

Third Essay: Does History Have a Meaning?

We often speak of the meaning of particular human events, of the meaning of life, of history, of various institutions, of democracy, without either defining or attempting to define the concept of meaning—evidently because, on the one hand, we sense we need such a concept but, on the other hand, it seems somehow self-evident. We need such a concept because all those matters are problematic and need to be explained and we are not indifferent to the divergence of possible explanations. The concept of meaning shares its (apparent) obviousness with all basic concepts which are so common that their nature resists the ordinary way of defining as the rules of definition in traditional logic would have it. Such are the concepts of being, of happening, of appearing. Meaning clearly belongs among such terms and it is undoubtedly its difficulty and at the same time its inescapability which leads us frequently to resort to a time-honored way of sparing ourselves closer analysis, which is to assume the self-evidence of such inescapable conceptual tools.

Our attempt at an analysis of meaning will set out from the relation between the concepts of meaning (sense) and significance (reference). Among logicians, it was Frege¹ for whom significance indicates an objective relation, meaning the conception of the object: a quadrangle and a parallelogram are two meanings with the same significance, like evening star and morning star. That shows that even logic could well use a distinction between the two terms, with meaning being linked more closely with the way we conceive of something and significance having

more objective connotations. On the other hand, it seems that—except in logic—we tend to restrict significance to the region of *logos* while meaning suggests something more real, pertaining for instance to feelings and actions; we speak of whether suffering has a meaning—rather than a significance, or of the meaning of a particular action, for instance the silence of German statesmen concerning their war aims during the first world war (distinguishing this sharply from the significance of this silence for the prolongation of the war and so on). Meaning is what enables us to understand that these goals had to be concealed—for instance a desire to change the entire existing world order: a significance for . . . follows from meaning so understood as its consequence. This is what justifies Heidegger's definition of meaning as that which makes something intelligible.² According to that, meaning would be something that offers a reason for another phenomenon, though not simply in the sense of a formal logical deduction, but in the sense of material intelligibility as well. This material intelligibility includes the motivation of an act but also that deeper background of living and acting we have in mind when we speak, for instance, of the meaning of suffering, the meaning of anxiety, the meaning of corporeity. In all these instances meaning is not something obvious but rather something we need to reach through an explanation which draws back whatever curtain at first keeps us from seeing it, what conceals, distorts, obscures it.

The motivation of an act poses the question of the relation between meaning and purposefulness. Fundamentally, the motive of an act is the purpose pursued by an agent and, further, the inclination from which that purpose follows. Hatred and the desire to eliminate the hated person are the motivation and purpose that dictate murder as a means towards that elimination as the purpose. Thus it is clear that every purposive action is meaningful, yet not every meaning is purposive or based on a purpose. A purpose is a causal connection which becomes meaningful by being taken up into the meaningful context of human motives and acts. Thus we cannot identify

meaning with purposefulness or attempt to explain the former by the latter. On the other hand, an action can be purposive and yet lose its (original) meaning: so it seems, for instance, that modern science with its unrelieved objectivism has lost its inner meaning and legitimates itself only by external purposes derived from its possible applications. Conversely, human acts can be purposeless or counterproductive and yet be meaningful: the pathological comportment of hysterics and neurotics generally has a meaning which can be understood, yet it is not purposeful. Mistakes we make in acting are understandable, yet they are not purposeful, though they presuppose a purpose and an (erroneous) choice of (inappropriate) ends.—To seek to derive meaning from purpose and purposefulness means to subordinate meaning to the category of causality since purpose can be understood, with Kant, as a mental causality. If, however, meaning is not reducible to purpose, we are then far more justified in believing that purpose is causality raised up to the region of the meaningful while the question whether that is the only mode of effectiveness of meaning remains open.

That brings up the question of the relation between meaning and value once more. Values such as truth, goodness, beauty are not of themselves purposes and goals though their realization can certainly become the goal and purpose of human action. Basically, though, values mean nothing other than that being is meaningful, and they indicate what "gives" it meaning: truth means that being is intelligible and accessible to understanding and explanation; beauty means that the emergence of being in the human world manifests the mystery of being as something perennially enchanting; goodness that the world may include an unselfconscious or self-forgotten favor and grace. So it is with the entire infinite variety of values that constantly address us, attract and repel us, and which "cause" it that for us, for the most part, being is not some indifferent occurrence but rather "speaks" to us, says something to us, is the object of positive or negative interest. Thus value is nothing but the meaningfulness of what-is formulated as if we were speaking of something autonomous, as if we had to do with

some "quality," as we used to call it, while in reality the point is that nothing can appear to us except in a meaningful, intelligible coherence, in the framework of our openness for the world, which means fundamentally that we are not in the world as indifferent observers, as witnesses, but that being in the world is the point of our being in its innermost sense.

In our context, the concept of value is important in virtue of a specific aspect—that which presents itself as something autonomous, as a positive existent that is what it is under all circumstances. Plato's Ideas of beauty and of the good "make" whatever there is beautiful and good to the extent that it participates in them. In that sense what-is may be problematic, Ideas cannot be. The meaningfulness of what-is is guaranteed even though individual existents can become worthless.

