

Ponti Venter

‘Modernity’: the historical ontology

Summary

The article focuses on a fundamental and generally disregarded aspect of modern thought: the turn in eighteenth-century philosophy towards a historical ontology. The works of selected intellectuals such as Defoe and Rousseau (in contrast to Hobbes) highlight the shift away from a static, hierarchical ontology with God as the highest structuring force, in the direction of a historical ontology with an inherent teleology and the dominance of reason as its *eschaton* — progress between the dialectically related poles of nature and culture. This historical ontology has since been taken up by important nineteenth-century thinkers such as Hegel, Comte, Marx and Darwin, and also makes its influence felt in the irrationalist tradition (albeit with the poles inverted), and even in the present day in various areas of culture (such as the film *Dead Poets’ Society*).

‘Moderniteit’: die historiese ontologie

Die artikel beoog om ’n fundamentele, meesal misgekykte aspek van die moderne denke onder vergrootglas te plaas, naamlik die historiese wending in die ontologie in die agtiende eeu. Aan die hand van werke van geselekteerde intellektuele soos Defoe en Rousseau (in teenstelling tot Hobbes) word die verskuiwing aangedui: weg van ’n statiese hierargiese ontologie met God as die hoogste struktureerder, in die rigting van ’n historiese ontologie met ’n inherente teleologie en die heerskappy van rasionaliteit as sy *eschaton* — vooruitgang tussen die dialekties-verbonde pole van natuur en kultuur. Die historiese ontologie kan by belangrike negentiende-eeuse denkers (Hegel, Comte, Marx, Darwin) teruggevind word, en laat geld hom ook in die irrasionalistiese tradisie (sy dit met die pole omgekeer), selfs tot vandag in verskillende kultuurvertrakkinge (soos die film *Dead Poets’ Society*).

If by 'linguistic turn' we mean the transformation or reduction of ontology to philosophy of language, then we may be able to identify and describe a hitherto scarcely noted, earlier transformation of this kind: the 'historical turn' occurring at the end of the seventeenth and beginning of the eighteenth century. This 'historical turn' could possibly offer a distinctive description of 'modernity'.

With the dawn of modern humanism the traditional, normative, hierarchical ontology was replaced by a human-centred ontology. This ontology was teleologically human-centred — focused in humankind and its (progressive) cultural mastery of nature. The age-old conception of a harmonious relationship between 'culture' and 'nature' was reconceived as one of subjugation and even enmity. Thus the culture-nature dialectic became the new historical ontology. The transformation of a hierarchical ontology (focused in the supreme good) into a human-centred teleological one can be characterised as the 'historical turn'. It may be represented as a change from stable metaphysical verticalism into linearly rising rationalist horizontalism (which, in the mid-nineteenth century, collapsed into irrationalism).

For those who insist on a problem-solving approach, the explanatory thesis above can be viewed as a hypothetical answer to the following question: Why has history (not primarily as a discipline but as a sequence of explanatory events) become so important in modern times? — an importance which it retains in at least some present-day forms of irrationalist thinking.

Some find the origins of modern humanism in Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's contention that human beings have been given the wonderfully unique ability to choose for themselves what they want to be — for human beings (uniquely) Pico supposed no blueprint of ideas in God's mind. But Pico still limited the options open to humankind to the provisions of the traditional hierarchical ontology of the Middle Ages. Thus, for him, the journey of humankind to itself was not a historical one, but rather a choice between a vertical descent into a vegetative or a brutish state, or a mystical ascent along the hierarchy to the angelic or even the divine level.

Modern humanism narrowed down the medieval supratemporal directedness to the divine to focus in human rationality itself. There was a growing belief that reason somehow was in control of reality. But, with the awareness that human beings are factually not in rational control of the world, the rational control was constructed in terms of a historical teleology, in which rationality was projected as the destiny and necessary outcome of history. History was envisaged as leading humankind inevitably towards this destiny — a destiny of full control over nature. This could only be conceived in terms of a dialectical ontology: humankind in progress was a product of nature, driven to its destiny by nature, and yet autonomous rational human beings were supposed to be in control of nature. This dialectical ontology is the nucleus of what I would call the historical turn. In this conception, 'reality' more or less coincides with 'history'.

The primary aims of this essay will be to illustrate the gradual shift from the hierarchical metaphysic towards a human-centred, teleological development from 'nature' to 'culture', and, via this thesis, to contribute to the understanding of the rise of modernity. It is important to note that the shift was not a purely philosophical one, but rather concerned the broad spectrum of the intellectual culture of modern times, so that it is demonstrated not only in philosophical works but also in works on economics and politics, as well as in works of art and literature. It became the framework in terms of which reality was viewed from the eighteenth century onwards.

