

**A Critique of Modernity: On Positivism, and Phenomenology**

**Antonio Leopold Rappa\***

*Natural cognition begins with experience and remains within experience*

Husserl

*I keep having the same experience and keep resisting it every time.*

Nietzsche

Modernity has two main antecedents – positivism and phenomenology. Hermeneutical variations of modernity are rationalistic, empiricist, progressive, optimistic. I intend to show how it becomes ironic when normative political theory implicitly recognizes the antecedents of modernity while simultaneously invalidating modernist moves towards achieving solutions to problems created by modernity itself. The paper is broken into four main parts – a brief overview of modernity, positivism, and phenomenology, and closes with the some markers of positivism and phenomenology in Nietzsche’s critique of modernity.<sup>1</sup>

**Modernity**

If we accept the premise that the modern period began with the developments after the Westphalian Peace of 1648, we might then accept three models of society’s beginnings in terms of the work of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau – and how they viewed modernity as a political strategy of avoidance. The point of departure from an pseudo-epistemological ideal to the moral obligations of a deontological reality involved three scenarios: (1) a *politics of*

*avoidance* of the horrifying state of nature (Hobbes); (2) Rousseau's direct challenge to Hobbes's State of Nature in virtually every aspect<sup>2</sup> that was mollified by the 'limited liberty' of the natural state and the 'oppression' of an artificial society; and, (3) the 'natural naïveté of Locke's State of Nature' governed by a inherent laws that (pre)reserved the citizens' right to rebellion under conditions of contractual failure. It was a difficulty of reception where as Nietzsche says is problematic that exists in the resistance among recipients who are caught between the word of God and the words of men, a tension between Being, and being nothing, and the moral tropes involved.<sup>3</sup>

The three social contract models are variations on the theme of Nature and its transition from pre-modernity to modernity, and the eventual contractual obligations that emerge are motivated by an individual avoidance of fear, anxiety, danger, and the unknown. The failure of the Church and the State to maintain their control over their traditional spheres of influence deepened the political cleavages extant in knowledge that was split between the ambiguities of divine epistemology and the spiritual control of the Church at one end, and the contradictions of political, mercantilist views of knowledge and the secular control of the State on the other hand. Modernity sparked off wide interest and attention because it promised mass enlightenment while reconstituting values and ideals away from a God-centered universe to a human-centered one, described by Nietzsche as:

a monumental problem, it is enmeshed more profoundly with something of which the old saint "has not yet heard... that *God is dead*". This poses incredible problems, because God had been the very movement of giving; it was His word, His command; all His creation was His gift. We, of His loving gift, had been given His Son, who exemplified the incarnation of *caritas* and taught us how to receive and proliferate its movement and thus to belong to Being instead of Nothingness. At least with William of Ockham this begins to come undone. God's radical omnipotence begins to rip free of its essential inscription in the constellation of love and charity; His will becomes potentially deceitful and malevolent, so contingent that potentially He could change his past, Uncharitable *in potentia*, God and His creation become increasingly difficult to receive. (Coles, 1996, 381)

The metanarrative of European pre-modernity to modernity was both supported and thwarted by Nietzsche's own diatribe against modernity. The displaced God and the renewed cleavages that developed between the Church and the State was an immediate consequence of a struggle for power, for control over the masses, in competition for greater economic wealth and higher political influence. This situation was catalyzed by the arrival of such new technology as the Guttenberg press and the radical discoveries of Copernicus and Galileo, which prepared Western European populations for the largest demographic growth spurt in literacy levels prior to any other point in the history of Western civilization in the Age of Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment was a political codex that released as it revealed Europeans (but, ironically, not their colonized subjects of non-European people) from the blind acceptance of the divine right of kings and the spiritual claims of the Church. 'Civilization' thus owed a 'debt of gratitude' to the British empiricists, the Irish and Italian political economists and the natural scientists for catalyzing political, social, and economic change.

The belief in the monolithic metanarrative of modernity therefore begins taking shape in the later stages of the Enlightenment period when the fourth wave of European colonialism began taking root across the entire globe with the extensive and exhaustive geo-political cartographies by British and French colonialists across the Americas, the Near East, the Middle East, South Asia, Southeast Asia, the Far East, and the Pacific. The largesse of the Western European enterprise and its invincibility was buttressed by new technologies of steam-powered machinery and rampant industries that not only began changing the face of Western European cities but also, the profile of the rest of the colonized world that included the Americas. The powerful metanarrative was concordant with the new wave of Christian-led influence that sought to unleash greater pressure on the formerly powerful, but apparently

backward Moslem empires that were technologically weakened in the wake of autarkic politics and infighting within the former boundaries of the Ottoman Empire.

Modernity was ripe in the age of industry sometime in the last quarter of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Competing colonial enterprises introduced the world's first truly global economy since the fall of the Roman Empire and the Age of Imperialism that stretched to all four corners of the world. The revolutions against the ancient regime promised greater autonomy for the masses while new inventions and innovations that appeared in the aftermath of war resulted in greater efficiency and productivity. A new age of ideological battles had begun with the "Great October Proletarian Revolution of 1917" and the end of the first "world war". The search for new resources to supply the rapidly industrializing economies of the old colonial empires ironically led to their breakup and breakdown in the wake of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the aftermath of the second world war.