The meaningfulness of what-is remains intact as long as values themselves remain thus unproblematic—whether they are conceived, as in Plato, as that which bestows meaning on what-there-is, or as flowing from the perfection of God the Creator, as in Christian theology influenced by Neoplatonism. As long as value is understood as an eternal spring of meaningfulness, Idea, or God as that which bestows meaning on things, human acts, and events, it remains possible to interpret the experience of the loss of meaning as a flaw not in that which bestows meaning but of that on which it is bestowed. That is an advantage which represents a barrier against the nihilism of meaning. The weakness here lies in the need to have recourse to metaphysical concepts while meaning and its loss are phenomena of concrete experience. To have recourse to metaphysics means to treat meaning as something ready-made and to give up for good the question of its origin (not in a temporal-empirical but in a structural-philosophical sense).

It is different if we take the experience of the loss of meaning, which undeniably does occur in our life, in all seriousness. Then that experience indicates not only our inadequacy, our inability to grasp meaning, to understand it, but rather the radical possibility that all meaning may be lost, that we might confront the meaning's point zero. Things have no meaning for

themselves, rather, their meaning requires that someone "have a sense" for them: thus meaning is not originally lodged in what is but in that openness, in that understanding for them; an understanding, though, which is a process, a movement which is no different from the movement at the core of our life. Certainly, things are beautiful and true in themselves, but not for themselves: it is only we who have the possibility of bringing them into a relation to their own meaning because we are in such a way that our own life can become meaningful for our own selves while things are not endowed with this relation to themselves, "making no sense" in their case.

If so, is it not then we ourselves who bestow meaning on things? Is not our relation to them, mediated by our own relation to ourselves, a matter of "bestowing meaning on the meaningless"? Could it not mean then that if there is an experience of absence of meaning, it depends entirely on us and on the openness we are? And if we are closed up, so that things "mean nothing to us," is it not then that the bestowal of meaning falls silent and the world manifests a nothingness of meaning? And if it can be shown that this experience is at the same time the fundamental opening up for the wholeness of our lives, for the freedom of our own existence, does that not show even more forcefully that the origin of all meaning, its ground zero, is in us and in our power?

Still, the idea that we create meaning so that the meaninglessness or meaningfulness of what-is is in our power, runs counter to the phenomenally based idea of an openness for what-is and its meaning. In particular, the bestowal of meaning on things is not a function of our will and whim. It is not up to us, is not within our power to keep things from appearing meaningless under some circumstances and, hand in hand with that, to keep meaning from speaking to us from things if we are open to it. We are, though, no less open for the meaningful than for the meaningless, and it is the same beings which manifest themselves now as meaningful, now as meaningless, signifying nothing. What does that mean if not the *problematic nature* of all meaningfulness? What, though, is the significance of this

problematic nature if not that our very openness for things and for others warns us that we should not yield to the inclination to absolutize particular ways of understanding meaning and the meaningfulness appropriate to them?

Here a few comments about the relation between the concepts of meaning and of being might be in order. There is an extensive analogy as well as a profound difference between the two. Like meaning, so being, too, has the trait of pertaining on the one hand to those existents which by their very nature are possible only in relation to it and to those existents which, again by their very nature, are independent of such a relation. Just as it is those beings which are primordially related to their own being who bring the things that merely are into a relation with their being, by understanding them as something and subsequently by formulating propositions about them, so too it is the beings open for being who relate them to their integral meaning by understanding them in their significance, not only in an aesthetic contemplation but also in their practical activity. It has, however, been phenomenologically demonstrated that we achieve an explicit relation to being only by having things lose their significance for us, when they "lose their meaning." It would seem that the meaningfulness of things and our explicit approach to being, its uncovering, preclude each other. Being would stand out only where meaning ends and so would be by its very nature something meaningless.

W. Weischedel has shown that meaningfulness is never possible as something individual, characterizing this or that individual entity independently of any broader context.³ Every individual meaning refers to a global meaning, every relative meaning to an absolute meaning. Because the meaning of things is inseparable from our openness for things and for their significance, we can say that wherever this openness is absent the world cannot speak to us and, as a result, human life as dwelling in the world is not possible. It follows further that human life is not possible without either a naive or a critically acquired confidence in an absolute meaning, a global meaning of the totality of what-is, of life and of events. Where human

life is confronted with absolute meaninglessness it can only surrender and give itself up. V. Mrštík therefore speaks of "that dreadful immobility of suicides."⁴ The antinomy of meaning and meaninglessness, of meaning and being, seems so to suggest that life is only possible thanks to the perennial illusion of total meaning which certain experiences show precisely to be an illusion. Truth would thus prove fundamentally hostile to life, in an irreconcilable opposition and conflict with it.

