of human thought itself; also, in order to feature the radical difference between the immense flexibility of Hegel's dialectical picture of human history and the stubborn rigidities of Eleatic influence on both classical philosophy and our own.

Plato is surely the best of the ancient critics of the ideal Forms and what we take to be the Parmenidean claim. The discussion (in the Dialogues) of the soul has very little point, for instance, if separated from the theory of the Forms. Aristotle's conception of *nous* seems to have no biological basis at all, is little more than a transparent device designed to shore up the Eleatic theme; in both his biological and ethical tracts, there is a noticeable slippage from the essentialized invariances of science and morality.[5] All this begins to explain the deeper joke of the *Republic* as well as Plato's patience with the inconclusiveness of the early Dialogues and the question-begging fixities never completely dispelled in the best work of Aristotle's attractive empirical rigor.

I am moving here, I assure you, in the direction of defining the human. I have chosen an oblique route partly to dramatize the fact that the Greeks did not understand the human in the same way we do; though, reading them, we instantly translate into our own idiom what they actually say, so we often fail to see the enormous difference between our respective views. If you doubt this, just consider, closer to our own world, that Kant very nearly abandons the human altogether in the strenuous analysis of his "transcendental subject." There actually is no sustained analysis in Kant of what is merely or essentially human, although, of course, Kant's rational agents are forever occupied with human concerns! Literally, Kant's transcendentalism makes it impossible to define the specifically human, though there's evidence enough that he anticipated returning to some sort of reconciliation between the mundane and the transcendental aspects of the human mode

of being.[6] Certainly, in his *Aesthetics*, Hegel pointedly takes note of the alien quality of what Kant offers as his abstract picture of a "human agent," which, Hegel suggests, cannot fail to disable the entire undertaking of explaining the creation, criticism, use, and appreciation of the entire world of art.[7] He's right, of course. We lose our grasp of the arts if we lose our grasp of history and the artifactual formation of the human.

My own impulse is to infer by association that Aristotle's treatment of the polis as the proper setting for grasping the philosophical import of more than Greek ethics and politics is instantly imperiled by Alexander's attempt to extend the normative role of the classical ethos to an empire meant to bring the Greek and Persian together in a new way, with no attention to those historicizing consequences that Alexander (under Aristotle's sway) could never have understood. Considering the Aristotelian temptations of our own time, the same disquieting lesson, I'm afraid, must surely haunt, say, Martha Nussbaum's "Aristotelian" account of Henry James's novels as well as her UN-oriented attempt to universalize Aristotle's conception of the virtues.[8] You cannot, however, determine the normative in practical life by empirically statistical methods of any kind. You begin to see the need for an important correction here. A place must be found for historical forces. There are no such forces in Aristotle's *Ethics* or, conformably, in Nussbaum's.

Moral judgment, like the exercise of taste and the practice of art criticism, is not a discipline that can be convincingly pursued on the basis of abstract descriptions: it requires the engaged perception and experience of the very specimen phenomena that are to be judged. Kant and the "Kantians," therefore—and at least the "Aristotelians," if not Aristotle himself—are plainly wrong. There you have the essential clue to the difference between the natural and human sciences—a fortiori, the paradigmatic lesson of the logic of the fine arts. (Allow this anticipation, please, to count as a piece of earnest money against the small liberties I've been taking.)

I see no way that Kant's hoped-for reconciliation between the empirical and the transcendental could possibly succeed, unless Kant would have been willing to abandon the quasi-divine powers of his own transcendental subject. He was, finally, unable to historicize his account of the human condition along the lines, for instance, that Johann Herder recommended and Hegel found congenial. It is, in fact, in Hegel's innovations that a truly modern conception of the enculturing formation of the human "subject" (self, agent, person) begins to dawn in a way that still fits contemporary

intuitions. Yet a very large swath of twentieth-century philosophy actually opposes the adoption of the defining themes of historicity and enculturation, which, beginning approximately with Hegel, are inseparably tied to every philosophically viable account of the human.

