

Existentialist Society Lecture. 2<sup>nd</sup> Nov. 1999.

Philosophy At The End Of The Millennium: Existentialism, Nietzsche, Stirner, Postmodernism.

Now what?

As we are at an Existentialist Society it seems right to begin with Kierkegaard, called the father of existentialism. In his first book Kierkegaard gave a description of three philosophical positions or ways of life: i) a cultured form of worldly hedonism; ii) a life of a judgmental, dutiful moralist; iii) a spirituality which transcends both worldly hedonism and the rules of social morality or ordinary justice.

He called the book Either/Or. For he contended that, as such positions are discrete and self-contained, based on their own unique values, and as reason and logic can't prove which position is objectively more true or superior, a subjective either/or decision, a free leap of faith, is required to adopt any one and commit oneself to it. Free choice here means choice in the face of the inability to establish the objective rightness of the decision; hence, choice taken in irresolvable uncertainty; hence, choice begetting angst - anxiety that we are completely wrong.

Kierkegaard rejected the Hegelian philosophy dominant in his day. It claimed that by use of reason we can all see how a position evolves out of previous ones and represents a rational advance. Reason can compare and assess positions. If we follow the logic of cultural evolution we make a smooth transition from one to another and eventually arrive at a shared final conclusion: the ultimate position objectively superior to all others. We won't need a leap of faith. Reason will guide and assure us we've arrived at the highest truth. Then we can all go home.

Nietzsche and postmodernism similarly reject the idea that reason can establish objective truth and that positions or ways of life can be compared to see which one is ultimate. Nietzsche is famous for his perspectivism, ie, his argument that philosophies reflect different perspectives on reality and that all such perspectives are founded on diverse culturally relative assumptions and values. We can't prove objective truth since the criteria for the truth - for what gets called true in a particular culture - vary relative to historical time and place. There are no independent criteria by which we can judge between positions. Moreover, behind logic stands evaluation: eg, that one values being rational, or questioning, or reflective, or analytical, or dialectical, or that one is bothered about non-contradiction, logical determinations of reality, and the like. After all, a late-medieval like Martin Luther can declare that reason is the devil's whore - ie, that reason is a corrupt faculty, part of our fallen and sinful nature: not a reliable faculty to use in pursuit of truth. It will seduce us away from truth, which can only be found, says Luther, in a God-given scriptural revelation.

So, the value of reason appears relative and can be put in question. Other cultures have not valued it as much as we have in modern times. Nietzsche raises the question why we want truth at all rather than illusion and suggests it is only a kind of imperialism, or piece of moral naiveté, to assume truth is worth more than myth or appearance. Moreover, what we call truths are just our more triumphant fictions: ie, certain fictions, simplifications, and the like, come to the fore at a certain point in time and if they triumph they get called truths by most people in that culture. Thus, truth is basically a concept expressing a people's incapacity to think otherwise. It reflects limitation, a degree of disempowerment. Our convictions are our prisons. At the same time, though, the temptation of truth is that it promises a power, viz, the security and superiority of feeling we live in the truth or possess the truth - as against others who are in the wrong. So, Nietzsche famously analyses truth and philosophy in terms of an underlying will-to-power.

Postmodernism is close. Foucault also analyses what's called knowledge in terms of power - eg, that a group which successfully portrays itself as having knowledge thereby acquires power and that such knowledges arise via discrepancies of power in society between so-called experts and those not in the know: between the haves and the have-nots in society, the dominant and less dominant in education. It is the dominant elites which determine what gets to be called the canon of knowledge - shoring up their privileged positions and passing the canon down to future generations. There's no guarantee the canon, or dominant regime of discourse, is truth rather than a temporarily triumphant fiction serving certain vested interests. (This may have crossed one's mind before!)

Also close is Lyotard, who calls the many positions grand narratives, or stories of truth, and refers to them as language games. The games are discrete and circular, for they are founded on their own unique set of values and contain within themselves their own game rules or criteria for truth, knowledge, evidence, proof, right method, and the like. There is no objectively true game, since there is no independent position from which you could judge between the games to decide which one is best. Hence, the games are said to be incommensurable - ie, they can't be measured or compared for their real truth-value. Truths and values are relative to the game you are playing. To say one language game is intrinsically or objectively superior to another would be as absurd as saying that soccer is intrinsically or objectively better than cricket. Games are simply different, not inherently better or worse.

Also similar to Nietzsche is Baudrillard's notion of simulation and seduction. We don't live in the real as such, he says, but in our cultural simulation of reality. In late-Capitalist consumer society, where mass media dominate, the mainstream cultural simulation is selected and mediated over and over again. It is reinforced through endless repetitions: hyper-mediated, hyper-realized. The simulation thereby becomes the hyperreal, the realer-than-real: an over-determined simulation which appears natural, normal, an obvious truth.

Meanwhile, the real itself is a void, a nullity, a desert of the real, as Baudrillard puts it.