We know that the conflict of truth and life is one of Nietzsche's fundamental theses, though the philosophical justification he offers for it is different. To be sure, for Nietzsche truth means precisely that absolute meaning which contradicts the nature of what is, which is the will to power, self-transcendence as the constant activity of life. In spite of this conceptual difference we can say that Nietzsche sensed the contradiction between the being of what-is and absoluteness of meaning, even though he does present this absolute meaning as something hostile to life, and so from our viewpoint incorrectly. This contradiction is for him a signal and a symptom of nihilism, the devaluation of the highest values, a decay of what hitherto had given life meaning. For him then the apparent solution is to embrace nihilism, proclaiming the world nonsensical in the name of a creative life which can so constitute a segment of what there is that it acquires a *relative* meaning.⁵

However, if our earlier analyses of the antinomy of being and meaning, meaning and meaninglessness are accurate, then it is impossible and illusory to resolve the problem of nihilism by a recourse to a relative and particular meaning. In its practical unfolding, life cannot rest on a relative meaning which itself rests on meaninglessness, since no relative meaning can ever render the meaningless meaningful but, rather, is always itself dragged into meaninglessness by it. An authentic life in utter nihilism, with the knowledge of the meaninglessness of the whole, is impossible, becoming possible only at the cost of illusions.

The theses of a nihilism so conceived, however, are no less dogmatic than the theses of a naive unbroken faith in meaning!

It is not just that scepticism consistently carried out must also include a scepticism about scepticism and so find itself in a lack of justification, at least pending definitive proof. We need also ask just what the phenomenon of a loss of meaning itself means. In Heidegger's analysis of our fundamental disposition, which is anxiety,⁶ we learn that it presents the possibility and also—*albeit but for a moment*—the reality of a confrontation with nothingness. Why only for a moment? Because anxiety means nothing other than the moment of crisis from which we must either return to the world and that means to meaning and significance, or depart into "that dreadful immobility" of absolute, deep boredom, the *taedium vitae* from which there is no return. To return, however, does not mean to come back to things just as they were. They will never again be unproblematic, unbroken, as once they appeared. It is similar to and yet in a sense different from Plato's liberated cave dweller. He, too, must return, though it is not quite clear why. Here, by contrast, the return itself is something comprehensible because it means life itself. However, the stepping out of imprisonment, out of everyday preoccupation, does not here represent a discovery of the positive *par excellence*, of beings which are eternal and so free of all relativity, but rather the discovery of being beyond all existents and their significance, the being that is nothing existent but rather appears, from the standpoint of what is, as mere nothing, mere wonder—the wonder that there is being at all, that which makes possible that step back from all that is which makes human life what it is, a constant distancing from entities and possibilities in this space and in virtue of it a relation to them.

Passing through the experience of the loss of meaning means that the meaning to which we might perhaps return will no longer be for us simply a fact given directly in its integrity; rather, it will be a meaning we have thought through, seeking reasons and accepting responsibility for it. As a result, meaning will never be simply given or won once and for all. It means that there emerges a new relation, a new mode of relating to what is meaningful; that meaning can arise only in an activity

which stems from a searching lack of meaning, as the vanishing point of being problematic, as an indirect epiphany. If we are not mistaken, then this discovering of meaning in the seeking which flows from its absence, as a new project of life, is the meaning of Socrates's existence. The constant shaking of the naive sense of meaningfulness is itself a new mode of meaning, a discovery of its continuity with the mysteriousness of being and what-is as a whole.

It is not only individual life which, if it passes through the experience of loss of meaning and if it derives from it the possibility and need for a wholly different self-relation to all that is, comes to a point of global "conversion." Perhaps the inmost nature of that rupture—which we sought to define as that which separates the prehistoric epoch from history proper—lies in that shaking of the naive certainty of meaning which governs the life of humankind up to that specific transformation which represents a nearly simultaneous—and in a more profound sense really unitary—origin of politics and philosophy.

Prehistoric humanity is not particularly demanding in deciding what is meaningful—on the contrary, it is quite modest in its valuation of humans and of human life, yet the world seems to it in some sense orderly, justified. Experiences of mortality, of natural and social catastrophes, do not shake it. For life to be meaningful, it is enough to know that the gods have reserved the best for themselves: eternity in the sense of immortality. The worth of the universe is in no way less because it includes death, pain, and suffering, just as it is not disturbed by the perishing of plants and animals or by everything being subject to the rhythm of generation and perishing. That does not preclude, under extreme circumstances, the feeling of panic in the face of death when humans become aware, in the face of a dead friend, that the same fate awaits them, yet the quest for some other meaning, such as life eternal, is a matter for some demigod, not properly a human one. Humans—actual humans—return from such adventures to their human context, to their mate and child, to their grapevines and their hearth, to the small rhythms of their lives wedged amid the great storms

in which wholly different beings and powers rule and decide. The doings of humans have to do with making life secure for themselves and for those close to them. That is what their bondage to the perennial maintenance of life suggests to them—the humility which teaches them to reconcile themselves with the lot of servitude to life and the toil of never-ending labor. At that price humans can live at peace with the world and not see their life as meaningless, only as marginal with respect to what decides about it, as naturally meaningful as the lives of the flowers of the field and the beasts of the forests. Conversely, if it were not animated by humans, the world would be impoverished and joyless for truly cosmic beings. That is how the gods themselves speak, horrified by the devastation to which they subjected the world in the flood.

