

Preface

ONE MUST BE CAREFUL what one says in print, but not so careful as to withdraw from convictions that have needed a lifetime to take form. I'm persuaded, for instance, that ours is a time for changing cosmologies, political systems, religious allegiances, the touchstones of art and sensibility, and perhaps, at a level of lesser presumption, the orientation of the philosophical canon, if there is a canon to confront. A risky time. My own competence, such as it is, is pretty well confined to speaking about this last matter. It's already a commonplace to say that our world is a global world: take care! We must remember that we surely knew the change was nigh for some time, though we've largely ignored the call to think carefully about what that might require of us. The disorders of our very young millennium have already shown us the unwisdom of our insouciance. We find ourselves bewildered by the seeming, sudden inadequacies of our form of life. I'll mention only two bits of evidence: one, a public secret; the other, a truth confirmed by the vehemence of its denial. Thus: the great monotheisms stand before us plainly exhausted, their creative powers spent now almost entirely in the noisy (often violent, even murderous) service of reversing their greatest teachings. In the same spirit, our largest conceptions of war and peace have hardly any relevance any longer for the least conflicts of our every day. Perhaps it was always so, though I more than doubt it. These disorders are much too deep to be merely local.

I won't spell out the relatively minor analogy that may be drawn from a review of contemporary philosophy. I've made the argument else-

where, and I'm bent on building on it here. Quite simply, I'm committed to laying a proper ground for a very unlikely, very unfashionable surge of speculative enthusiasm restored, however lightly, to philosophy's most essential reflexive question: the analysis of what it is to be a human self. I hope to avoid anything that might risk trading rigor for short-lived advantage. Nevertheless, an answer suited to our time cannot but recover something of philosophy's embeddedness among the fundamental occupations of the race—indeed, something of its genuine grandeur. We have no other inquiry but whatever is informed by our understanding of what it is to live as a human being. I confess I take that seriously: seriously enough to believe we are at a crossroads now, at which the question might well support a radical reorientation. Not an altogether unfamiliar conceptual start, of course. That would be unlikely. But a new perspective and a new formulation nevertheless, something capable of yielding a new sense of the unity of all our purposes within the limits of natural life within the limits of the natural world. A philosophically responsible offering, that is: hence, one modest enough regarding the practical or executive redirection of our lives. As you'll see soon enough, it will have taken me an entire book's worth to voice no more than the first sentences of a turn in thought brave enough to close the lid on undertakings begun a good many years ago and to open others that have already escaped the controls of the first.

Philosophy has no point (for me) if it has no convictions about the right orientation of human life; but it has no resources of its own by which to validate any such change directly—except by subtraction. So it plays its part under extraordinary constraints.

Notoriously, in our time, this has been taken to signify that philosophy, as standardly practiced, has already come to an end. In fact, this last doctrine may be the single most arresting thesis to have surfaced in American philosophy in the past thirty-plus years. No doubt there's a paradox there that must be met. But the doctrine itself I regard as the spoiled, self-congratulatory expression of considerable but barely earned material comfort, the persuasion of whiggish minds turned against the perpetually incipient chaos of the world. Philosophy ought to provide an indictment of such cold comfort; but if it should, then it has forgotten to reclaim its proper function. That cannot now be recovered in any cognitivist way. But it can, I'm persuaded, be reclaimed, contingently, diversely, historically, responsibly, perspicuously—in medium-sized practical terms. The challenge remains the same in every large movement of Western philosophy. Which,

I would like to believe, invites and supports risks of the sort I find myself happily entangled in.

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J. M.
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