### **Break with Tradition**

Part of the problem before us is that there has been – at least for the past two hundred and fifty years – a tendency by historians, economists, and social theorists embracing the European heritage to promote the belief in the monolithic metanarrative of modernity. The reasons for this putsch are clear because it posits the Eurocentric view of the world as the ideal view reifying a civilizational ethos that has since waned and weakened in the wake of a decolonized, postcolonial, post-Cold War, and now increasingly, late modern world. The supreme confidence in the European tradition of science and scholarship has weakened because ironically, every great civilizational ethos carries with it the seeds of its own destruction. Foucault once mentioned that tourists visited Italy to see a civilization in decline, and that people were now visiting France for the same reason. The new millennium is

showing signs that this is becoming a truism about Europe itself. And that part of the problem may be explained and interrogated by examining the philosophical roots of modernity, perhaps if only to see what went wrong, and how the once powerful “Departments of Philosophy” have now shrunk significantly in terms of scope and influence, partly because the laws of economics have more accessible alternatives to the good life, and partly because the desire for metaphysical and analytic speculation leaves too much work for the modern human brain that prefer the electric charges of popular and trendy courses at increasingly commodified universities across the globe.

### **Normative Good, Positive Bad**

Similarly, but not quite, the status of political theory as a major discipline within “political science” has over the past eighty years become increasingly less attractive to students seduced by “life-scientific”, post-facto, band-aid, gobbledygook formulae as if theory was in fact not about life, or worse, that theory and life could actually be separated. Yet the ability to draw from non-philosophical sources continues to pose the best advantage over political philosophy.

The second part of the problem lies in the instinct for disciplinary survival, political science exists as separate tables, as Gabriel Almond argued in 1987, that have vaunted islands of vulnerability that are fiercely defended. By extrapolating Almond’s dining metaphor, one might imagine a political science at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century being one in which the separate tables of game theory and rational choice models have merged as allies and opened their *own* restaurant that requires no less than quantitative diners. No one else would be able to digest the food. But rather than merely offering exotic sites of alternative cuisine within the industry of political science, the new restaurant claims to represent real political science. Almond’s

metaphor marks the problem of sub-disciplines in political science that, having failed to find a common vocabulary, have now turned on one another.

So where does this leave normative and historical approaches to the study of politics? The burden of proof appears to lie in the careful and meticulous uncovering of previous research in political philosophy that might reveal fragments of light on modernity. But, if we are to believe Habermas, nothing has changed much, not even the criticism:

In the discourse of modernity, the accusers raise an objection that has not substantially changed from Hegel and Marx down to Nietzsche and Heidegger, from Bataille and Lacan to Foucault and Derrida. The accusation is aimed against a reason grounded in the principle of subjectivity. And it states that this reason denounces and undermines all unconcealed forms of suppression and exploitation, of degradation and alienation, only to set up in their place the unassailable domination of rationality. Because this regime of a subjectivity puffed up into a false absolute transforms the means of consciousness-raising and emancipation into just so many instruments of objectification and control, it fashions for itself an uncanny immunity in a form of thoroughly concealed domination. The opacity of the iron cage of a reason that has become positive disappears as if in the glittering brightness of a completely transparent crystal palace. All parties are united on this point: *These* glassy facades have to shatter. They are, to be sure, distinguished by the strategies they elect for overcoming the positivism of reason. (Habermas, 1992, 55-56)

Here, in a fragment of Habermas' discourse we see the easy dovetailing of both positivist and phenomenological antecedents of modernity. Positivism is criticized for its non-admittance of subjective reasoning, and phenomenology, the other is criticized for false appearances, its glassy facades. The following sections examine the two antecedents of modernity with the intention of showing how the philosophical picture of European-initiated modernity is anchored in the optimistic, modernist platform of progression, development, achievement and advancement.

## **Positivism**

Positivism lies in the great extant of the work of Kant, Comte, Hume, and Saint-Simon. However it was Comte who first used the word 'positivism' to describe the kind of

scientific arrangements that were needed to discover knowledge, human beings became the center of the universe, and replaced religion as the focus of cosmological activity. At the center of Comte's arguments were the claims that ran parallel to Kantian notions of time and space in the search for evidence. Later, positivism would meander through the work of John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer, and Ernst Mach. The idea that experience was about distilling knowledge from a partial reliance on "neutral" human sense perception came to be known as logical positivism, a powerful intellectual idiom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century that permeated the legal and constitutional structures that currently under gird modern plural and pluralist societies. The modern world was ripe for the sustenance that logical positivism, legal positivism, psychological positivism, and constitutional positivism in all their neutral arbitrariness because it supported the logical progression of modernity. But the recipients and promoters of positivist modernity chose to circumvent its problems rather than encounter them; the moderns preferred choice were contained in neutral and objective laws rather than the ranting of a madman:

Zarathustra's first encounters with people in the marketplace go exactly as the old saint predicted: His efforts to give are smashed upon the shores of those unwilling to receive him. He in turn receives not receivers but a corpse. But does the herd-like stream of humanity, with its tenacious stupidity, bear sole responsibility for these disastrous encounters? Or is it also the blindness of the solarly that governs Zarathustra's giving?<sup>4</sup> (Coles, 1996, 382)