History differs from prehistoric humanity by the *shaking of accepted meaning*. We would be asking erroneously if we were to ask what caused this shock; it is as vain as asking what causes humans to leave their sheltered childhood for a self-responsible adulthood. As we can see from testimonies such as the panic of Gilgamesh at the death of his comrade, humans of the prehistoric epoch retreat to the accepted peace with the universe by restricting their wants, just as an adolescent can retreat into the safety of infantilism. The possibility of a shaking presses in on them but is rejected. They prefer a modest integration into the whole of what is, and their social existence in community is appropriate to it, not deviating from the whole and the forces that govern it. Even that which, or better, those who rule over the human realm are of a divine nature while humans proper are destined to their service while from them and through them they then receive all that they need, physically or meaningfully, for their existence. There is no specifically human region of beings that would be reserved for humans and their quest for responsibility for themselves, least of all is the human empire that. Whenever humans attempt to create such a region, the humility of accepted meaning that characterized humanity up to that point cannot persist. In accepting responsibility for themselves and others humans implicitly pose the

question of meaning in a new and different way. They are no longer content with the bondage of life to itself, with subsistence as life's content and service in the sweat of their brow as the lot of beings fated to episodicity and subordination. Thus the result of the primordial shaking of accepted meaning is not a fall into meaninglessness but, on the contrary, the discovery of the possibility of achieving a freer, more demanding meaningfulness.—This is then linked to that explicit awe before being as a whole, the awe-full realization that the totality of being *is*, which, according to ancient philosophers, is really the inmost pathos and origin of philosophy. Humans who do not remain in the humility of passively accepted meaning cannot be content with their fated lot and fundamentally linked with that is also that new possibility of relating to being and meaning which consists not in a predetermined, preaccepted answer but in questioning, and that precisely is philosophy. Questioning, however, presupposes the experience of mystery, of problematic being and this experience, which prehistoric humankind *avoids*, from which it takes refuge in the most profound, truth-laden myths, unfolds in the form of philosophy. Just as in acting politically humans expose themselves to the problematic nature of action whose consequences are unpredictable and whose initiative soon passes into other hands, so in philosophy humans expose themselves to the problematic being and meaning of what there is.

Thus in the historical epoch humankind does not avoid what is problematic but actually invokes it, promising itself from this an access to a more profound meaning than that which was proper to prehistorical humanity. In the community, the *polis*, in life dedicated to the *polis*, in political life, humans make room for an autonomous, purely human meaningfulness, one of a mutual respect in activity significant for all its participants and which is not restricted to the preservation of physical life but which, rather, is a source of a life that transcends itself in the memory of deed guaranteed precisely by the *polis*. It is in many ways a more risky, dangerous life than the vegetative humility on which prehistoric humanhood depends. Similarly,

that explicit questioning which is philosophy is by far more risky than the submerging conjecture which is myth. It involves greater risk because just as action is an initiative that yields itself the moment it becomes explicit—it puts itself in the hands of an unending contest of insights which lead the original intentions of those who think into the unsuspected and the unforeseen. It is more full of risk because it draws all of life, both individual and social, into the region of the transformation of meaning, a region where it must wholly transform itself in its structure because it is transformed in its meaning. That precisely, and naught else, is what history means.

Philosophy did not shake the modest meaning of the small, vital rhythm, dictated by the fascination with corporeal life and its bondage to itself, in order to impoverish humans but rather with the will to enrich them. Humans were to break free of the accepted meaning in order to rise to what had so far given meaning to the universe and to themselves as well as to other dependencies, to plants and animals, and what hitherto determined the meaning of things because it was unperishable and so divine. Philosophy offered a new vision of the imperishable—not merely the permanence, immortality, perenniality proper to the gods, but eternity. Eternity presented itself to philosophy first in the form of the imperishable wherein lies the genesis and perishing of all that is, its appearing, its waxing and waning, its fall into darkness—in the form of *phusis*.⁷ To its night belongs the dawning of the *cosmos*, of the order of things as that which does not diminish but rather accentuates the mystery of being and beings. However, just as the life of the free *polis* was granted but a short time to unfold in its free daring, fearlessly aiming for the unknown, so also philosophy, aware of its bond with the problem of the *polis* and sensing in the germ already its perils and perishing, was led by a striving for a definitive and new bestowal of meaning to see in that darkness only a lack of light, the night as a waning of the day. It was led to become, in the continuous clarity of definitive certainty that runs through all theory, a perception of being in which its meaning is exhausted in a new definitive statement.

From the moment that the perishing of the *polis* had already been decided, philosophy transformed itself into what was to be its image for millenia, transforming itself into metaphysics in Plato and Democritus, into metaphysics in two modes, from above and from below, a metaphysics of the *logos* and the Idea on the one hand, a metaphysics of things in their sheer thinghood on the other, both pretending to a definitive clarity and a definitive explanation of things, both grounded in that model of clarity represented by the discovery of mathematics, that germ of the future transformation of philosophy into a science.

There is a bond between that mathematical theme, the theme of a truth seen once and for all time, precisely and by anyone under any circumstances, and the theme of Plato's metaphysical thought which is termed *chorismos* and means a separation, an abyss between the true world, accessible to the precise and rigorous insight of reason, and the approximate, apparent, impressionistic world defying a rigorous grasp which our ordinary experience treats as the only reality—our surroundings, the world around us. This view, at first strange, even bizarre, proclaiming as true reality something of which sound common sense and the overwhelming majority of humans know nothing, is actually historically one of the most influential metaphysical themes without which we would today not have not only doubtful disciplines like theology but primarily all the modern sciences, especially mathematical natural science and all the far-reaching applications thereof. We might even say that Plato exceeds Democritus and surpasses him precisely in this conception. All appearance to the contrary, modern science follows Plato more than it does Democritus.