You realize that the speculative theme I am pursuing has been battered, throughout the history of philosophy, from the vantage of at least two profoundly opposed strategies of analysis. One favors appropriating the divine, or what seems close to the divine, in our earthly world: what belongs to Parmenides, Plato, and Aristotle; the medieval world; Kant and the post-Kantians; and more recently, thinkers as diverse as Husserl, Heidegger, Levinas, and some of the British idealists. The other prefers description and explanation in terms restricted to the inanimate physical world: what belongs to the reductive and eliminative convictions of the unity of science program, positivism, the radical forms of neo-Darwinism, computationalism, and other manifestations of what may not unfairly be called scientism.[9]

The first is persuaded that the human *cannot* be defined in terms restricted to the natural world; the other, that an adequate definition *can* be rendered in terms sufficient for the entire inanimate and subhuman world. So, one way or another, language, culture, history, agency, creativity, and responsibility are rightly seen to be, in principle, no more than complexifications of basic states and processes that need no conceptual supplementation drawn from the cultural world itself.

Both strategies fail, in the plain sense that the human is entirely natural, as natural (or naturalistic) as anything we might otherwise specify; yet, in being natural, the human is also sui generis, uniquely competent in ways that cannot be conceptually captured by categories that initially refer to anything less (or more) than what the distinctive processes of history and culture immediately display. That is what the Greeks and Kant lacked or largely lacked, although, of course, they were able to refer to (but not to analyze) what *was uniquely human in a naturalistic but sui generis way.* If you think of natural language as the exemplar of the cultural, you see the problem at once—although the proto-cultural among subhuman animals may be reconciled with the proto-linguistic forms of animal communication.

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Let me change direction here. I don't really believe Plato ever championed the doctrine of the Forms. He was not, in my opinion, a closet

Eleatic or Parmenidean—or a Platonist—of any kind. On the contrary, his best work, which I associate with the Socratic elenchus, shows very clearly that he was fully aware—was perhaps worried, puzzled, enchanted all at once by the fact—that the "Socratic" inquiries, paradigmatically addressed to the definition of the virtues, proceeded in a fluent way without relying on strict invariances or necessities of any substantive kind. But they did so, apparently, without ever achieving their appointed purpose. I take Plato's continually testing and retesting the powers of the elenchus to be a sign of his interest in the possibility of abandoning the Parmenidean constraint altogether; but it's the classical world itself, of course, that makes any breakthrough impossible.

The Forms are never featured in the early Dialogues; and when they begin to appear—at first, as one says, under the mode of absence, in fact even more strikingly in the *Statesman* than in the *Republic*—they are perfunctorily dismissed in a burlesque of the elenctic process itself. In the *Statesman* (a dialogue never easily placed), Plato pointedly returns to the elenchus, once it is explicitly conceded that we don't know the Forms at all—though we admit we must decide (there's the point) on a rational way to rule the featherless bipeds we know ourselves to be! Hence, Plato reverses or replaces the inquiry begun in the *Republic*: he assigns the instructor's role to an Eleatic Stranger, under the terms of an expressly diminished elenchus, though Socrates remains in attendance. This way of reading the *Statesman*, of course, goes completely contrary to Gregory Vlastos's influential ordering of the Dialogues.[10] But it makes perfect sense.

Plato, I suggest, returns repeatedly to test the mettle of Socrates' subversive practice, which is itself a daring transformation of the original Parmenidean elenchus. It seems he cannot discharge the Greek longing for invariance, but he obviously sees that invariance is neither required nor accessible in a fruitful discussion of the moral/political virtues. Still, Socrates never really succeeds in defining any virtues. If only Plato had had Hegel's conceptual resources, say, regarding the *sittlich* nature of the virtues themselves—in effect, a full conception of what a culture actually is—he might have penetrated to the heart of his own fascination with those ordinary modes of discourse that begin to yield a grasp of valid norms and encultured competences without invoking any changeless order whatsoever. *That* I take to be the convergent meaning of Plato's perseveration and Hegel's conceptual breakthrough. Both depend—the first, uncomprehendingly, the second, with stunning clarity—on a conceptual strategy that draws on

the pre-philosophical fluencies of ordinary practical life. Hegel seizes the advantage; but Plato seems forever baffled. Both abandon Parmenidean fixity—whatever Parmenides' true intentions may have been.