Nietzsche's political charges against modernity for its inimical idealism, an idealism that we know is ironically built on Nietzsche's own aristocratic vision of failure, is exemplified in Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols/The Antichrist* where he raises the issue of modernity's logical falsification in

*The error of a false causality.* -- We have always believed we know what a cause is: but whence did we derive our knowledge, more precisely our belief we

possessed this knowledge, more precisely our belief we possessed this knowledge? (Nietzsche, 1968, 59)

The false causality for Nietzsche is therefore not only a series of lies but in effect a pattern of profoundly illogical rationalizations that lead to the dispossession of knowledge. His scathing attack on modernity is Nietzsche's bony finger pointing at European decadence and decline and the virulent spread of its seductive non-logic of rationality. But rather than a twilight signaling the end, modernity has proven to be a sunrise industry, a successor unto itself as Conway argues:

Deeply contemptuous of the reluctant advocates, unwitting valets, and involuntary memoirists who pose as original thinkers, he never undertakes to deliver a solemn, sonorous treatise on politics. Understandably wary of philosophical system-building, he conveys his political insights via lightning epigrams and apothegmatic proclamations, generally ignoring the quaint Alexandrian custom of furnishing evidence, arguments and justifications. While his contemporaries celebrate the triumphs of the new *Reich* or frolic in the surging tide of democratic reforms, he scours the premodern world for sober realists and exemplars of political wisdom. He chooses as his interlocutors such untimely figures such as Homer, Manu, Thucydides, Socrates, Plato, Epicurus, Caesar, and St. Paul. (Conway, 1997, 1-2)

Conway's restatement of Nietzsche's indictment is not only pointed at the moderns who overtly support the system, the bureaucrats, the police, the politicians, the terrorists, the clerics, and the saints. It is equally aimed at those of us who stand by and watch and wait and do nothing to resist the amalgam of modernity. In this fashion, Nietzsche should recluse himself since before madness, before confronting his own abyss and black hole – the space of eternity – he is himself party to the system that he confronts despite his rejection and in spite of his proclamations. The 'depth' of modernity in positivism therefore enjoins a believable story of immense magnitude that traversed civilizations and concentrated on the importance of the classical Greek tradition and its wanton successors. It is a story from which no one, not even Nietzsche, can escape since the time of Socrates, the epicureans, and St. Paul, which had



already begun its ascent into insurmountable cosmological proportions. All things are thus claimed as pouring into the lineal logic of modernity, from family and community to tribe and people. (Conway, 1997, 24) But Nietzsche's diatribe against modernity and the modern condition is also genealogically attached to Kantian notions of transcendental space. Man is being in time. Modern man is purposeful being, an end to himself as Riley correctly notes in sections 81-85 of *Judgment*. (Riley, 1974) Nietzsche's moments are tied by the boundaries of Spirituality and State making it appear like Kant before him, "impossible to move on both sides of the boundary line at once, and that he who crosses it shifts his problem as well as his method". (Land, 1877, 38) Thus the problem of positivism may be treated as an antecedent of modernity because of an important Kantian view of that entity that exists between object and subject, between objective reality and subjective idealism (modern), and between objective idealism and subjective reality (late modern). The Kantian universe integrative, self-including, and Euclidean, as J. P. N. Land pointed out in 1877, but not (as) imagined as Land suggests, (Land, 1877, 41). This is precisely why Helmholtz's interpretation of Kantian space adopts the superficial 'depth' of a threefold classification:

1. a form of intuition – any conception of space must be imaginable as space;
2. a universal, essentialist perception that is native to us, not a "datum that is passively received"
3. space is a transcendental form – belonging to and arising out of our consciousness.(Land, 1877, 47)

The imagination of space, despite the appearance of false causality, must be intuitively derived, and be able to stand on its own; it must appear to the citizen – in any of the three social contract models, for example – as being constitutive of his own tradition, and the

consciousness of that such a tradition does indeed exist. It is an epistemology of belief and a deontological correctness deriving out of mind and motion and is considered like, “Leibniz holds with Kant that space and time are subjective principles, ordering forms of consciousness”, (Calkins, 1897, 369). We can deduce that Kantian space integrates all structures and all concepts and represents a deontological account, a ratiocinated form of all-encompassing behavior, (Parsons, 1964, 197). The positivist oeuvre therefore involves the unmentionable but widely held view in modernity of hopefulness and optimism. Naturally, this is where Kantian space departs Nietzschean time. But it is through Nietzsche’s critique that we access Kant’s powerful integrating positivist universal and hence his hand in influencing modernity. His influence is directly seen in several ways: the transcendental notion of time as space; the integrative feature of modernity; and the dispossession of man as a subject and slave to Man as the object of Mastery. With Kant, no longer do moderns have to view themselves as finite beings inept and incapable of understanding an infinite godhead. Man himself contains the seeds of his own knowledge and his own (ultimate) destruction because he is simply capable of it. Modernity is the positive extension of Man’s absent humility, his misplaced shame, his irreverent trust in the unknown, and his optimistic egotism of political control. Kant’s universe is the universal edge of modernity, its onset, coda and stratum. Rationality and irrationality both occur within the ends of its boundaries, the ever-expanding ego of European sophistry and control; it was, as Shklar argues, not only the spirit of the modern European, but also “a true account of the nature of conscience”, (Shklar, 1973, 260). Kant is therefore the true creator of the positivist oeuvre in political modernity. He provides the moderns with a sense of originality and the security that there was a beginning to which moderns could turn towards for solace and comfort in the objectivism and neutrality of Kantian space, the primary characteristics of positivism but because these are essentially man-made, they possess the potential of being subjective and value-laden. Yet there is never a

problem of value and subjectivity in Kantian positivism because his idealistic universe is sufficiently plural to contain future versions of subjectivity not yet discovered. This is why late moderns continue to work under the millstone of positivist laws today while being able to speak of the futility of their jurisprudence.