All cultures are seduced by their truths. Moreover, seduction is not rational, or it is pre-rational, more basic than the rational. For to be rational already presupposes one has been seduced by the ideals of reason. Hence, Baudrillard seems to be in agreement with Nietzsche that behind reason stands evaluation or the mysterious non-rational - the other of reason - which Baudrillard calls seduction. However, Baudrillard, unlike Nietzsche and Foucault, is uncommitted to the view that seduction operates through power or a will-to-power, or even through desire, as some others would have it. Hence, he says we should forget Foucault - presumably Nietzsche too, at least on this point.

How then does seduction operate if not through power or desire? Actually, this is undecidable. For to analyze seduction in terms of power, or desire, or some other factor, be it psychological, psychoanalytic, natural and empirical, or supernatural and non-empirical, would already presuppose a seduction, ie, that one has been seduced by this or that discourse or perspective. Rather, the ultimate sources of seduction remain mysterious, a kind of secret rule of the game. We find ourselves seduced, we know not how or why. One thing remains though: whatever position or way of life we are seduced by, there is no way we can establish its objective or essential truth. It has value only relative to our seduction. To say our seduction is objectively best would be as absurd as Romeo saying Juliet is objectively best. He may feel she is, but he can't establish this as a truth for others. So the implication of seduction theory in particular, and postmodernism in general, is that beauty and truth is in the eye of the beholder. Hence, it's said that truth is dead in postmodernity - ie, essential truth, objective truth, is an outmoded notion, a concept from a dead language game of the past.

So, in the light of Kierkegaard and existentialism, Nietzsche and postmodernism, philosophical positions and ways of life now appear as perspectives, simulations, or discrete and discontinuous language games; or in more dramatic terms: at the end of the millennium, truth is dead. But was Kierkegaard right to say free choice or a leap of faith is required to jump the gaps? Is there free choice here? Is there even a self which is free to make such a choice? Does it have the free will? On these questions we find Nietzsche and postmodernism part company with Kierkegaard and existentialism. Let's consider.

Descartes is the father of modern philosophy or what's called modernity by postmoderns. Emphasis is on self and related concepts, such as autonomy, responsibility, accountability, free will, free choice, individuality, and the like. It begins with the Cartesian "I think therefore I am". Several things are implied: that there is a self, that the self is a causal agent, that the self can control thought and action through free will, that the self is a free moral agent - ie, accountable and responsible. Philosophers like Descartes, Kant and

Hegel, stressed the rationality of self and said the self is most free when most rational. Kierkegaard and existentialism object. Nevertheless, they still concur on free self, free choice, deliberation and decision, responsibility and accountability. Therefore, we have to say that existentialism belongs to modernity.

Now, what about Nietzsche? He rejects the "I think" in no uncertain terms. It is arbitrary to assume the "I" creates or controls thought and action. After all, thoughts, beliefs, actions, decisions, and the like, can be generated by underlying and unconscious agencies. This, of course, connects to will-to-power. Will-to-power can operate in us at levels below the level of conscious awareness or control. The sense of having a free subjectivity, a free self, is itself an illusion generated by will-to-power in the human organism. Moreover, Nietzsche declares: the doctrine of free will is "a hangman's metaphysics" - ie, a fiction invented by certain resentful and vengeful groups in the past so that others - criminals, conquering tribes, masters - can be held accountable and responsible and duly condemned, punished, or damned. Belief in free will thus serves to rationalize and legitimate righteous indignation and revenge under the fiction of justice and desert. The idea caught on.

Similarly, postmodernism decentres the self, ie, it undermines the ideology of the free self by pointing to factors which condition who we are, what we can think or say or believe, or what we can do. One catch-phrase is: the self does not speak language, but language speaks the self - ie, the cultural language or language games we are brought up in conditions our sense of subjectivity and the possibilities of thought. We may think we are free agents, but actually we are speaking and acting in accordance with our historical conditioning and cultural limitations.

So Nietzsche and postmodernism differ radically from Kierkegaard and existentialism in so far as the latter rely heavily on an assumption of free subjectivity reminiscent of Descartes. There can be no existential free choice, or free and accountable leaps of faith, if self is merely a simulation of selfhood, as Baudrillard might say, determined by modernity's cultural code. Moreover, in the light of this, Nietzsche is surely not an existentialist and existentialism is not the heir to his thought; rather postmodernism is. Indeed, postmodernism could well be described as kind of neo-Nietzscheanism.

In sum: Kierkegaard the existentialist argued that positions can't be compared by reason alone and that objective truth is impossible, then declared that a responsible, accountable, free leap of faith is required. He assumed the reality of free will or free subjectivity as the final ground of our action and commitment. Nietzsche and postmodernism object. Underlying factors, such as power, desire, cultural conditioning, language limitations, regimes of discourse, seduction, and the like, must be taken into account. Existentialism is itself a version of the hangman's metaphysics. Are we speaking at a hangman's society?!