This overriding consciousness of a historical movement from a lower state to a higher one is found as early as Defoe and Lessing — in Lessing through education, and in Defoe through a growth in experience. Rousseau transformed Hobbes's alternative states ("nature" versus "civil society") into a historical sequence under the guidance of human autonomy. The term 'nature' was given a diversity of specific meanings, usually concentrated in what humankind 'originally' was, as well as in those aspects of human reality (like the sentiments, passions, drives and senses) which were considered subrational. In the Enlightenment, 'culture' was closely associated with 'rationality', which referred to both practical and theoretical rationality (with the former being more important). The historical turn therefore concerns a historical movement from a

subrational to a rational state. This was further developed in the idealism of Immanuel Kant, who struggled with the issue of the domination of reason by subrational nature and the mastery of nature by reason. The historical became a cultural motif which we find in many nineteenth-century writers such as Comte, Marx and Darwin. Its teleological rationalism was overturned by some Romantic writers, who propagated a return to nature, and by various twentieth-century irrationalist writers like D H Lawrence and Virginia Woolf as well as by films like *Dead Poets' Society* and *A River Runs Through It*, and by the New Age movement, all of which propagate a return to nature (as the non-rational or subrational).

1. The gradual historicising of reality (Defoe and Rousseau)

Defoe, in *Robinson Crusoe*, gives an early expression of the historicising of reality into the nature-culture dialectic. The novel tells the story of a human being (humankind perhaps?) who is hampered by his natural inclinations and, through a gradual process, learns the rational mastery of nature. Thus, from the point of view of its implied basic categories (natural inclinations vs rationality), one can compare it with other works from the same era which exhibit these basic categories, on condition that we allow for the artistic freedom of the author of the novel, and do not expect the same logical rigour which we would find in a good scholarly text.

Hobbes, for example, apparently expressed himself in terms of the same dialectic by contrasting the state of nature with the civil state, but he did not relate the two states to one another as earlier and later historical phases, respectively. In Hobbes the 'state of nature' represents the hypothetical, realisable, horrible alternative to the 'civil state' — it is the spectre of violent human nature with which he frightened citizens into obedience. Hobbes, still adhering to Cartesian scientism, axiomatised politicology by means of a static comparison of the civil state with the natural state (cf Venter 1996a: 177). Defoe, in *Robinson Crusoe*, allows the 'state of nature' to be realised by letting Crusoe suffer the consequences of following his

natural inclinations.¹ But he also historicises the process of cultural mastery of nature by 'story-cising' the slow, rational, technical (tool-based) mastery of nature and the recovery of the protection and comforts of civil society. After much struggle and hard work, the character Crusoe, ironically a Puritan theist, claims to have become the sovereign king and lord of his world — a claim suggestive of Kant's later blunt statement that mankind has advanced from animality to "equality with all rational beings" (ie, to a godlike being). Defoe's Crisoe tells us:

My Island was now peopled, and I thought my self very rich in Subjects; and it was a merry Reflection which I frequently made, How like a King I look'd. First of all, the whole Country was my own mere Property; so that I had an undoubted Right of Dominion. 2dly, My People were perfectly subjected: I was absolute Lord and Law-giver; they all owed their Lives to me, and were ready to lay down their Lives, if there had been Occasion of it, for me. It was remarkable too, we had three Subjects, and they were of three different Religions (Defoe 1990: 241; cf also Roets 1996: 14-22).

This historicising did not happen suddenly. It had, for example, an antecedent in Lessing's *Erziehung des Menschengeschlechts*, in which the downward emanation which one would expect in an implicit neo-platonism such as Lessing's is neglected in favour of the mystical conversion, here represented (under the influence of Ferguson) as a history of the progress of the human species under God's guidance, from the sensuality of "childhood" (Old Testament) via the emotionality of "youth" (New Testament) to the final phase of mature "humanity" (rational insight).²

Rousseau it was, however, who restructured the Hobbesian contrast into a historical dialectic of (civil) culture versus nature. In his early discourses, *On the moral effects of the arts and sciences*, and the discourse *On the origin of inequality* Rousseau wrote about humankind

- 1 Crusoe is reduced to almost the natural state through shipwreck on a deserted island.
- 2 This shift of focus from the metaphysical to the historical in some modern 'neo-platonist' philosophies is also maintained in the works of Goethe in the nineteenth century and in Teilhard de Chardin's form of evolution theory in the twentieth century.

in terms of a historical progress towards practical rationality, feeling his way between a return to nature and the inevitability of progress. In *On the social contract* he very briefly and densely summarised the changes involved in humankind's progress from the natural to the civil state. This implies a movement:

- from instinctual behaviour to justice/morality;
- from physical impulses/right of appetite to the choice of duty;
- from following one's inclinations to consulting reason;
- from a stupid, unimaginative animal to an intelligent being and a man;
- from natural liberty to civil liberty;
- from an unlimited right to everything, to limited proprietorship;
- from liberty determined by strength to liberty determined by the general will, and
- from slavery to impulse, to obedience to self-given law as moral liberty.