Plato's scruple leads him to an impasse, which he reenacts again and again without apparent comprehension. But he surely senses that the "secret" of the human world, which eluded Western philosophy for more than two thousand years, must lie somehow in the elenctic process itself. Plato *has* an inkling of its exemplary importance, but he has no idea of what he's found. So he clings somewhat disfunctionally to the remnants of Parmenidean fixity. Hegel, of course, invents a dialectical model of a conversational critique bridging opposed (so-called contradictory) tendencies within, or between, the salient options of historical life. He appears to resolve the Platonic impasse by an evolving series of transformative reconciliations that preserve as well as possible the normative claims of the contending customs and traditions that confront us. Hegel accepts the initial validity of the norms of *sittlich* life within the flux of history; he therefore has no need for invariances of any substantive sort or for any changeless ground of normative validity. He finds the elenctic mechanism already in play in the human reconstruction of human history. There's the grand solution that eluded Plato, the breakthrough of the most daringly modern of modern conceptions. It also explains, of course, why Hegel has no need for the contortions of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* in ensuring the linkage between the play of imagination in artworks and the intimate bearing of art on the formation and direction of moral sensibility: Kant was obliged (in the opening passages of the third *Critique*) to disjoin altogether the judgment of aesthetic taste (or beauty) from any contamination of conceptual subsumption (that would have directly associated the aesthetic with the scientific and the moral), and then reversed himself regarding the relation between art and moral sensibility in the second part of the third *Critique*. Hegel saw at once that the aesthetic and the moral were inseparable within the *geistlich* holism of the cultural world.

At times Hegel seems almost besotted with his own device. He invents his "discovery" of the rational self-understanding of the whole of endless history: at its best, it's a heuristic instrument of the supplest possibilities; at its worst, it's the march of God in the world. But *we* need not pretend to grasp Napoleon's or Alexander's "world-historical role," as Hegel claims to do, in order to appreciate the novel advantage of his conception of history. Both the Socratic elenchus and Hegel's dialectic must

be fitted, *in* evolving time, in essentially the same way, to emerging history. Plato senses the goal but never masters the process. Hegel masters both but loses something of the reflexive sense of the human limitation of just such an understanding. The briefest overview of the continual near chaos of the actual evolution of the modern state—for instance, according to something not unlike Michael Oakeshott's well-known summary[11]—would soon persuade you of the completely contrived nature of Hegel's picture of the entire course of history, whether in politics or the arts. Hegel confronts us with the profoundest contingencies as if they were all ineluctable necessities of Reason. Doubtless, he knew the difference.

He knew he was transforming Kant's entire vision in a radical way—by historicizing it, by reading Kant's system as less than necessary. He knew he was completing Plato's elenctic dream. But he had no patience with the piecemeal scatter of a merely human understanding of history. No more did Jean-Paul Sartre, of course, more modestly—as Foucault complains.[12] Hegel relies, as does Plato, on the entrenched stabilities of societal life. But viewing them in terms of the distinctive explanatory structures of cultural history, he takes them at once to provide a ground for normative validation as well; whereas Plato, viewing social practice as mere convention and contingency, never finds a sufficiently strong reason to replace the Forms by human practices as such. Plato never realizes that what is provisionally normative in our practices is not merely discernible but actually part of the formative forces that determine the very mode of human being.

In any event, I view the elenchus and the dialectic as two closely related strategies of inquiry that are (1) presuppositionless; (2) *sittlich* (in a generous "anthropological" sense); (3) free of Parmenidean infection of any kind; (4) lacking any formal or criterial method; (5) cast as forms of discursive reason; (6) inherently incapable of claiming or validating any uniquely correct analysis of whatever sector of the world they choose to examine; (7) committed only to what, as a practical matter, is adequate to our salient interests from time to time—or committed in such a way that theoretical inquiry is seen to be dependent on, or derivative from, or internal to, our practices of discursive inquiry; (8) applied to what is intrinsically interpretable without end; (9) unable to discover in any simple or direct way the objective (or telic) structures of the independent world; (10) hence, applied to what is culturally constituted or constructed relative to our evolving experience of the world; (11) applied to what is local, contexted, not strictly universalizable, validated in *sittlich* ways; (12) historicized and known to

be such; and (13) insuperably phenomenological, that is, grounded in and restricted to our encultured experience of the world (in something closer to Hegel's than to Husserl's sense).