What now of Max Stirner? Where does he stand? Stirner was writing at much the same time as Kierkegaard, in the 1840's, and in a similar intellectual environment. Like Kierkegaard he rejected the dominant Hegelianism in which he was schooled. So in some ways he is similar to Kierkegaard, especially in that he too provides a sustained critique of rationalist metaphysics and objective truth. Moreover, at first glance he seems to be arguing in favour of free subjectivity, the free self or free ego, and free individualism. Thus, he might seem to belong in the existentialist camp. However, this is rather misleading. If we look more closely we find he is not committed to the idea of a free self or ego, and that, contrary to initial appearances and to his critics and commentators, he is not advocating individualist egoism at all.

Well, this needs some explaining. Stirner certainly argues against objective truth arrived at through reason, proposing instead that positions have been adopted in the past for underlying egoistic reasons of self-interest. Desire had more to do with it than reason. However, as with will-to-power, this egoistic will did not always operate at the conscious level of deliberation or control. Most of the time people have been unconscious or involuntary egoists, as Stirner puts it, ie, they may have thought they were choosing a position purely because of its truth, but since no position can exhibit its truth, the real motives were psychological, egoistic in the sense of being self-serving or apparently advantageous.

This is summed up in Stirner's saying, "Nothing is sacred but by my bending the knee." - meaning: nothing is simply given as sacred or true or right or valuable in itself, but only acquires this appearance of value by our elevating it to this sublime status, disempowering ourselves in relation to it. We project its value, declare it sacred, untouchable, inviolable, thereby losing the capacity to take back its value again, or annul it. We do this because we feel, however dimly, however unconsciously, it is advantageous to be aligned with the sacred. However, Stirner argues we are, rather, disadvantaged in the process. For we become addicted to the sacred truth, and, as Stirner sees it, a better - more empowering, more reliable, more immediate, more liberating - mode of happiness, a happiness of non-addiction, can be found by undermining and annulling every sacred truth. We achieve this through realizing nothing is sacred of itself but only appears sacred via our projection - by our bending the knee. Seeing it is not sacred or inviolable in itself, we find we can violate it, ie, take back its value and annul it, thus letting go of it.

Example: consider people who fall romantically in love. At one level they feel it is advantageous to be thus enthralled - and so they pursue it: their own thralldom, their own servitude. The other becomes a sacred object or idol to which one becomes addicted, attached. One becomes emotionally dependent. There are certain highs involved, to be sure, which explains the temptation. But there's the down side. We are subservient in that our sense of emotional wellbeing is vulnerable to the other's will or changeability. As Stirner would

say, we have fallen prey to tributariness - ie, we pay the other too much tribute, give the other too much weight, value or power. In short, we make the other sacred by bending the knee. This is the pattern of idolatry. The same applies to everything - eg, God, truths, faiths, beliefs, ideologies, reason, discourse, thought, and even the self or ego. We can make a little idol out of anything.

Do we possess our objects of belief and desire or do they possess us? For Stirner, re-phrasing Hamlet, to possess or be possessed - that is the question. Possessing them without them possessing us means we retain the capacity to take back value any time and cancel, suspend or annul it - ie, we can absolve ourselves of the thing, we can let it go, be non-attached and independent in relation to it. We can, for example, let that old lover go, let that old God go, let that old truth go, let even life itself go - let everything go. To be able to have and enjoy things without them having you, describes the non-attached condition Stirner calls Ownness. We come into our own, we develop maturity, when we can have and not have in this way.

God and the truth is dead for Stirner in that he can let them go. He is radically uncommitted. Indeed, he is not concerned for anything except "the self-enjoyment of life" - akin to what the Greeks called "eudemonia" - ie, philosophical good spirits. To attain and enjoy good spirits is Stirner's purpose. Attainment comes via the realization that nothing is sacred except by our bending the knee and exercising the capacity to take back all things and annul their value or power over us. This implies we annul all the objects of belief and desire, hence, all the objects of hope and fear and time. What then remains? Only what Stirner calls "creative nothingness" - ie, the ongoing unfolding of life itself here and now without names, conceptualizations, divisions, limits. For these are all objects of belief or desire, potential idols. And we take these back and annul them. So it is no longer a matter of fear and hope, of time, of mediation. The immediate self-enjoyment of creative nothingness is realized where there are no idols left standing to block it. It is the free creative act of life-affirmation, of life affirming itself in and through us: a life-enjoyment without reason, that is, for no reason except itself because, well, enjoyment is enjoyable - which seems obvious.

Now, is this egoism? I say not. For ordinary egoism is the pursuit of enjoyment in time via the objects of belief and desire. And self-enjoyment is precisely not this. On the contrary, self-enjoyment is the radical alternative to ordinary egoism. But is it not egoism at least in the sense that Stirner believes in the free ego or individual self of egoism, as the commentators say? No, again. Stirner is not attached or committed to self or ego, since self or ego is simply a concept, an object of belief or desire, one more potential idol. He annuls it along with the rest. Note that Stirner's motto throughout the book is not "I have set my affair on the ego or egoism". His motto is, "I have set my affair on nothing." Creative nothingness is the last word in his discourse, and on the last page of the book even the idea of the ego or owner is taken back, annulled, returned to the creative nothing from whence it came.