Rousseau undoubtedly conceived of the abovementioned contrasts as historical phases in human progress. He described a movement from one state to the other; a process through which the abovementioned changes occur. Though the terms are the same, this clearly does not represent Hobbes's threatening alternatives, but rather two phases in the history of human progress which cannot be converted:

The passage from the state of nature to the civil state, produces a very remarkable change in man, by substituting justice for instinct, and giving his actions the morality they formerly lacked (1916: 18; my italics).³

Significantly, Rousseau did not bother to give an exposition of the metaphysical ontology, although he may not have denied it outright. Referring to the role of God, he rather focused on denying any permanent God-given social structure (as supposed by the Catholic hierarchists). Instead he proposed the *autonomous* rationality of the

3 *Ce passage de l'état de la nature à l'état civil produit dans l'homme un changement très remarquable, en substituant dans sa conduite la justice à l'instinct, et donnant à ses actions la moralité qui leur manquoit auparavant* (Rousseau [1762]: 250).

social contract and the public reason of the state as structuring principles (even establishing a civil religion on this basis) — as if appropriating Defoe's "absolute Lord and Law-giver", but giving a social content to it (cf Venter 1996a: 184 ff). For Rousseau, God does not determine what the state is; rather, the state determines what God is! The only 'crime' for which Rousseau prescribed capital punishment was denying any of the tenets of his civil religion.⁴ Rousseau's world is concentrated in that history which leads up to "public reason" — a totalitarian social organism based on the model of the ancient city state (cf Venter 1996a: 187 ff). In fact, the individual human being has no other destiny than to mature into an organ of public reason:

If [...] they are accustomed to regard their individuality only in its relation to the body of the state, and to be aware, so to speak, of their own existence merely as a part of that of the state, they might at length come to identify themselves in some degree with this greater whole [...] to lift up their spirits perpetually to this great object, and thus to transform into sublime virtue that dangerous disposition which gives rise to all vices (Rousseau 1916: 268).

The significance of presenting the national state as all-encompassing, autonomous, public reason can only be understood against the background of the history of rationality in the West. Through Xenophanes of Colophon's objection against the representation of the divine in the form of a tribe, his substitution of the idea of a single, simple, perceiving-thinking entity, and Parmenides's reception of this as the unity of thinking and its object, interpreted in turn by Aristotle as the supreme 'thinking of thinking' — through all this the *intellectual* (dominated by the logical) was awarded the prized ontological place of the 'supreme aspect' of 'being': suprahistorical, eternal. This was maintained throughout the Middle Ages: the *summum bonum*, *summum ens*, was always considered to be characteristically the 'Supreme Reason' or the 'Supreme Intellect', while human beings were conceived of as images of, or analogical to, the Supreme Reason. Clement of Alexandria,

4 The mode is neo-classicist: reminiscent of the charges against Socrates.

5 'Being' always implied 'valued existence' which was more than just 'to be there'.

Augustine of Hippo, Anselm of Canterbury, and Thomas Aquinas all provide examples. The following is an exemplary compression of this type of ontology in the words of Clement of Alexandria:

Who spired a soul into the human being? Who gave it a sense of justice? One, the craftsman of the universe [...] thus formed a living statue, the human being [...] For the 'image of God' is his Word (*logos*), and the divine Word, the light which is the archetype of all light, is the true Son of the Mind (*nous*); but the image of the Word (*logos*) is the true human being; it is the mind (*nous*) in the human being, who precisely because of this, is being said 'to be created after the image and likeness' of God, for in having a heart with understanding it is likened to the divine Word (*logos*), and in this it is reasonable (*logikos*) (*Protreptikos* 10).

Clement could introduce reason into history only by representing it as the "image" and "likeness" of Reason Itself, which remains above history. Rousseau, however, in setting the autonomy of public reason over against any structuring principle for society, situated Western divine rationality within history (as embodied in the state or "public reason"). Thus he replaced the idea of a supreme, eternal, rational being in control of destiny with the idea of a summit of historical progress (suggesting that he himself was expressing the final phase of history). This is part of his bequest to Kant, Hegel, and Marx. It concerns more than simply an influential view of the state or of society — it was a step in the direction of a novel view of reality as historical.⁶

Given the idea of history advancing to a summit of autonomous rationality, a vexing question comes to the fore. Who is the agent or what is the driving force of history? Rationality in the form of the *Supreme Being* was no more accepted as the unfold and structuring guide of the world and of human life; historical rationality was supposed to do this from the eschatological position of the summit of progress.⁷ But where was the movement of history towards that

6 This leaves us also with the question of the Archimedean point: whence is it possible for a historical, social, individual to have an overview of history while situated inside history?