In historical terms, however, the metaphysical duality of Plato and Democritus is most important: it means that from the beginning metaphysics already assumes two forms rather than one, and that these two will soon be joined by a third, fundamentally different form, that of Aristotle. Thus philosophy in its metaphysical form does shed that mystery which was the origin of the shock which gave rise to it—but the mystery catches up to it in the form of the mystery of the plurality of

metaphysical concepts, fundamentally different perceptions of the nature of what there is as such.

Plato's teaching demonstrates the close relation between metaphysical philosophy and politics by setting as its foremost task the construction of a state wherein philosophers, humans determined to live in truth, will be able to live without becoming entangled in a conflict equally deadly for them and for it. It is Aristotle who ultimately presents the first conceptual foundation of politics on the basis of the *polis*; but it will remain Plato's merit that even where this basis will be set aside in the life of the West—as in fact happened in the Hellenistic era and in the transition of the Roman *civitas* into a principality⁸—the state will still remain something separated from the rest of the world by a sharp divide, for the state will belong to the context of the "true" world and will derive the justification of its institutions and actions therefrom.

The most persistent experience of this period is the awareness that philosophy cannot provide human life with a higher meaning which would be entirely positive, clearly intelligible, and free of the mystery engendered by the shaking of the unquestioned primordial meaning. It is the awareness that metaphysics is misleading, that in place of the certainty it promises and humans hope for it leads to doubt. This is the period when humans, deprived of the practical meaning of life in the *polis*, turn inward, seeking there what they did not find in the *polis*—and that means also in the cosmos, which is both a part and an image of the *polis*. Between humans and the cosmos a barrier of mistrust arises, which also affects philosophy, the organ of meaningfulness. The significance of the Christian experience in history is now this: what the philosophical claim of a firm *epistēmē*, denied by scepticism, cannot warrant, what humans cannot achieve with their most strenuous efforts, is easy for God. Faith, God's word addressed to humans and the response to this word, displaces the relation to the *cosmos* as of secondary importance and ultimately as unimportant. Christian theology seemed not at all bothered that the explication of God's address to humans took place in the sphere of the tran-

scendental *chorismos* posited long ago for a wholly different purpose by Plato's metaphysics. Divine transcendence, whose conceptual foundations undoubtedly do not lie in Israel's treasury of ideas, is an inheritance of the "true world" formulated once by Plato and transformed theologically by Aristotle. The Christian faith is not a meaning sought by humans and autonomously found by them, but is rather dictated from that world. That is why it fundamentally contains also something that we do not encounter in Greek life in this form, the realization of the misery of humans incapable of generating meaning themselves and of bestowing it on themselves—an element which the Christian posture shares with ancient scepticism though in a more radical form and without that resignation which characterizes scepticism. Christians coming face to face with the human poverty of meaning, absolute and global, do not give up but assert their faith the more energetically, the more graphically that poverty is presented.

Thus the question of meaning is resolved positively by dismissing philosophy and by countering scepticism with the word from an otherwise inaccessible "true" world. On this basis there grows a new community and a new way of coming to cognitive terms with the totality of what-there-is. It is a new community, which, to be sure, is no longer simply the work of humans but in which humans do participate freely. It is not only a community of humans with each other, a mutual recognition in which they guarantee each other a spiritual perpetuation in the memory of glory. It is, rather, a community of humans with God who is their eternal memory and the perception of their essential spiritual being. It is a community in which, for all its hierarchy, all humans are equal before the face of the ultimate "true" reality; in which they are thus true fellow participants in a meaningfulness which they did not create but which they are called to bring about.

This conception of a new community naturally offers a whole range of potential historical embodiments. In its oldest form it represents a resolution of the moral dilemma of the Roman Empire whose existence, life within it, and duties

assumed towards it required a higher, absolute, justification. The Constantinian model, wherein secular and spiritual communities coincided so that the Ciceronian idea that the ideal state, the "state of true being," and the Roman *res publica* are one and the same,⁹ achieves a monumental realization on a new dogmatic foundation and on the level of Roman voluntarism, is just one possible embodiment, though one whose effects, albeit in a secularized form, are still being felt today. — Not even Islam is wholly devoid of kinship with the idea of the sacred community of true being, at least in the minds of some of its philosophical representatives who sought to link the idea of prophecy, with its relation to the empire of Arabic law, to Plato's teachings concerning the philosopher-statesman (Alfarabi, Avicenna.)¹⁰ Most important and most fruitful, though, is the burgeoning of this theme in the context of the mediaeval West where it constitutes a problem of its own, focusing the thought of politically and historically engaged thinkers as well as of clerics. Here the actual framework of meaningful life is no longer simply given, as the world-state was for a Roman in the time of the late Empire or the empire of Islamic law for Islam: over the centuries, the relation of the earthly city and the true city is resolved in different ways on the basis of the same fundamental belief—though with different conceptions of the relation of this faith to other natural aspects and potencies of being human.