All this counts as a summary of the sense in which I view Plato's use of the elenchus (more in promise than in fact) and Hegel's dialectic (viewed as more tentative, more plural, more provisional, more contested at every turn, more discontinuous, too, than Hegel may have supposed at times) as bearing in a decisive way on the definition of what it is to be a human being or what counts as the human world.

If the tally holds firm, then two important lessons may be drawn from it without delay: one, that both the Greek and Kantian accounts have almost no grasp at all of the metaphysics of the human or cultural world as such; the other, that the cultural world, however embedded in physical nature and for that reason not adequately described or explained in physical terms alone, has no fixed structures of its own of any kind, is subject to the flux of history at every point of interest, and yet confronts us (contrary to Plato's worry) with all of its evolving, perfectly legible stabilities—the regularities of *sittlich* practice. Both Plato and Kant retreat to the safety of proposed invariances: Plato, possibly less tendentiously than Kant, since Kant requires fixity in order to secure his conception of the closed system of the first *Critique*, whereas, paradoxically, Plato sees no way at all to save the elenchus he assigns to Socrates. There's the abiding failure of the first two thousand years of Western philosophy! Bear that in mind, please. For the saving lesson *is* the conception of historied culture—which surely generates the principal part of any valid moral theory or valid theory of the arts; very probably also, any valid theory of science. Viewed from our own vantage, the force of the entire clue makes itself felt in the *recency* of Kant's failure to have hit on an adequate inkling of the historicized and artifactual nature of human being. The extraordinary distortion of philosophy's canonical history begins to dawn.

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Before I press any part of my own answer to the "secret" of the human (a perfectly open secret by this time), let me add to our elenctic company a third voice closer to our own than either Plato's or Hegel's, that catches up the intuitive directness of the first (without Eleatic temptations) and yields to the historicizing effect of the second (without properly acknowledging the explicit role of history). This third voice illuminates, obliquely again, certain

inherent limitations in the "method" of cultural analysis, which counts as little more than an improvisational "meander" shared by the apt members of a particular culture in a way that entrenches (consensually but not by criterial means) their collective understanding of the world they share.

In this way, they (that is, we) become aware of the *determinable*—never fixedly *determinate*—*geistlich* ground on which all their inquiries and commitments ultimately depend: especially what, by various strategies (elenctic, dialectical, now meandering), prove to be legible and supportable in the way of diversity, extension to new cases, correction, transformation, opposition, sheer scatter, *and* normative standing. Sophocles's *Antigone* offers an elenctic example at least as telling as the Socratic practice, perhaps even closer to an understanding of cultural history than the Dialogues could claim, since in the play one and the same society acknowledges the valid but contingently competing priorities of throne and family.[13] *Antigone* may be the clearest specimen text we have, against the backdrop of which Socrates and Hegel may be seen to subscribe to the same conceptual resources. For without an incipient sense of history (better, historicity), the central conflict would have had to be assigned to the cosmic order itself—a palpable scandal. At any rate, that is a judgment we find ourselves drawn to, viewed from a contemporary vantage.

Plato fails because he neither vindicates nor overthrows the Parmenidean dictum. Strictly speaking, the Socratic elenchus is not a method or a rule or an algorithm of any kind. It is only an informal practice that comes out of the fluencies of ordinary conversation. But Plato never seems to fathom (*or* he grasps but cannot defend) the power and sufficiency of elenctic informality against the Parmenidean prejudice that defines rational rigor. That informality will help to define, in turn, precisely what "human being" means.

The same tolerance for transient opposition marks the nerve of Hegel's dialectic, though Hegel, of course, presents his account of history in much too high-blown a way. Hegel was obviously enchanted by the brilliant applications of his "method" to the whole of the *geistlich* world; but historicism could never have assigned his interpretive tales a principled advantage without actually cheating. Any such bias would surely go contrary to Hegel's immense grasp of the contingency of cultural change itself.

Perhaps the theory of Forms began to seem as feasible to Plato as the rationality of *Geist* may have seemed to Hegel—incipiently in the *Meno*, say, where the dialectical play of the elenchus begins to evolve in a new direction.