The other antecedent of modernity that is distinguishable is phenomenology. For the late moderns, the study of phenomenology might be more significant important than positivism because of its proximity to existentialism.

### **Phenomenology**

The predisposition of modernity to the subjective study of phenomena is seen in the prevalence of form over substance not only in the late modern period but also at its very beginnings. Perhaps this might even be where late modern ideas might begin *beginning*. A phenomenon requires a reliance on sense and sense perception, a reliance that goes beyond the pale of objective criteria and demands a subjective sensitivity. Theories of the phenomenological are important intellectual aspects that touch on the meaning of what the senses tell us appears before us. Consequently, divergences in the range of phenomena, both natural and artificial are constitutive of an equal if not larger range of modes of examining phenomena. Political science in its claim to examine politics often focuses on the study of what are considered political phenomena. However, the history of political theory shows that phenomenology is much more complicated than I could possibly explain, and perhaps cannot be effectively and adequately examined, like positivism and modernity, in the context of the simple paper format. Nevertheless, we are aware that unlike Edmund Husserl, Hegel's notion of phenomenology rests on different intellectual premises. For example, Pelczynski agrees with Shklar that Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind* may be likened to a text about the history of Eurocentric ideas across time, which in Pelczynski's words involves "a fascinating philosophical interpretation of the dominant modes of European thought from ancient Greece

to the French Revolution. Hegel felt he had to come to terms with the thought of the past before he could construct a satisfactory system of philosophy valid for his own times”, (Pelczynski, 1977, 127). The atomization of the moderns in the *Phenomenology of Mind* runs an interesting parallel with what sounds like a kind of Hobbesian mechanistic atomization in the *Leviathan* (1651) and foreshadows individual desires for the sake of the community:

The positive theory emerges later, in the section on “Objective Mind” in the *Encyclopedia* and in the *Philosophy of Right*. His concept of civil society explores the forms of integration peculiar to the modern world, while his concept of the state as an ethical community relates civil and political institutions and attitudes to the dominant cultural forces of his time: Christian religion, morality of conscience, a doctrine of natural law, and utilitarianism. (Pelczynski, 1977, 129)

The retreat into utilitarian and natural law concerns a larger epistemological ambit that crushes the individual experience and promotes the importance of the spiritual whole, whether it is supported by the structures of state or the structures of civil society. Unlike Hegel, Husserl, argues that:

[277] *Phänomenologie bezeichnet eine an der Jahrhundertwende in der Philosophie zum Durchbruch gekommene neuartige deskriptive Methode und eine aus ihr hervorgegangene apriorische Wissenschaft, welche dazu bestimmt ist, das prinzipielle Organon für eine streng wissenschaftliche Philosophie zu liefern und in konsequenter Auswirkung eine methodische Reform aller Wissenschaften zu ermöglichen.* (Kockelmans, 1994, 28) [phenomenology can mean one of two things: (1) “a new kind of descriptive method which made a breakthrough in philosophy at the turn of the century, and an *a priori* science derived from it; and (2) a science which is intended to supply the basic instrument (*Organon*) for a rigorously scientific philosophy and, in its consequent application, to make possible a methodical reform of all the sciences”].<sup>5</sup> (Husserl, 1927)

The problems that best Husserl’s position become clear by hindsight, the widespread non-acceptance of his views within the academic community of psychologists, and the evidence of rejection by his own student assistant of four years, Martin Heidegger. More importantly, the question arises as to whether Husserl intended to employ his technique of *phänomenologischen Reduktion* as a method of uncovering eternal truth and value from the

subconscious (plausible) or to predict the behavior of subjects through possession of knowledge of the subconscious (possible). It appears more likely to me that Husserl intended to use *phänomenologischen Reduktion* for the phenomenological investigation (discovering truth and value that is concealed) rather than behavioral prediction (anticipating future outcomes through cognitive knowledge). Yet part of the reason for including Husserl's *Phänomenologie* as an illustrator of this antecedent of modernity. Also, Husserl's modernist optimism and meticulous planning of *Phänomenologie* – as a new science of rigor within the cosmological landscape of modernity's intellectuals – is indicative of the modernist trait and trajectory. Indeed, Husserl's work shows the kind of scientific fetishism that plagues some of the social scientific community of “experts” and “specialists” who take a very serious view of the sophisticated value of empirical and scientific work despite the virtual uselessness of such instrument's predictive qualities!<sup>6</sup> This penchant for mimicry is also seen in his method Husserl devoted much time towards the preparation of the definition of *Phänomenologie*, and in striving for completeness, he revealed the significance of his own modernist tendencies with the intention of applying scientific rigor and reductionism to philosophy (and phenomenological psychology):