Here, then, we need to grasp the new place and significance which metaphysics assumes in the complex of Christian faith and doctrine. It may be true that it ceased to be the locus where the meaning of the whole of what there is is to be sought and where we can assume we shall autonomously find it. The significance of metaphysical thought and metaphysical inquiry, however, becomes that, within the framework provided by faith and *guaranteed* thereby, it is possible to some extent to come to understand what faith offers. Rational cognition thus reaches transcendent goals without fear of going astray, while on the other hand we can devote ourselves to all speculative daring without being led to the regions of

scepticism where meaninglessness lurks. Reason as the natural organ for the understanding of truth loses its place of pride in life, but we might claim that this loss is at the same time a gain: for it gains firm foundation, certainty, and with it daring.

The mediaeval universe is at first spatially finite, still under the influence of ancient conceptions, though it tends to spatial infinity; it is, however, definitely finite in time and its time is derived from the history of salvation which belongs fundamentally to its conception of the meaning of life and history—enclosed by the creation, the fall, salvation, and judgment.

European humanity has become so accustomed to this Christian conception of the meaning of history and of the universe that it cannot let go of some of its substantive traits even where fundamental Christian concepts such as God the creator, savior, and judge have ceased to be significant for it, and that it continues to seek meaning in a secularized Christian conception in which humans or humanity step into God's place. Karl Löwith, who forcefully called to our attention that, in the Christian era, the ancient cosmos was replaced as the source of meaning by the reconciliation between God and man, sees this clinging dependence of all meaning on history, even in the modern age, as one of the sources of the modern despair over meaning:¹¹ for if history is the locus of meaning, then to rely on it is like trying to hold on to the waves in a shipwreck.

According to the same author, another Christian source of nihilism is the relation to nature as a reservoir of objects given to humans to rule and care for. The idea which first meant care for things entrusted to humans turned in the modern age into a doctrine of domination and exploitation of the treasury of nature with no regard not only for nature itself but for future humankind as well.

Most important, however, is that for the Christians nature need not be that concrete reality within which they are submerged and to which they belong as to one of the fundamental loci of the epiphany of its mystery but rather, at least since the age of nominalism, an object of judgment and speculation. Nature is not given and evident but rather distant and alien, to

be formed by the means of our psyche. The locus of meaning and being is God in God's relation to the human soul: nature is the locus of cold, abstract reflection. Thus with respect to nature modern humanity builds not on antiquity, especially not on Greek antiquity with its aesthetic conception of geometry, but rather on the Christian mode of regarding it with a cool distance and distrust. In the last phase of the Christian view of nature, Divine proximity to the human soul is taken for a divine guarantee of what is now becoming—or really, has become—the main concern for the trendsetters: the existence of nature and of mathematically evident models which enable us not so much to perceive nature but to calculate it. Nature as such, nature as autonomous being, ceases to be of interest, it ceases to be the object of observation, becoming instead something formal—the object of mathematical natural science.

Nature, in mathematical natural science, is not something that presents itself spontaneously, it is not a phenomenon but an object of construction and experimentation which present nature within the limits of rigorously defined anticipations which cannot be realized as such but which make calculation possible. Nowhere in nature can we observe pure momentum in the strict sense and yet the law of momentum holds and rigorous kinematics would be unthinkable without it. Given the immense, really miraculous achievements of mathematical methods in physics and natural science in general, this becomes the source of a new, soberly audacious view of the whole of reality which recognizes no beings other than those at which we arrive by such mathematical reconstruction of the world of the senses in which we naturally move. Thus, with the help of the Christian conception of meaningfulness and nurtured by Christianity, a new conception of reality grew in the womb of the Western European society. This conception gradually turned away from the innermost source of the Christian order of meaning so that concepts such as God, creation, the fall, and salvation came to seem meaningless to it. Beyond that, it gradually reached the point of a complete divorce between meaning

and reality. Reality in the strict sense, the reality of effective scientific cognition, now appears as devoid of meaning.

Mathematical natural science with its utility and its genuine effectiveness in so many aspects of life has become an essential part of the reality of contemporary humankind without which our life would become impossible. However, though we cannot live without it in a physical sense, it is not clear that we know how and that we can live with it and solely on its basis. If Weischedel is right in claiming that it is literally physically impossible to live with a sense of absolute meaninglessness, and if mathematical natural science, as it has grown over the three centuries since the rise of modern mechanism, represents, for a growing number of our contemporaries, the norm of what there is, then it is understandable that for all the expansion of the means with which to live, our life is not only empty but at the mercy of the forces of destruction.

In his great work devoted to the crisis of the European sciences, Husserl showed how mathematics itself, with its formal character focused ever more on mere form and structure, leads humans to the point where the methodological nature of its application to the natural scientific experience is not clearly seen, and so inevitably to a dissolution of all concrete perception into a smokescreen of formulae. Natural science thus becomes a nihilism of nature once it turns into a mere factographic discipline of unintelligible even though comprehensively manipulable data. Such a science cannot justify itself as a meaningful activity and necessarily derives its meaning from elsewhere, from without, from a "social demand" which, as we know, can be at least problematic in its meaningfulness or even testify to the same nihilism whose symptom it itself is as the rule of the society which is making the demand.