7 The horizontally conceived immanent end replaced the transcendent vertically idealised supreme being.

summit supposed to come from? We are confronted here with the Lukàcs question: where is the agent of history? It could be 'nature' or 'instinct'; it could be the active rationality of the human species; it could be the 'slyness of (hidden) reason'; it could be the contradictions between productive forces and relations of production. The direction taken (as we shall see from Kant) is that the agent of history is inherent in the making of history by humankind.

2. Broadening the perspective: the Enlightenment

Rousseau serves here as an introduction to the Enlightenment lifeworld — a philosophy become praxis. Before taking our central thesis further, a concentrated exposition of some traits of Enlightenment thought with regard to this thesis is necessary, in order to unpack the nature-culture dialectic — the ontological foundation of the Enlightenment.

Enlightenment thinkers were neither the first, nor the last, to struggle with the relationship between 'nature' (the originally given) and 'culture' (transformations of the original brought about by human action). Philosophical conceptualising of the relationship between nature and culture is to be found in ancient Greek thought (for example in the *physis-nomos* debate among the Sophists, such as Protagoras of Abdera and Callicles of Acharnae), in Aristotle (*physis vs technè*), and throughout the Middle Ages (*natura vs ars*), but it always remained one problem among many philosophical problems. It is the Enlightenment which elevated this question to the paradigmatic position of a historical ontology.

God still functioned in Enlightenment thought, sublimated through pantheistic or quasi-pantheistic discourse into 'nature' as an impersonal power. The impersonal character of this divinity is often confused with deism (transcendence without immanence). Whereas orthodox Christianity assumes the dependence of humankind on a personal transcendent God, the Enlightenment viewed humankind (individually, or socially, or ideally) as progressively liberated by its own powers from the limitations to which the species had been subjected at its origin. Humankind was seen as (on the one hand) an innocent child of nature (Friday in *Robinson Crusoe*) and, on the other

hand, a species on its way to cultural and moral perfection (liberated by its own rational powers). This is the characteristic Enlightenment dialectic of nature and culture.

The nature-culture dialectic provided the two polar opposites between which the faith in progress was accommodated. Progress included human choice (which could go wrong). But the aggregate of choices of a society or an economic community, or the synergy of the members of the body politic as an organic unity, or even humankind as a species, was believed to lead necessarily to progress under the leadership of 'nature' or 'reason' or both. Thus 'freedom' vs 'determinism' correlated analogically and dialectically with 'individual' vs 'social'. But whereas the 'natural' individual was considered to be 'free', and the social situation historically determined, the social situation could nevertheless also mean freedom for the individual from the dangers of the state of nature. Rousseau, for example, on the one hand presented us with the edenic situation of the noble barbarian, but on the other hand also maintained that it was impossible for humankind to continue for ever in this native state. This required the formation of society — with both corruption and progress (a new form of freedom under the general will) as its outcome.

The comforter of the Enlightenment was not some divine paraclete assuring humankind of salvation, but the faith in progress itself. Enlightenment thinkers readily acknowledged that their world was one of voluptuousness, suppression, corruption and murder — filled with evil — but they lived by the expectations of a better world (according to some, like Condorcet, 'very soon' to arrive; others, for example Kant, were somewhat less optimistic). The faith in progress required a human-centred yet human-transcending, teleological idea of 'nature'. Something more than the purely human was needed to guide humankind out of the innocent primal state, yet the process of advancement needed to be realised in and through humankind's freedom itself (the implication of the removal of a structuring Supreme Being).

Enlightenment thinkers emphasised nature and naturalness. 'Nature' in this context did not in the first place refer to what the natural sciences were studying (although these were included), but to

that human-centred yet suprahuman driving force in history (in some sense to be imitated and yet to be suppressed by humans in their cultural activities). Rousseau was somewhat vague on this point (playing around with property relationships which supposedly disturbed original nature), but it is undeniable in the works of Adam Smith and Kant. The Enlightenment's idea of nature was in itself humanistic: it concerned the human problematic, mostly from the side of the lower functions (sentiments, passions, instincts, drives and senses) which served as a base for progress, but had to be overcome and dominated through progress. Thus culture and rationality were introduced as *in* nature but not *of* nature — humankind having been alienated from its 'lower' functions and from nature as its environment. Religious faith fitted nowhere — except if it could be reduced either to the rational or to the emotional (natural). This explains some later reactionary attempts by romantics, realists, and naturalists to recover the 'natural' by giving primacy to the 'lower' functions and the environment, as well as New Age attempts to recover spirituality as 'natural' (making rationality itself appear unnatural).