*Die Methode der phänomenologischen Reduktion (auf die reinen “Phänomene”, das rein Psychische) besteht danach 1) in der methodischen und streng konsequenten ἐποχή bei jeder in der seelischen Sphäre auftretenden objektiven Setzung, sowohl am einzelnen Phänomen als an dem ganzen seelischen Bestand überhaupt; 2) in der methodisch geübten Erfassung und Beschreibung der mannigfaltigen “Erscheinungen” als Erscheinungen ihrer gegenständlichen Einheiten und Einheiten als Einheiten der ihnen jeweils in den Erscheinungen zuwachsenden Sinnbestände. [The method of phenomenological reduction (to the pure “phenomenon”, the purely physical) accordingly consists (1) in the methodical and rigorously consistent epoche of every objective positing in the psychic sphere, both of the individual phenomenon and of the whole psychic field in general; and (2) in the methodically practiced seizing and describing of the multiple “appearances” as appearances of their objective units and these units as units of component meanings accruing to them each time in their appearances]. (Kockelmans, 1994, 112-113)*

In a globalizing world fraught with contradiction and divergence, modernity's desire for purity, accuracy, and distilling truth from value, and value from fact through scientific testing is complemented by citizens' deference to "experts" and to "specialists". Modernity's penchant for rigor is also seen within the international political economy of pharmaceutical industries that devote billions of dollars towards research based on simple scientific principles that include, for example, scientific experimentation with chemicals and the reduction of compounds under controlled conditions. This situation is itself an epistemological process of discovery, a mode of recovery that ranges similar to Husserl's attempt to uncover cognitive reality through his *Methode der phänomenologischen Reduktion*, thereby further legitimizing phenomenology as an antecedent of modernity. However, Husserl's phenomenology is an antecedent of modernity not so much because of his definitive statement but because it assumed that there potentially *is* underlying meaning to be discovered, a sub-text as it were, in the substrate of reality. This sequence of events should not be confused with postmodern intimations of multiple layers in society. Rather, Husserl's position reveals the modernist determination to uncover the truth: *X exists because X is independent of our ability to describe its existence*. There are eternal truths about humanity, which await discovery. Therefore, Husserl's phenomenology as an antecedent of modernity provides the latter with the wherewithal to move confidently into a discoverable future, a future that comes to terms with concrete reality through logic and rationality. The clarity of advancement in modernity is thus concretized in Husserl's belief that:

philosophy had to come to terms with concrete experience, but he thought that the real was to be discovered in the process of consciousness, the fundamental intentionality of all experience. The aim of phenomenology thus was to break through to a true reality, "to the things themselves". In his phenomenology, Husserl thus sought to set aside theory and mere perception in pursuit of the underlying intentional reality of life itself. (Gillespie, 2000)

The underlying reality in the psyche is the frontier that is to be mapped by the linear logic similar to that used by the European colonialists in their experience of Asia, Africa, America and the Pacific.

The next section returns us to where we began, with Nietzsche's diatribe against modernity and the modern condition. This section tries to simultaneously locate the positivist and phenomenological accents that have been discussed.

### **Conclusion: Nietzsche's Critique of Modernity**

It is not surprising for students of political philosophy, the history of political thought, and political theory to invariably see that contending trends in European analytical philosophy is at some level "strictly a matter of fashion" (Solomon, 1987:vii). Some days Nietzsche's stock value appears to rise while on other days one sees the resurgence of publications on Kierkegaard, Sartre, Heidegger, and Arendt's work. However, one might not be entirely convinced by Solomon's point about the syncope of European philosophy, regardless of the strength of his persuasive diatribe in *From Hegel To Existentialism* (1987).

Nietzsche's aristocratic "essentialism" was a result of his own struggle with the Christian morality and humanism of his time. Nietzsche's condition of modernity is his critique of the morality of Western modernity. This becomes clear in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1886), *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887) and *The Gay Science* (1887) (or what Nietzsche himself called *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*). Nietzschean thought therefore embodies two classes of human beings who occupy two distinct plateaus of social mobility. The political socialization of the masses come under the Christianizing influences of the Church which we recall in Nietzsche's lifetime, was in decline but still constituted a significant influence in the conduct of daily life. The elite constituted the other class, a minority of *Übermensch* who would subjugate and control the masses through two main strategies: (1) the exercise of spiritual control through the Church; and (2) the exercise of political control through the State.