Mathematical natural science as a discipline and as the model for being scientific is—or until recently has been—one of the chief bastions of modern nihilism. Husserl tends to describe for the most part its negative side, the way it dissolves natural reality; there is, however, also an immense *effectiveness* to this technoscience that appears to single out from reality and

to see in it only an arbitrarily usable reservoir of potencies and powers. This network of effects, this con-ception¹² does not avoid humans who themselves function within it as an accumulator and a relay. Thus society presents the same image of the mobilization and accumulation of forces which periodically discharge themselves in immense conflagrations, leading each time to more extensive and finally universal, global complexes of force.

Representatives of the scientific community frequently wax indignant at the "misuse of science" in our time: in reality, a science which has lost its own inner meaning cannot reclaim something of which it has purged itself: in its own eyes and by its own criteria, such "misuse," in fact a relative and thus meaningless bestowal of meaning, is something perfectly legitimate.

In our time, not only individuals but entire societies seek to defend themselves against meaninglessness with the help of derivatives of the old Christian meaning, such as our philosophy of history, for the most part stillborn like Comte's Cult of Humanity or Durkheim's animistic pantheism,¹³ or by force and defiance seek to enforce meaning where *ex datis* there can be none, as in the case of Marxism. Not Marxism as a teaching, as a critical social science, rather, as the "sacred" doctrine of new, restructured, and aggressive societies, exploiting the corroding scepticism of the old. Founded doctrinally on Feuerbach's materialism, it shares its ambiguity.¹⁴ Either, with modern science, it can understand by "matter" something essentially meaning-less, devoid of meaning, which is consistent with the division of reality into an effectual material base and a derivative ideology, to which we could attribute effectiveness only at the cost of inconsistency. Alternately, it can follow the old hylozoic model,¹⁵ but that entails not a constructive dialectic method but rather a trust in phenomena as such, an entirely different philosophical and scientific orientation and a wholly different stance and approach to the world. Actually, this is an unwitting example of the Nietzschean contradiction embodied in the prescription that if there is no meaning, we need to create it "by imposing an order on the portion of the world within

our reach." This is a contradiction clearly demonstrated in Weischedel's reflection about the degrees of meaningfulness: each particular meaning, if it is to be genuine meaning, presupposes a total and absolute meaning, but a relative and partial meaning can never bestow meaning on the whole because particular meaning can be consistent with and a product of meaninglessness, while only total meaningfulness can keep all individual beings from drowning in meaninglessness. Perhaps the most terrifying experience of meaninglessness is that presented by the devastation of partial meaningfulness, by the catastrophes of societies and spiritual worlds painstakingly built up over the generations. And if Weischedel's other idea, which we sought to justify earlier by uncovering its phenomenal source in what we would like to call the apparent antinomy of life and being, that acting and living are impossible without a sense of meaningfulness, is also correct, then it contains a clarification of why, in spite of the growing accumulation of force and tools, our life leads to catastrophic conflagrations or to surrenders which, with respect to meaninglessness, essentially amount to the same. It also explains why, precisely in the global age when Europe, from its own historical necessity, its own entanglement with meaninglessness, is leaving the center of history, there must prevail an anonymity of nihilism choking all the desperately nurtured hopes and their philosophies.

Today's polarized world might at times seem like the battlefield of two nihilisms in Nietzsche's sense of the word: the stage of a struggle between an active and a passive nihilism: the nihilism of those who are hampered by inconsistent remnants of antiquated meaning and those who unscrupulously carry through the transvaluation of all values from the standpoint of strength and power. Yet today's dominant philosophies, one overt, the other covert, conceive of humans and their essential interests as a biological organism, a part of the material world, though not as we live our corporeity but as we appear in the perspective of a meaning-less, basically natural scientific theory: as an organism maintaining a metabolic exchange with its context and reproducing itself. Thus it seems as if the whole

movement of history, after all the drive for absolute meaning in politics, in philosophies of a metaphysical cast, in religion that probed as deeply as Christianity, ended up where it began—with the bondage of life to its self-consumption and with work as the basic means of its perpetuation. With respect to that bondage we have sought to show that contentment therewith and therein is what distinguishes prehistoric humanity from history proper. We would be confronted with the paradox of a history resulting in a prehistoricity, consistent with the peculiar circumstance that nations and civilizations which for millenia persisted in a prehistoric state (as China) and which are now entering into history can well draw on some elements of their prehistoric life, with corrections, to be sure, and perhaps even derive from it a significant portion of the energy with which they are entering into the new arena.

Yet it is not so. Prehistoricity is not characterized by a deprivation of meaning, it is not nihilistic like our times. Prehistorical meaning may be modest, but it is not relativistic. It is a meaning which is not centered on humans but rather relates primordially to other beings and powers. In that modest meaning humans can live in a human way and at the same time understand themselves as they understand a flower or a beast of the field. They can live at peace with what there is, not in a devastating struggle with it that sacrifices life's possibilities, stored up over countless eons, to what is most mundane and most utterly meaningless about human existence.

Thus our reflections seem to become lost in a hopeless pessimism. All the phenomena we have cited seem to exude meaninglessness as the ultimate outcome of human striving for truth, that is, for authentic meaning. "Dogmatic" nihilism appears to be the last word of human wisdom which thus seems coextensive with the views of the present-day *monsieur Homais*, the archetypical *petit bourgeois*.