Stirner doesn't belong in the existentialist camp because he is not committed to key existentialist notions: eg, self, free will, authenticity, accountability, responsibility. He would absolve himself of all such notions. He would not make an idol of them. Well, then, shall we say Stirner is more like a postmodern? After all, he was one of the first to use the term "modernity" to describe the previous period of philosophical culture, and he says that his own position - ownness, or self-enjoyment - comes after this, and so by implication is post-modern. In fact, a good case can be made that he was way ahead of his time, that critics and commentators have failed to understand him, and that he anticipated many themes of postmodernism a hundred and fifty years ago.

However, what Stirner most resembles, it seems to me, is Taoistic Zen. After all, Taoistic Zen is also all about radical non-attachment to any objects of temporal desire or belief and a contemplative openness to and appreciation of the Tao, understood as the nameless, the unconceptualized, Way of reality. As the first line of the Tao Te Ching says, the Tao or Way that can be named is not the real Tao or Way itself. Thus, the Tao is akin to Stirner's creative nothingness and the contemplative appreciation of the Tao is akin to Stirner's practice of immediate self-enjoyment.

What about similarity between Taoistic Zen, Stirner, and postmodernism? Well, in so far as postmoderns are committed to discourse itself, or the terms of their discourse - whether power, or desire, or deconstruction, or simulation, or seduction, etc. - and make a sacred idol out of them, then there would be little similarity. However, in so far as ironic detachment from discourse is hinted at in some texts - notably in the case of Baudrillard - then there may be a similarity. In Baudrillard, in his rather extreme brand of postmodernism, there is an ongoing unresolved ambiguity or equivocation over whether his discourse is to be taken as a serious or sacred truth about the real or whether he is instead engaged in a kind of provocative and ironic game with the reader. The former is suggested by his description of himself as a moralist and metaphysician. The latter is suggested by references to his text as theory-fiction and by pronouncements that the secret of theory is that there is no longer any truth in theory. In short, Baudrillard prevaricates on this crucial issue. And so, in the end, one must forget Baudrillard.

Stirner privileges the calm contemplative self-enjoyment of creative nothingness above all and he seems rather scornful of other pursuits. He prefers aloof retreat from the world and he seems to have gone on to live the rest of his life this way. Same goes for mainstream Taoistic Zen. However, postmodern writers, including Baudrillard who at least flirts with the void and contemplative silence, tend to privileged discourse or writing as such, and so churn out endless books - even if they are books of theory which argue we can't write books of theory any more. This seems to be the state of play in philosophy as we approach the end of the millennium.

Which leaves me with one last question to address tonight. Is there a way forward from here into the next millennium, a way beyond the positions outlined so far, a way beyond even postmodernism: a post-postmodernism perhaps? Is there life after theory? This strikes me as being the primary research question in philosophy at the present time. And to judge by the number of books and compilations with the word “after” in the title, I wouldn't be alone.

I'll advance the following conjectures. If the first millennium, the medieval millennium, pre-modernity, can be categorized as the Age Of Faith - ie, where religious faith, piety, theology, supernaturalism, etc. increasingly preoccupied cultural life; and if the second millennium, the modern millennium, can be categorized as the Age Of Reason - ie, where theorizing, reasoning, science, humanism, critical thinking - eventually leading to late-twentieth century postmodern irony, ambiguity, and nihilism - increasingly preoccupied cultural life; then perhaps the next millennium might be characterized differently from both and be called the Age Of Art. This would be an age after theory, an age which is post-religious and post-rational - or in sum, post-truth, and, therefore, also post-irony, post-nihilism, even post-Baudrillard, even post-postmodern: an age where art and artistic effects come to the fore and preoccupy cultural life.

Art existed in previous ages, of course. However, each age has a dominant principle which other interests serve, and in those ages art served the dominant principles of faith or reason. So, in medieval times reason and art were pressed into the service of faith: faith went in search of understanding through reason in theology and in search of aesthetic self-expression through religious art. In modern times, faith and art are pressed into the service of reason: faith becomes either a rational faith, faith within the bounds of reason alone, as Kant had it, or a faith in reason itself; and art becomes rational, humanist, realist, socialist, critical, avante garde, etc., following the evolving trends of critical theory.

What I envisage, then, is an age where art really comes into its own, ie, artistic creativity and effect, aesthetic quality and interest, becomes the dominant principle and faith and reason is pressed into its service. Faith becomes faith in art as a way of life: an artistic faith - in art and imagination we trust, rather than in God we trust (or in science). Reason and its associated qualities - logical argument, order, proportion, method, clarity, coherence, concision, discursive elegance, etc. - is employed in so far as it contributes in a work to its aesthetic quality. The latter, then, is what counts, not reason itself. So good or bad in such an age is not decided by a dominant religion or piety, nor by a dominant rational methodology or science, but by degree of artistic appeal.