Enlightenment thinkers differed among themselves about the specific content of nature. Rousseau seems to have limited nature to the original (instinctual) state of humankind, in which individuals were free and propertyless. Hume's idea of nature was somewhat snobbish: it was idealised into the simplicity of the noble human being, as we find expressed in courtly knighthood (the 'naturalness' of the street sweeper or the farmer or woman has no more than amusement value) (Hume 1875: 240; cf also Venter 1995: 136 ff). Adam Smith predicated 'nature' on both the primal state of humankind (the bartering farmer) and on its free, teleologically guided, progress (Smith 1950: 15 ff; cf also Venter 1992a: 324, 327).

Enlightenment 'nature' is a complex and complicated concept. It includes progress (cultural disclosure), but is also in tension with culture (which is the outcome of its power). The conceptions of the relationship were more complicated than simply a 'beginning' vs 'end' relationship: nature was considered as an ever-present shadow in culture, founded in the nature of humankind itself. The necessity associated with progress elevated culture to the dominant position

(the rational summit of history, referred to above) — a situation later inverted by Romanticism.

The dialectical tension thus expressed itself particularly in the role accorded to 'naturalness' within culture. In his earlier works Rousseau expressed a negativity towards culture — a negativity actually directed against a scientised culture (under the influence of 'Cartesian' scientism). In his later works Rousseau clearly indicated the impossibility of surviving in the state of nature — social formation was supposed to bring the necessary survival possibilities through progress. It also brought a vexing question: how can original (natural) freedom be maintained in progressive cultural disclosure? Hume, following Aristotle (cf Venter 1995: 139 ff, Hume 1875: 191 ff, 241-2), searched for the golden mean between simplicity and refinement in culture, yet also wished to serve the 'natural' by leaning towards "simplicity" — in his case the simplicity of courtly knighthood. This gives an indication of the extreme slipperiness of 'the natural' and 'nature' in the Enlightenment context.

Humankind appeared as the bearer of this tension between the idealising of the primal state and the expectation of progress, living a divided life between 'the good old times' and 'waiting for better days'. For humankind was viewed as carrying its own nature along in history, like a shadow present wherever Enlightenment light shone upon it. Nature in itself was viewed as world-immanently teleological, pressurising humankind to transcend its original state through its own efforts and powers. This 'naturalism' both strengthened the polarity in unity of the dialectic and severely complicated the relationship between nature and the *telos* of culture (reason).

'Evil' remained a difficulty for progress-faithful Enlightenment thinkers. Enlightenment thinking — as a philosophy for praxis, expressing itself in the ideals of empowerment, illumination of the mind, emancipation, education, human rights, democracy, religious tolerance, freedom, equality and brotherhood (cf Klapwijk 1986: 38-40) — implied a revolt against the prevailing absence of these ideals (or even the presence of their opposites) as well as an optimistic belief that these ideals could be realised by forces immanent in history (such as education, the democratic state or, idealistically, universal

reason). But the very presence of and role given to 'evil' stamps this optimism as a faith, the self-elevation of reason embodied in the intellectual to an Archimedean point — a point of perspective which both transcends history and encompasses it from beginning to summit ('eternal peace'); a point both intra- and suprahistorical (cf Von Hayek 1952: 553 ff; Venter 1996b: 234 ff).

As in many predestinationist theologies, so in this natural teleology 'evil' was viewed as part of the instruments used by the 'good' (whether nature, society, spirit, reason, or idea) to lead the world to some beatific final state. War, conflict, selfishness, competition, inequality and poverty, were all recognised and acknowledged as 'evil', but simultaneously seen as so many mechanisms by which nature imposes progress. Nature's ends justify her means — the prototype of social Darwinism.

A metaphorisation of Newtonian gravitation provided the mechanical *process* which would equilibrate 'evils' into the final 'good' (cf Venter 1997: 99-106, for a full discussion of the development of equilibrium as a process metaphor in social thought). But until the final stage of rational culture had arrived, humankind was supposed to cope with the pressures impelling it: private vices (Mandeville), state-controlled freedom (Rousseau), selfishness (Smith) or war (Kant). The belief in an equilibrating process leaves us wondering about the intricacies of the relationship between a mechanistically conceived process and an organismically conceived *telos*; but it also confirms our central thesis of 'reality reduced to history', since (at least empirically) the two world pictures, organismic and mechanistic, together cover the Western picturing of reality and throw some contextual light on the curious phenomenon that extremist rationalism in the form of metaphysical idealism capsized towards the organismic world view (eg Hegel and Fichte).