Nihilism, however, proves truly dogmatic as soon as it insists on meaninglessness as the final and indubitable fact, and if its doubts concerning dogmatically posited meaning do not equally entail the possibility of a scepticism about such

scepticism. In light of that recognition dogmatic nihilism proves to be a correlate of dogmatic assertions of meaningfulness, of those theses for which metaphysics takes credit, together with dogmatic theology, so much the worse if "revealed."

From this perspective, history would not represent the gradual unfolding of the meaninglessness of the universe, at least not necessarily, and it might perhaps even be possible for humankind to bring about a meaningful existence consistent with it—on condition of a gigantic conversion, of an unheard-of *metanoëin*.¹⁶

Humans cannot live without meaning, and without a global and absolute meaning at that. That means: humans cannot live in the certitude of meaninglessness. But does not that mean that they cannot live with a sought for and problematic meaning? That precisely this life in a problematic context is a part of meaningfulness in an authentic sense, not in a privative or a dogmatic one? Perhaps Socrates knew this, perhaps that is why the characterization of Socrates by a contemporary thinker as perhaps not the greatest but as the most authentic philosopher is so aptly profound. And Lessing, when in the choice between "having the truth" and "seeking the truth" prefers the latter, might he not have had the same in mind?¹⁷ The situation takes on a distinctive coloring when, with Weischedel and with his teachers before him, we realize clearly that questioning and rendering problematic are not merely subjective acts and attitudes but presuppose problematicity as something further and transsubjective, as a transsubjective situation. And, ultimately, is there not at the very core of reality itself something like the mysterious and the mystery? Is mystery necessarily something subjectively private while actually it means such clarity that it can outshine all that seems clear in our everyday life? Is not the infinite depth of reality possible only because we cannot see its bottom, and is not just that a challenge and an opportunity for humans in their reach for meaning which is more than the flowering and perishing of the lily of the field in the eyes of the gods?

The possibility of a *metanoësis* of historic proportions depends essentially on this: is that part of humanity which is

capable of understanding what was and is the point of history, which is at the same time ever more driven by the entire positioning of present day humanity at the peak of technoscience to accept responsibility for meaninglessness, also capable of the discipline and self-denial demanded by a stance of uprootedness in which alone a meaningfulness, both absolute and accessible to humans, because it is problematic, might be realized?

Let us conclude by summing up:

We distinguished, first of all, meaning as that which arises in understanding and knowing as a persisting sediment, that is, significance, conception. (Meaningful means of communicating meaning, as in the first place language, also fall under this heading.) Secondly, there is the meaning contained within the thing itself, that with which the thing addresses us and responds to our possibilities, enabling us to come to terms with it or through it with others, comporting ourselves intelligibly towards things and persons. Concerning this meaning we then need to ask whether it is absolute, global and all-comprehensive, or always merely relative to and conditioned by something else (for example, by biological life), so that it stands and falls with it. Within the matrix of such factual meaning we distinguish in turn between meaning for which humans are marginal and meaning which has humans as its center. The relative meaning of the things of our surrounding is centered on humans, relative to human life. Humans need not necessarily be marginal to absolute meaning, they are not that if that in humans to which meaning can speak corresponds to that which bestows meaning on all there is.

The experience of the loss of meaning leads to the question whether all meaning is not anthropocentric and relative to life. If that were the case, we would be facing nihilism. The meaning we thought we had grasped in it all, in the whole and the parts of whatever is accessible to us, proves to be limited and void. Such a shaking of meaningfulness can only lead to the stagnation of life unless we can find a way out of the denial of meaning. Since the shaking of a given meaning comes about together with the experience of being as that which cannot be

considered anything that is, it is easy to formulate nihilism as an antinomy of being and meaning: the experience of the emergence of being would then be at the same time the experience of the utter meaninglessness of what-is.

Actually we are dealing only with the uncovering of meaning that can never be explained as a thing, which cannot be mastered, delimited, grasped positively, and dominated, but which is present only in the *seeking* of being. For that reason, too, we cannot encounter it directly in things, directly along with them as relative and positive meaning. The basis of this meaning, in Weischedel's terms, is problematicity; in Heidegger's terms, the concealment of what-is as a whole as the foundation of all openness and all uncovering. Thus it is this mystery that expresses itself in the shaking of naively accepted meaning (whether the relative meaning of immediate human comportment and action or the absolute meaning of myth). Thus the shaking of naive meaning is the genesis of a perspective on an absolute meaning to which, however, humans are not marginal, on condition that humans are prepared to give up the hope of a directly given meaning and to accept meaning as a way.

What is important for our question about the meaning of history is that the problems here sketched apply not only to individual life but to history itself as well. History arises from the shaking of the naive and absolute meaning in the virtually simultaneous and mutually interdependent rise of politics and philosophy. Fundamentally, history is the unfolding of embryonic possibilities present in this shaking. For that reason, for those who are oriented to life in its immediacy, history appears to end in the nihilism of a deprivation of meaning. In understanding being as it manifests itself in existents, characteristic of modern objectivist science, that is, of science that gives up the idea of any relation to meaning as asymptotic, this trait appears to stand out forcefully. Such objectivism, however, is internally contradictory and science itself shows signs of overcoming it. The discussion of this question, however, belongs to another treatise.