For example, consider theory - ie, the old representational language game: ie, a game purporting to contain knowledgeable propositions truthfully representing reality as it is - eg, God exists, electrons exist, the self exists, freedom exists, etc. However, representational language turns on epistemology



- ie, the study of knowledge, which claimed to give the logos or knowledgeable account of knowledge, the truth about the truth. It claimed to know what knowledge is and exhibit its possibility. This always was an absurd undertaking, however, founded in a paradox. For to know what knowledge is presupposes we already know what knowledge is in claiming to have knowledge about knowledge. Put another way, to say a criterion of the truth is a true criterion of the truth either presupposes the criterion already and so begs the question, or else sets up an infinite regress by bringing in another criterion. The upshot is simple: epistemology is impossible; hence, knowledge and truth is impossible; hence, the age-old representational language game of theory is impossible; hence, we need to move beyond representational language and the claim that theory contains statements as true representations of reality.

We cease prevaricating and unambiguously drop the pretense that theory is really saying anything about reality at all. But what then can it be doing? Is there another way of intending or understanding a text? There surely is. Literature, creative writing, fiction, theatre, poetry - do not have to claim to be representing reality. They can be an alternative to the representational language game of truth. A novel, for instance, might be a complete fabrication from beginning to end, an exercise of the artistic imagination, a fantasy work. However, it can still have merit, ie, in an aesthetic sense if it succeeds in generating aesthetic arousal and interest in the reader. So theory, after theory, must be understood this way: as creative writing, literature, prose poetry - art. This still allows there can be good and bad theory, but good and bad is not determined by criteria such as truth-content, representational correspondence to reality, or verisimilitude, but by aesthetics.

In short, in the blink of eye - perhaps we should make it at the stroke of midnight bringing in the year 2000? - everyone becomes an artist. Thus: philosophers, theologians, fundamentalists, mystics, scientists, sociologists, critical thinkers - all artists, all exercising their creative imaginations, expressing themselves, inventing theory. No longer any ambiguity about it: theory is theory-fiction. We start from there. We drop the irony and pretense of truth and switch over to a purely aesthetic paradigm. We all become artists, artists all the time, even in our own heads. For thought - ongoing internal discourse - no longer represents reality either. Everyday thinking itself is art, is imagination, is story-telling. Of course, we can be relatively good or bad artists. The criterion is not representational truth, if truth is dead, but turns on aesthetics: broadly speaking, on the degree to which whatever is generated is pleasing or interesting.

Here are some dictionary synonyms for the word "interesting" - absorbing, arousing, amusing, appealing, attractive, compelling, curious, engaging, engrossing, entertaining, gripping, intriguing, novel, original, provocative, stimulating, thought-provoking, unusual. These and related aesthetic terms, such as, beautiful, sublime, elegant, inspiring, moving, etc., now take over from the old terms associated with the dead language of representation, such

as, truth, knowledge, correspondence, coherence, pragmatism, probability, proof, evidence, demonstration, verification, falsification, legitimation, etc. So observe that, where once Lyotard reported there is a legitimation crisis regarding theory there is no longer a legitimation crisis, since, after theory, theory no longer makes claims which require legitimation. Rather, whatever value theory-fiction has turns on its aesthetic merits. The quest, therefore, is no longer a quest for the truth - which always was an impossibility - but, rather, the point of theory and every other aesthetic creation is simply this: to make life more interesting!

Observe those who are down, depressed, dull, in the doldrums, those for whom life has lost its spice, for whom life seems meaningless, who may even contemplate suicide. Life shows no interest. What they need is arousal - that which would enable them to find life more interesting. That is where art comes in. Art is therapy. Art is the endless capacity of the human imagination to create and re-create interest in life, and thereby, meaning and value. And it comes in all shapes and forms: not just books, paintings, films, music, but also: religion, science, mythology, philosophy, debate, psychoanalysis, politics, Zen meditation, whatever. Everything is theatre. Go to a church or ashram or zendo - or for that matter, a parliament - and the theatricality is obvious. Less obvious, but no less theatrical, are our therapy rooms, science labs, and lecture halls. Note the costumes, the props, the role plays, the standards of good and bad form, the rules of procedure - the stage directions, in other words. There is no truth to be found in any of it. Nevertheless, it can be extremely interesting. What's more, it keeps us all alive and kicking.

All we need do now is create more art as best we can - more inventive art, more pleasing art, more arousing art, more comprehensive art - art for its own sake, where art is the dominant ethos and everything else, eg, faith, reason, virtue, is subservient to the aesthetic principle. Moreover, it is no longer a matter of saying one art form is inherently better than another, eg, that one religion is better than another, or that science is better than religion, or vice versa, or that meditation or contemplation is better than intellectual work or an active life in the world. For they are all equivalent as art forms, and to say one is superior would be like saying horror movies are inherently better than tragedies or comedies. It is merely a matter of what makes life seem more fascinating to you. So generate and enjoy! After theory, this can be done more freely and with a clear intellectual conscience. For truth is no longer a constraint. If it interests one to think there are fairies at the bottom of the garden, then one can entertain the thought, and thereby entertain oneself. After all, this is no more or less true than that there is a God or an electron at the bottom of the garden. Indeed, perhaps fairies ride about on electrons and angels still dance on pinheads. As for the Big Bang, that's a particularly stirring form of science fiction - however, a fashion which, quite possibly, will be outmoded in fifty or hundred years.