In general, 'nature' was linked in Enlightenment thought to a host of other basic terms like culture, history, progress and freedom. 'Nature' most usually referred to the 'original', the subrational (and thus allows for a development in the direction of rationality), but it has a strong teleological content and is focused in humankind. 'Culture', with rationality as its nucleus, is nature's dialectical antipode: it is both the outcome of the teleology and the opposite of

nature. 'Progress' is the movement of history to ever higher levels of civilization; one could say it is the level of dominance of reason over nature. 'Reason', slumbering initially in nature, encompasses more than Cartesian mathematical thought — it includes and exalts the logic of political or economic or moral praxis. The role of 'freedom' is most difficult to describe — it can be part of the natural condition but it stands in opposition to the traps of the subrational (such as the sensual, the passions and the sentiments); it is present in the social state in direct association with practical rationality, yet melts away in the aggregate of choices, which exhibits a lawlike function.

3. Immanuel Kant

This provides the background for closer scrutiny of Immanuel Kant, in whose work many of these themes matured. It should be noted that Kant was more than an Enlightenment philosopher — he was part of the process of transforming the praxiological philosophy of the Enlightenment into the more abstract format of idealism. From the Enlightenment, however, he adopted the idea of a teleological, human-centred 'nature' in dialectical tension with 'culture', as well as the concept of evil (conflict) as part of the mechanism of progress. As a critical idealist he helped to radicalise the Enlightenment faith in the realisability of ideals, in spite of evil, by elevating such immanently historical ideals to determining realities: the precursor of the hypostatized 'universal reason' or 'idea' or 'concept' of metaphysical idealism or the 'really real' in a platonic sense interpreted now as *a priori*. Kant introduced a new 'transcendence' into immanence, since he recognised that the ideals could not be embodied in individual human beings or in one supposedly synergetic organism, such as the state, without resulting in serious relativism or solipsism.

3.1 Reality as history

In the usual (textbook) summaries of Kant's thought, the focus is on the synthesising or unifying functions of consciousness (sense experience, understanding and judgment), as found in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Little attention is paid to the fact that Kant framed his

analysis of consciousness in the historical setting of the faith in progress: in the original state of animality consciousness is said to be dominated by instinct; in the later, cultural stage, the same consciousness comes under the control of reason.

Kant, finding no rational pattern in the history of mankind, supposed a natural pattern, implying (in spite of his view that the dynamics of history has its origin in human rational freedom) a natural law for history (represented in turn in anthropomorphic or theomorphic terms):

It does not matter how we metaphysically conceive of the freedom of the human will: the appearances thereof, namely the actions of man, are determined under the force of natural law, precisely like every other natural event. [...] Individual people, and even whole nations, do not often think about the fact that they, while striving — everyone in his own way and often in conflict with one another — each for his own goal, unconsciously follow the goal of nature (which is not known to them) as if they are on leading-strings, and are involved in the promotion of that which, if it were known to them, would not have much significance for them (Kant 1975a: 33, my translation).

These words express the philosophical basis of a historiographical method which had become popular by then (and which was implicit in Defoe, Lessing and Rousseau): retropolation into the past and extrapolation into the future — the reconstruction of the original state and the prediction of the future states of human life (expanded into the animal kingdom by evolutionists from the eighteenth century onwards). For the reconstruction of the past, Kant seems to have adopted the principle of uniformity of the geologist James Hutton:

And yet that which one does not dare with regard to the progression of human activities, one can still undertake, with regard to the first beginnings thereof — in as far as nature produces it — by presumption. For about this one may not guess. But one can rap the source of experience, if we suppose that the latter was no better nor worse than we find it today — a supposition which is line with the analogy of nature and does not imply anything daring (Kant 1975a: 38, my translation).

Kant considered it viable to predict eternal peace and a league of nations (for which he even wrote a draft constitution) for the distant

future, on the basis of his belief in and insight into the natural law of progress:

It has been determined that all natural abilities of a creature will one day develop themselves fully and effectively. In man, as the only rational creature on earth, the special natural abilities aimed at the use of his reason need only develop fully in the species, not in the individual [...] We can regard the history of the human species in general as the execution of a hidden plan of nature, to create a perfect legal order, both within and among states, as the only situation in which it can develop all its abilities in mankind (Kant 1975a: 35, 45, my translation; cf also Kant 1975b: 92).

Kant used the 'natural law' to divide human history into (at least) four phases: the dominance of instinct and the awakening of reason; the development of labour; the development of an urban culture, and the development of nations, ending (somewhere in the future) in a league of nations under international law. The vision of the progressive disclosure of the full *rational* potential of humankind is already present in the very basis of this reconstruction of all of human history.