For Nietzsche, the idea then of propagating individual will was a combination of individual pleasures derived from being controlled by a minority of *Übermensch* at one level, and at another, the thought of enslavement by the *Übermensch* as seen in *Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik* (1872). Satisfaction could only be realized by a simple attentiveness to one's own responsibility in political and spiritual life, that is, an attentiveness to the "will". For example:

we Europeans of the day after tomorrow, we first -born of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – with all our dangerous curiosity, our multiplicity and art of disguise, our mellow and as it were, sugared cruelty in spirit and senses – *if we are to have virtues, we shall presumably have only such virtues as have learnt to get alone with our secret and most heartfelt inclination, with our most fervent needs: very well, let us look for them in our labyrinths!*<sup>7</sup>

The notion of virtue, says Nietzsche is not about subscribing to some kind of imagined conscience tied to tradition and myth but rather a dynamic and ever-changing and adapting morality based on the European experience. We should therefore, as Nietzsche says, be forewarned of false prophets, not only of religion<sup>8</sup> but also of science and technology who present us with potentially useful devices that are eventually used to thwart and destroy human life as seen in the non-value of international terrorism.<sup>9</sup> For me, Nietzsche's condition of modernity is contained in a nihilistic irony, one that suggests that the ultimate values devalue themselves over time and space. And modernity's self-contained nihilism, or at least my simple understanding of Nietzsche's condition of modernity, represents such a value. A value that supercedes all other values to the extent that it becomes the single most important value, a kind of super value over all values. Let me explain that the overvaluation of the super value is exemplified by modernity in which modernity is in itself the self-referential supreme value of all, the conditions constitutive of this epistemology. The notion of modernity according to Nietzsche is seen in that "which determines its value: a great event, taken as a



whole, a considerable refinement of vision and standard, the unconscious after-effect of the sovereignty of aristocratic values and of belief in “origins”, the sign of a period which may be called the *moral* in the narrower sense: the first attempt at self-knowledge has been made”. (Nietzsche, 1988, 45, Aphorism 32) Of course, this is not my own method in the sense that I have borrowed this idea from reading Gianni Vattimo’s concept of *pensiero debole* (weak or postfoundationalist thought) in his remarkable *La fine della modernità* (1985).<sup>10</sup> The appropriateness and value of Nietzschean work is seen in his attachment to historicity and value rather than the emotive state and histrionics of western civilization’s dalliance with religion and religiosity. For example:

Berkowitz’s masterly account (the best I have seen) of *The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life* informs his subsequent discussions of *The Birth of Tragedy*, *The Genealogy of Morals*, and *The Antichrist*, where he argues that Nietzsche’s primary objective in his historical writings was not to understand history or to deconstruct it but to mine history creatively for its lessons about what is of highest value[...] Berkowitz’s emphasis on Nietzsche’s preoccupation with ethical questions is thoroughly appropriate, and his argument that Nietzschean perspectivism does not preclude Nietzschean knowledge is convincing (there may be no facts, only interpretations, but some interpretations are far more credible than others, and one can *know* this). (Detwiler, 1995)

If Nietzsche is mining of the history of histories for its lessons on moral life, and that the deontological consequences, ethos perhaps, arises into a format we could call the Nietzschean landscape, then we can go one step further. This further step would afford a (layered) perspective that is not only about the politics and polemics of a deconstructed history that is left open, vulnerable, barren, and desolate for modern inspection machines that ensure quality, consistency, and higher productivity. Nietzsche’s style, and method, is complex by far when compared to the work of Comte, Husserl, Heidegger, and even Sartre, yet its shiny face and apocryphal visions are themselves studies (with)in the political methods of phenomenological interrogation of a “thing” for the sake of the “thing” itself

(phänomenologischen Reduktion). The value of the work of this miner of history is in the process rather than the product, and the proverbial forest for the trees. Like Kant's transcendental and Euclidean space of geometrical perfection (as geometrical precision) Nietzsche's universe is perfection on another plane, cohesive and coherent because opposing axioms cling together in sober, flowing formulations that sound like ironic pontification:

Challenging all reifications, Nietzsche provided a clearing in which every so-called entity, every thing, is but "the sum of its effects" – effects which are made to constitute entities such as male and female, master and slave, subject and object. [...] To be sure, the presumptuousness of Nietzsche's hyperboles is hard to take. As his words turn into the flow of music, dance, and visual images, the culmination he keeps promising fails to be provided. Hearing Nietzsche, you await his message. He seems to be of several minds. You want to know what he really stands for, what his point is, what he really means you to do. Yet we are led on by the flow and overflow of his pronouncements, by his ensnaring confidence game. We remain in a state of suspense even as we recognize that his devices for holding us are political tricks: enigmatic declarations and contradictory voices, equivocations and parables, exaggerations and stories, but above all, captivating sentences (like and unlike those we serve in prison) which end with question marks and thus intimate the possibility of stays of execution, appeals, and reversals of judgment. (Kariel, 1989, 172-173)

Kariel's jarring critique is less a criticism of Nietzsche and more of an attack against modernity's traits, "enigmatic declarations and contradictory voices, equivocations and parables, exaggerations and stories, but above all, captivating sentences", characteristics that are found in today's modernity of mass consumption, instant gratification, quick releases, spare parts, new version upgrades, and protective software. Kariel is being fastidious and discordant in suggesting that his work is not useful in an instrumentalist society, and it is just too bad that Kariel perceives Nietzsche in such messianic terms, indeed, with a message for mankind. It is precisely because of Nietzsche's multiple mindsets and tricky political devices that Nietzschean messages become prophetic and emancipating even in the callous, neoliberal

megastates of today. Strong on the other hand is clearer in his conceptualization of the aristocratic and highly elitist Nietzschean *weltanschauung*:

Nietzsche insists that all explanations of the world are grounded in a particular form of human life; he draws our attention, by means of a genealogical description, to the constitutive human elements of those explanations (pp.27-40) [...] According to Strong, Nietzsche prepares the way for a new philosophical class of rulers, who will address themselves to a new political task: how shall mankind as a whole, not man as fragmented into particular peoples or races, be governed, i.e., towards what ends shall man as man be directed? Men are no longer to be directed toward a struggle for power within the horizons of a particular regime: rather the political struggle Nietzsche envisions is a struggle “to *define* the world” (pp.289-290). While insisting upon the radical divergence of the old and the new political tasks, however, Strong maintains that Nietzsche seeks to recapture the unity of philosophy and politics to be found in the ancient Greek polis. (Jensen, 1976, 519-520)

As Jensen suggests, men are no longer self-directed to power but the modern struggle to define and contain the world in which we live by discovering truth and value, and by using these breakthroughs towards formulating grand theories in the [en]light[enment] of Kant’s universe. Strong’s description, as opposed to Kariel’s play-acting, and mild histrionics, reveals the elitist and autocratic vision of Nietzsche’s own positivist perspective, a teleological provisioning of power-containment within power struggles while harking back to the classical Hellenes. Similarly, and equally lucidity, Leslie Paul Thiele argues for the worth of Nietzsche’s “new vistas in the realm of society and politics” in spite of his ruthless elitism (Thiele, 1994, 468), and his inability, as Thiele suggests, to escape the moral conundrum of his metaphysics, a critique of modernity’s philosophy that includes a sub-critique of Kateb’s apparent refusal as we see in Thiele’s proposition below:

George Kateb has employed Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s thought in a courageous attempt to fashion a political sensibility for our times. He endeavors to spell out certain political ramifications of a technological world in which God is dead and metaphysics is impotent. His work is of particular interest here for two reasons. First, it ably demonstrates the availability of Heidegger’s and Nietzsche’s

philosophy for democratic purposes in the postmodern world. Second, in developing this political sensibility, Kateb ignores or denies those implications of (Heidegger's confrontation with) Nietzsche's subjectivism that I have proposed as crucial. As such, Kateb's effort must be shown to undercut itself if my effort is to gain a foothold [...] Finally, Kateb's characterization of Heidegger's project as an advocacy of the "abandonment of social being" is certainly difficult to square with Heidegger's basic definition (and celebration) of human being as a being-in-the-world-with-others [...] Nietzsche's balance is precarious. He is able to maintain it only owing to the support he finds in the world he pushes away. To tout Nietzsche as the destroyer of metaphysics is to miss half of the story, perhaps the more important half. Alternatively, the attempt to succeed where Nietzsche fails in the destruction of metaphysics courts the most debilitating effects of postmodernism. In sum, to misinterpret the nature of Nietzsche's balance is to misdirect our efforts to foster new social and political sensibilities, (Thiele, 1994, 477-486).<sup>11</sup>

The popularity of Nietzsche in modernity today varies inversely proportionate to the maddening depths of his insights into modernity. As we have seen, Nietzsche's foundational elitism was an immediate consequence of his personal struggle with the coercive deontological prescriptions of Christian morality and humanism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Nietzsche's critique of modernity is in effect his criticism of Western and European modernity. Nietzsche's criticism of modernity impartially reveals flashes of the value of values in modernity, the "thing-in-itself – that is where their cause must lie and nowhere else [...] With all the value that may adhere to the truth, the genuine, the selfless, it could be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for all life might have to be ascribed to appearance, to the will to deception, to selfishness and to appetite" (Aphorism 3. *Beyond Good Evil*, 1988, 16). Nietzsche's diatribe against modernity incorporates an agonistic politics sometimes associated with the work of William E. Connolly and Bonnie Honig. Since the word "agonistic" is usually defined as the "state" or "experience" of being aggressive interaction within society tantamount to low grade political violence between and among individuals, and between and among communities in late modernity; an agonistic politics refers to a politics of struggle in a sustained manner – that ranges from being argumentative (low grade agonistic politics) or unrestrained (high grade agonistic politics) – in order to resist

the devolution of politics to a secondary place, or allow the displacement of common sense with bureaucracy, and a sullen, intellectual life with an optimistic but lugubrious mournfulness. Therefore, an agonistic politics must at least refer to participatory politics in the public spheres of modernity. Therefore the modern citizen caught in the wide swathe of modernity's Democlean swords and ontological switch-blades (and wishing to encounter modernity) without being completely vanquished.

This paper has shown that existing and potential explanations of modernity implicitly recognize two primary antecedents: positivism and phenomenology and their tentacular rootedness in modernity. The paper examined how these antecedents of modernity revealed the philosophical picture of European-led modernity that is anchored in the optimistic, modernist platform of progression, development, and advancement. The paper illustrated why positivism and phenomenology are the primary theoretical antecedents of modernity, and how these antecedents might be recognized as private and public intimations of modern values that foregrounds early Enlightenment intellectualism through a series of negotiations that involved the work of Kant, Saint-Simone, Comte, Husserl, and Nietzsche, because, like Nietzsche, we keep having and feeling the same experience, and keep having to redeem ourselves by resisting that familiar experience called modernity.

\* National University of Singapore. This paper was originally titled "A Critique of Modernity: On Positivism and Phenomenology" and was prepared for the American Political Science Association meeting in Boston, MA, August 29 to September 1, 2002.