But at this point perhaps we need to consider two typical objections to life as art. First: that it is escapist. However, to claim devotion to art is mere escapism

from reality presupposes one can prove what is reality. And after theory, this can't be done. Moreover, after theory, any theory of reality is itself art. Thus, the objection is outmoded. That's why entertaining fairies at the bottom of the garden is just as valid as entertaining electrons (if electrons are entertaining). Second: life devoted to art is morally irresponsible. This again presupposes truth, this time a truth of morality. Moreover, after theory, moral theory is itself an art form, as is the ethical self. That is: one finds a type of character attractive, hence one is drawn to those who exhibit it, more-or-less, and one tends to create it as a preferred self-image. Thus, in an age of art, ethics turns on aesthetics, rather revamping the "beautiful soul" idea - except it is no longer claimed beauty has an objective or universal standard or that we ought to conform to one. Beauty is contextual, as is morality. However, if we are concerned as artists to be aesthetically appealing the likely way is to become more beautiful and interesting whether in appearance or character. A pain in the bum is a poor artist in the medium of morality. Of course, one may be good in some other way. But if the ideal in an age of art is maximum comprehensive artistry, it behoves us to develop our artistic talents in as many mediums as possible, as best we can, including the medium of morality. In this way, we become eclectic artists, somewhat Renaissance-like. So virtue is included in an age of art, as is faith and reason, under the dominant aesthetic principle.

If there is anything to avoid it is simply that which usually makes for bad art - hence, such as: the ugly, the displeasing, the inelegant, the irritating, the banal, the clichéd, the commonplace, the stereotypical, the repetitious, the overdone, the long-winded, the unoriginal, the uninspired, the dull, the boring, the superficial, the inept, the poorly crafted, the technically unproficient, the juvenile, the unripe, the jaded, the stale, etc. We apply such criteria when adjudicating things in context - eg, a play, an academic essay, a poem, a painting, a scientific paper, a thesis, a political manifesto, a dance, a sermon, a news report, a character, a song, and so forth. Experienced judges usually find themselves in agreement with other experienced judges in the same field. Still, judgments are subjective in reflecting and expressing one's lack of interest or pleasure in the work, a deficit of aesthetic arousal.

We might note that the disturbing, the unsettling, the occasionally discordant or displeasing, is not always an objection to a piece. It depends on how these elements fit into and complete a whole which overall may be aesthetically pleasing.

Which leads to my penultimate point tonight. People have no idea what reality as a whole is. Indeed, it is quite comic when they think they do. At such times they appear as perceptive as the soap box they're standing on (which is entertaining in its own way). At any rate, things appear thus after theory. This opens a strategy of re-enchantment. For whenever some discord arises in life, some painful episode, to avoid disenchantment we just have to realize that within the whole this discord may play a positive essential part. It may be a fine artistic touch, a piece of finesse lending grace to the total picture,

even if grace is currently incognito. In other words, in an age of art after theory, it is easy to entertain ourselves with the idea that reality itself is an artistic work and that this is how our sufferings can be justified and accommodated. After all, the truth of the idea is no longer relevant. All that matters is that it be a re-enchanting idea to engage with. One just needs to contemplate reality in this fashion, as a perfect aesthetic Whole or Way or Tao, to defuse the blues.

Finally, it will no doubt have occurred to the perceptive person that my discourse tonight must be, according to its own lights, beyond truth. This is so. It is only an argument. An argument could be completely convincing to everyone who hears it, and yet still be false. So what has it to do with truth? My discourse, therefore, is merely intended as a piece of creative writing which may or may not provoke a lively aesthetic effect. Its sole purpose is to interest or re-enchant, at least its author. If nothing else, it has achieved that.

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### Supplement. Ex Soc 99.

The point now is to be an artist, rather than a philosopher, in so far as being a philosopher now is only one way of being an artist. Moreover, it is no longer a matter of pursuing the truth, an answer, the true position, etc. It is a matter of pursuing aesthetic interest and effect - in order to, let's say, re-enchant the world - whether in philosophy used as a medium or art form, or in any other medium or art form.

## Manifesto Of The Artist In An Age Of Art After Theory.

Being an artist in an age of art after theory means developing oneself in a certain way and living in a certain way. I'll sketch a picture. The artist after theory will tend to pursue the following and live accordingly:

1. Creativity in general, creative living, such as: being inventive, innovative, paralogical; lateral thinking; being more unconventional, original, unique. It's a matter of 'pushing the envelop' on principle, of seeing if you can break some barriers, seeking ways of doing things differently; a matter of trying out new things, hence, of experimentation: experimental living, testing, exploring, trying things on for size, etc. The artist should make a point of doing a few creative things every day, working on one's artistry in various aspects of everyday life and on several levels of our human nature. One should always be able to say, eg, "Well, I'm just trying this out." - thus, there is a lightness of approach to everything - an artistic playfulness. The artist as free spirit, as joyful player in the theatre of life.