This reconstruction, however, contains a methodological difficulty, particularly with regard to the last of the four phases. The dynamic of progress is driven by conflict, which apparently subverts progress through the downfall of nations, empires and civilizations — there is a tension here. Kant seems to have solved this difficulty by adapting another theory from the natural sciences: this time the 'catastrophism' of Bonnet, according to which organisms advance when natural catastrophes transform embryo-miniatures into higher species. Kant metaphorised real embryos into societal embryos, or rather embryonic civilizations. Thus the revolutionary vision of history (as found in various adaptations in Hegel, Marx, Toynbee, Spengler, Thomas Kuhn and Fritjof Capra) was born. Through and after each catastrophe, according to Kant, a higher civilization emerges:

For if we start with Greek history [...], if one studies the influence of this on Roman history (which swallowed up the Greek state), and the influence of the latter on the barbarians (who in turn brought about the downfall of the latter), up to our own times [...] we shall [...] detect a regular process of improvement of the state structure [...] As long as one only pays attention everywhere to the civil legal order and its laws — in so far as both, by the good which they

contained, served for some time to uplift and glorify nations (and with them also the arts and sciences) but also caused them to collapse, because of the shortcomings inherent in them (but yet in such a way that there always remained a germ of enlightenment, which, developed further by each revolution, prepared another, even higher phase of the development) — then, I think, not only will a guideline reveal itself, which can serve to explain such a confused play of human affairs [...] but also (and this one cannot hope on good grounds without presupposing a plan of nature) a comforting vision into the future will be disclosed, in which the human species will be represented in the remotest future in the way in which it will have worked itself up to such a level at which all the seeds which nature has planted in it could develop to full maturity (Kant 1975a: 48-9, my translation).

In the interplay of method and progress, human history from its inception was conceived of as one of advancement through catastrophe: the awakening of reason, the absorption into community, the succession of communities. Kant thought the shifts to have been accompanied by pain and death, but in each case the embryo for a new higher development was always already present.

These developments were all to happen according to a plan of *nature*, and yet, from another perspective, the inherent powers of humankind itself (nature as reason and reason suppressing nature) were believed to determine the progress. This was represented as a development from brute animality (German: *Tier*), in which instinct (identified with the combination of the senses) initially dominated, but was gradually replaced by the dominance of rationality. Nature's plan consisted in shortchanging humankind in natural abilities, leaving it no other option than to advance by reason:

Nature wanted man to generate everything which transcends the mechanical ordination of his existence, completely from himself, and not to partake of any other beatitude or completeness, but that which it provided to itself; free from instinct, by its own reason. For nature does nothing superfluous [...] It appears as if nature enjoyed itself here in its stinginess, and measured his animal outfit [...] so precisely according to the need of an original existence, as if it wanted that only the human being (itself) should be accorded merit [...] once he has worked himself from the most severe rawness [...] up to beatitude (Kant 1975a: 36, my translation).

In analysing the progress of humankind, Kant played around with the story of Paradise given in Genesis. The fall into sin was read

as the coming of age of reason and choice (progress and catastrophe at the same time). Initially reason did no more than compare the possibilities of satisfying biological urges and needs (which created a 'Kierkegaardian' *Angst*); secondly it assumed a dominance over the drives and needs; next it began to focus on the future (in prediction, expectation, and self-conscious fear of death), with humankind's expectation of a better future for their offspring as the only comfort in their misery.

3.2 Reason

The final phase in the emergence of reason's domination is the most important. In Kant's reading of the Genesis story, humankind instrumentalised other living beings by using them for its own survival. This, however, implied a realisation that it is not acceptable to instrumentalise fellow human beings (one's equals in rationality). This sense of equality, rather than love or benevolence, provided the basis for the formation of societies, according to Kant (vaguely echoing Adam Smith). This completed the pre-social epoch of human history, as a humanising coming-of-age, which meant that reason was finally in power. This implies that Kant, like Rousseau, viewed the social setting as more rational than the pre-social.⁸ In terms of our theme, however, it also explicitly points to the equivalence of ontology with history in Kant's thought:

The fourth and last step (lifting humankind totally above the companionship with animals) which reason took, was that man (although quite faintly) came to understand that he himself was actually the goal of nature, and that nothing which lives on earth can compete with him in this respect [...] And thus man ascended to a certain equality with all rational beings, to whatever rank they may have belonged, namely with reference to the claim that he himself is the goal, to be appreciated as such by every other being, and not to be used by anybody simply as a means to other ends (Kant 1975 b: 90-1, my translation).

8 It is difficult to understand how the realisation of equality and non-instrumentality fits with Kant's explicit acceptance of the war motive as the motor or impetus in this progress.