### **Bibliography**

Berkowitz, Peter. 1995. *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Calkins, Mary Whiton. 1897. "Kant's Conception of the Leibniz Space and Time Doctrine". *The Philosophical Review* 6(4): 356-369.

Coles, Romand. 1996. "Liberty, Equality, Receptive Generosity: Neo-Nietzschean Reflections on the Ethics and Politics of Coalition". *American Political Science Review*, 90 (2): 375-388.

Connolly, William E. 1995. *The Ethos of Pluralization*. Minneapolis London: University of Minnesota Press.

Conway, Daniel W. 1997. *Nietzsche and the Political*. London and New York: Routledge.

Detwiler Bruce. 1995. Review of Nietzsche: The Ethics of An Immoralist by Peter Berkowitz. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995. *American Political Science Review* 90(3): 620-621.

Gillespie, Michael Allen. 2000. "Martin Heidegger's Aristotelian National Socialism". *Political Theory* 28(2): 140-166.

Habermas, Jurgen. 1992. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures*. Translated by Frederick G. Lawrence. Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Husserl, Edmund. 1927. Definition of "Phenomenology" in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.

Jensen, Pamela K. 1976. Review of *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* by Tracy B. Strong. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975. *Political Theory* 4(4): 519-522.

Kariel, Henry S. 1989. *The Desperate Politics of Postmodernism*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

Kockelmans, Joseph J. 1994. *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*. West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press.

Land, J. P. N. 1877. "Kant's Space and Modern Mathematics" *Mind* 2(5): 38-46.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1988. *Beyond Good and Evil*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1974. *The Gay Science*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage Books.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1889. 1968. *Twilight of the Idols/ The Anti-Christ*. Translated by R.J. Hollingdale. London: Penguin Books.

Parsons, Charles. 1964. "Infinity and Kant's Conception of the 'Possibility of Experience'". *The Philosophical Review* 73 (2): 182-197.

Pelczynski, Z.A. 1977. Review of *Freedom and Independence: A Study of the Political Ideas of Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind* by Judith N. Shklar. New York and London: Cambridge University Press, 1976. *Political Theory*, 5(1): 127-130.

Riley, Patrick. 1974. Review of "Kant's Political Thought" by Hans Saner translated by E.B. Ashton. Chicago: Chicago University Press 1973. *Political Theory* 2(4): 453-457.

Shklar, Judith N. 1973. "Hegel's Phenomenology: The Moral Failures of Asocial Man". *Political Theory* 1(3): 259-286.

Solomon, Robert C. 1987. *From Hegel to Existentialism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thiele, Leslie Paul. 1994. "Twilight of Modernity: Nietzsche, Heidegger and Politics". *Political Theory* 22(3): 468-490.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nietzsche's work may be divided into aphorisms, or, short "pithy" statements, of "great weight and value", and longer sections ranging from a single sentence to many paragraphs over several pages. In this paper, sections 1 to 62 are considered aphorisms, 63 to 185 are maxims, 186 onwards are statements. I share Berkowitz's belief that Nietzsche's basic concern is ethical and therefore political rather than the typical view of the Nietzschean foci on language and interpretation. See Peter Berkowitz, 1995. *Nietzsche: The Ethics of an Immoralist*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

<sup>2</sup> I wish to thank Ethan A. Putterman for this reminder.

<sup>3</sup> Or as Nietzsche reminds us in Aphorism 108, "There are no moral phenomena at all, only moral interpretation of phenomena". See Aphorism 108, *Beyond Good and Evil* 1988, 78.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 382

<sup>5</sup> See Joseph J. Kockelmans, 1994. *Edmund Husserl's Phenomenology*, West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University Press, p.29.

<sup>6</sup> A simple example from political science is the fact that there was no quantitative model in formal political theory, or indeed empirical political psychology that could effectively predict the outcome of the 2000 Presidential elections. See Robert S. Erikson, Joseph Bafumi, and Bret Wilson, 2001. "Was the 2000 Presidential Election Predictable?". *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 34(4): 815-819.

<sup>7</sup> See Aphorism 214, *Beyond Good and Evil*; see also Aphorism 62 pg 69-71 regarding the corruption of the European Race.

<sup>8</sup> See Aphorism 228, *Beyond Good and Evil*. Nietzsche treats the concept of the English utilitarian tradition and parallels it with Puritan morality that leads to what he calls English morality.

<sup>9</sup> See for example, Aphorism 228, *Beyond Good and Evil*, 1988:138 where Nietzsche says, "May I be forgiven the discovery that all moral philosophy hitherto has been boring and a soporific – and that "virtue" has in my eyes been harmed by nothing more than it has been by this boringness of its advocates; in saying which, however, I should not want to overlook their general utility. It is important that that as few people as possible should think about morality – consequently it is very important that morality should not one day become interesting! But do not worry! It is still now as it has always been: I see no one in Europe who has (or propagates) any idea that thinking about morality could be dangerous, insidious, seductive – that fatality could be involved!"

<sup>10</sup> Gianni Vattimo, 1988. *The End of Modernity*. Johns Hopkins University Press and Polity Press.

<sup>11</sup> See also, Pamela K. Jensen, 1976. review of Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration by Tracy B. Strong. Berkeley: University of California Press 1975 in *Political Theory* 4(4):522.