2. To live the playfully artistic way the artist will have to develop certain personal traits, such as: a capacity to be more self-assertive and adventurous, to be different, to take more risks, to dare to court possible disapproval - and so not be so much bothered about the social conventions. One must be able to utilize for art's sake the benign tension of the struggle or labour to create, seeing it all as part of the artistic game, the artistic sport, the way of artistic life. Also, one will have to have a solid self-esteem for oneself as person and artist to feel free enough to play this game. (It may help to realize there should always be a place in society for such types: the outsiders, the challengers of the herd instinct, etc. Recall Nietzsche.) The artist must also be open to changes, be able to approve of them whenever they happen, seeing them as an opportunity rather than an obstacle - a spur to ingenuity. Everything must remain open and experimental, not closed, finished, fixed, or written in concrete.

3. Although we will have to risk shocking others, maybe sometimes upsetting them, as artists we are basically benevolent in that we are really trying to help others, ie, by trying to make life more interesting or re-enchanted. For at the end of the day, human beings need culture, this artistic interest in life. Human beings can't live by bread alone: they need the arts and the challenges posed by artists. Bread gives survival, but art gives meaning! Without that meaning we might even die, as Viktor Frankl argues. If so, then artists are as essential to society as bread-makers, and the risks they take are surely worth taking. Society has to learn to accommodate and value them. Getting back to the virtue aspect: artists should be moved by a general goodwill, a will to generate the aesthetically pleasing, for self and others (a mutually beneficial scenario). We are to make life more interesting. As artists we are, in different ways, entertainers. Even enlightenment is entertainment. Thus we enhance the meaning of life and make life a more light spectacle. Our virtue as artists is our willingness to risk giving of ourselves to thereby charm others.

4. But the aesthetic life is not just a matter of being active, ie, creative and productive. We also need to know how to be passively receptive and appreciative of art and aesthetic quality in as many mediums and art forms as possible: even everywhere in existence itself. The latter requirement is where the element of meditation or spirituality comes in. This enables us to be more receptive to the beauty all around us, even in the most ordinary things. In Zen, the ordinary is also extraordinary. The purest meditation in an age of art is the practice of passive aesthetic contemplation which awakens an experience of the beauty and sublimity of 'what is'. Therefore, this kind of practice - call it aesthetic spirituality - is mainstream and crucial to the full life of art. It also tends to promote the kind of serenity and free virtue or benevolence which can help motivate the artist to help others through art. People might be helped to access greater beauty and sublimity, and more often, and this in turn has a healthy effect on the psyche, conducive to eudemonia, philosophical good spirits - or should we now say, aesthetic good spirits? For now we seek an artistic eudemonia, an artistic wellbeing and virtue.

5. It is not only a matter of creating objects or events which are aesthetically pleasing, and of finding aesthetic interest in a variety of art forms, even in being itself, it is also a matter of making ourselves, our lives, personalities, appearance, etc., into a kind of art work. We are to create ourselves as art objects. The artist should learn how to make himself or herself more interesting, more beautiful, more involved, more intriguing. It is no longer a question of personal vanity. Rather, it behooves us as artists to create beauty and aesthetic delight in the world, hence, to beautify ourselves, or make ourselves aesthetically interesting (at any rate, as far as we can). It is not simply for ourselves we do this, but also for others, for the mutual benefit. Thus, for example, a person who has some beauty of appearance or character should not be shy about that, but exhibit that beauty for others to appreciate. It's a kind of crime to hide beauty away. It should be as open and free as possible. "It's your duty to be beautiful" - as an old song has it. We should not bury our talents in the ground but use them (as it even says in the Bible).

6. But beauty is not only skin deep: it goes all the way down. That is, there is a form of beauty for each of the levels of our human nature: spirit, intellect, imagination, body, heart, conscience. Hence:

First, there is a beauty of spirit: ie, the beauty and sublimity of the free spirit, of transcendence, and of maximum receptivity or openness to being or what is: the Tao, etc., as developed through meditation practices, such as zazen, and through aesthetic spirituality in general.

Second, there is the beauty of intellect: ie, of critical thinking and elegant discourse, of lateral free thinking and innovative reasoning, of Socratic dialogue and method, of writing and teaching, of rational proportion and concision, etc.

Third, there is the beauty of imagination: ie, of vivid and inventive flights of fancy, of having vision and generating possibility and applying this to real life and everyday issues to give a sense of creative direction.

Fourth, there is the beauty of body: ie, of exercising the various “arts of appearance” - which should be pursued now by the artistic person not as a personal vanity but as an artistic experiment.

Fifth, there is the beauty of heart: ie, of allowing feeling and emotion, of being non-repressive, of being able to be moved and to enjoy feelings as themselves part of the aesthetic experience of life or the whole tapestry.

Sixth, there is the beauty of conscience: ie, of free virtue, spontaneous goodwill, the kind that arises from the increased experience of beauty in life or being itself. For we do tend to love and affirm what we find beautiful, and so we act benevolently toward it rather easily, ie, not as a matter of duty or obligation. Hence, virtue is better than duty. The artist lives benevolently outside the law.

It would be our role as artists to develop beauty on as many fronts or in as many mediums as possible; hence, we should try to be eclectic and comprehensive, developing our talents on each level. Each has its own form of beauty. So the well-rounded artist will have included each type of beauty and will have made of himself or herself a complex, many-layered, multi-dimensional, intriguing and interesting creation.

7. If as artists, operating by an artistic ethos, our role is to relate to the world in a maximally aesthetic manner, the most complete and profound way to do so would be to relate to reality, as a Whole or Way, as itself an art-object: a kind of ongoing, self-evolving, kinetic creation, where the apparently bad parts, the passing discords, the evils and sufferings of life, are considered essential to the overall pattern or craft or artistry to make a well-balanced or aesthetically satisfactory totality. Of course, we haven't the faintest idea if this is what reality really is or not! But that's okay, because it is no longer a question of representational truth. Hence, it no longer matters whether the vision is true or not. Hence, it is not even a question any more of belief or faith, never mind knowledge. It is only a matter of whether the vision is engaging, entertaining, re-enchanting - in short, aesthetically interesting as an artistic strategy.

It is surely that. For in viewing reality this way, we begin to see everything as an art object which can be appreciated as such in aesthetic contemplation. Thus arises the ultimate strategy of aesthetic re-enchantment: reality itself is art!

To be maximally receptive to this ultimate art object, reality itself, we must approach it as we would any other art object we wish to fully appreciate. We must open sympathetically to it in a disinterested way without distractions and intellectual or moralistic pre-judgments - removing all prejudices, in other words - and without even seeking to conceptualize or name the object as such. Rather, we must just let go of all this and let the aesthetic object be

there for disinterested contemplation. This is proper meditation, I would say - the aesthetic self-enjoyment of 'what is' (creative nothingness, or the Tao that can't be named, the God beyond God, etc.). One listens to it, watches it, senses it, attends to it, opens to it, as one would open and listen to a piece of music, or as one would quietly gaze upon a sunset. There is no separation between you and the sunset or between you and the music. There is only the aesthetic quality of the experiencing itself, without a division between the experiencer and the experienced.

I wouldn't call this mysticism, however, since mysticism plays the old representational language game of truth and so belongs to the departing era. Philosophy-as-art no longer claims to gain access to ultimate reality or truth or salvation or God or enlightenment, or any such grandiose thing. It is not a destiny, a truth, or a duty. It is simply an optional artistic strategy of re-enchantment, a way of being re-enchanted with the Whole as the ultimate art object of beauty and sublimity.

When people can relate this way to 'the whole movement of life' - appreciate the tapestry - then they are maximally related to life itself as art, and so they realize the ultimate goal of 'the aesthetic paradigm' or the 'new age of art'. And this is a very positive state or relationship to be in. For it involves being able to take a free aesthetic delight in things and find this delight more easily everywhere. Therefore, one could also say that this becomes the goal of so-called 'psychotherapy' in the new age of art: to help people realize and enjoy themselves as artists, and life itself as art. Thus, just as faith, religion, science, reason, virtue, etc., become secondary to the aesthetic principle and serve it, so too does psychotherapy. Just as we now speak of philosophy as art, similarly, we should speak of psychotherapy as art, and see the therapeutic situation as a kind of theatre of seduction. It is no longer a science, nor a matter of truth, nor of true health, nor of essential normality, and the like. There are no longer any correct norms, only styles of living and thinking which are more or less re-enchancing according to aesthetic criteria.

With the practice of philosophy (as wisdom) and of meditation (as applied wisdom) beauty increases across the board. However, even if no thing is any longer ugly as such, it is not that everything becomes equally beautiful, but that some things are somewhat less beautiful than others. So although one might be inspired to say 'everything is beautiful' there are still grounds for aesthetic discrimination and personal taste. Hence, there is still a sense of direction and development toward filling life with more particular beauties while cultivating the general beauty. The latter tends to moderate the former, ie, the pursuit of beautiful things is moderated and liberated by the awareness of the beauty of being itself. For we do not need to be as possessive and attached to particular beauties when life in general is already the primary source of the experience of the beautiful. We can afford to be more relaxed in our relation to particular beauties (art works, people, scenes, events, etc) since beauty is all around us anyway, even in the most ordinary objects. We need never be without some kind of beauty to appreciate at any time, and this is



the essence of always being in aesthetic good spirits (aesthetic eudemonia) - the goal of this philosophy.

When we are in aesthetic good spirits we are always finding something 'interesting' in life to consider or contemplate. We are always in the - rather paradoxical-sounding - state of 'disinterested interest'. The mode of interest here is in a sense 'disinterested', because it tends to 'take us out of ourselves', ie, elevate us above the more ordinary and narrow forms of self-interest. It fills us with a kind of spirit-enlarging inspiration and pleasure.