This really is crucial — humankind as the goal of nature; humankind as itself the goal; humankind as the equal of all rational beings and therefore not to be used by anybody as a means to an end. The discourse is pregnant: the Aristotelian and medieval God as the *summum bonum* and the final goal (*causa finalis*) here finds its equal in *humankind* as the goal of nature. The *desiderium naturale* has lost its transcendent focus. Luther and Calvin would have argued that man is an instrument of God in a radical sense. By establishing man as the equal of all rational beings, however, Kant not only rejected the right of one man to use another as an instrument, but also implicitly that of “all [other] rational beings, to whatever rank they may have belonged” (including God) to use man as instrument. On the one hand Kant proclaimed nature to be the voice of God and the supreme planner; on the other hand he set rational man up as equal to God in rationality. Given the position of reason in history, this surely is historicising a complete vision of reality (or ontologising history), in the sense that both the ‘bottom’ of reality (nature) and its summit (complete rationality) are included in the phased historical progress.

In his *Metaphysic of Morality* Kant used radical terminology to express the idea of man as the goal — expressions such as “something, the existence of which has *absolute* value in itself”; “something which, *as an end in itself*, can be a ground of definite laws” (Kant 1901: 245). This is a much stronger statement of human autonomy than that of Rousseau, and it finds expression in the third formula of the will-generated, universal moral law of nature, the categorical imperative, which prescribes the use of human beings always as end, never as a means (Kant 1901: 246). On the one hand reason idealises a universal kingdom of ends which binds together all of humankind in freedom (a substitute for Rousseau’s totalitarian state). But, on the other hand, reason is power imposed onto and dominating nature — on the moral (practical) plane by suppressing the enslaving animality of man (animals may be instrumentalised), and on the theoretical level by imposing natural laws onto the physical universe (Kant 1968: 3).⁹

9 The relationship between culture and nature in this case remains an extremely complicated dialectic.

Kant explicitly related his ontology of historical progress to the nature-culture dialectic in a defensive interpretation of Rousseau. From the perspective of the *history of nature*, the beginning ('paradise' and 'fall') was good since it was God's work. But from the perspective of the *history of freedom*, Kant says, it was evil, since it was human work. Man (as an individual) had to bear the catastrophes caused by his own culpable choice, while as part of the whole (a theodicee?) he had to admire the wisdom of the ordination as serving the complete development of the species. Thus Kant interpreted the early writings of Rousseau as pointing to a conflict between culture and the physical potential of the individual to fully attain his destiny, while later (in the *Social Contract* and *Emile*) Rousseau is supposed to have attempted to solve the problem of how culture had to advance to educate humanity, as a moral species, to perfection, so that the moral species would no more be in conflict with the natural species, for this conflict is the cause of all disasters. Kant saw some hope for the elimination of this conflict:

In the meantime the stimuli towards promiscuity, which in such a case is blamed, [are] in themselves good and, as natural capabilities, efficient, but these capabilities, since they are only focused upon the natural state, suffer destruction by the advancing culture, while this in turn is taken down by the natural abilities, until perfect art becomes nature again — this is the last goal of the moral destination of the human species (Kant 1975b: 94-5, my translation).

The discourse of Kant is terse, but one can feel in it something of the historical ontology of Marx (the utopian harmony of culture and nature in the disappearance of the division of labour). An early 'romanticism' surfaces here — finally the power of culture over nature (the consciousness that, for reason, nature is no more than a phenomenon) returns to a position of culture in nature and nature in culture: an almost Hegelian unification of thesis and antithesis.

In summary: the two extremes of Kant's hierarchy of progress, nature and culture, give the framework of his ontology. Their relationship is one of inverted dominance: nature dominates initially, but through the historical phases nature provides for a planned dominance of reason over nature. Yet nature remains in the final sense, when culture and nature unite. One could, with equivalence,

substitute slavery to instinct for nature and freedom of rational judgment or autonomy for culture. It is important to note that the two sets of terms are in opposition, yet the dominance of the one results in the domination of the other over time in a phased process of empowerment. This historical process is viewed as progress (or Enlightenment) by Kant.

4. Some nineteenth-century thinkers: Hegel, Comte, Marx, Darwin

Once the historicising of reality in the eighteenth century is understood, it becomes easier to understand the dialectic of Idea, Nature, and Spirit in Hegel. Hegel radicalised rationalism; it was impossible for him to accept the important role given to nature by Rousseau and Kant. Nature (for Hegel) is itself Idea (logic, reason) in its (Böhmean) state of self-alienation, and rational freedom, culture, the Spirit (especially as Objective Spirit), is Idea enriched by its fusion with Nature and re-united with its true self (cf Venter 1995: 169-79).

Comte's dynamic law of the intellect (the three stades law), is primarily an exposition of the manner in which the static law was supposed to guide the intellect progressively away from childlike speculative attempts to cope with the incomprehensible power of nature (the overwhelmingly "sublime" in Kant) in terms of subjective explanations ('why?'), towards adult positive control of these powers (nature as 'only a phenomenon') through objective registration of regular relationships ('how?'). The pretence of objectivity and of submission to natural law hides the motive of dominance and power, which is only unmasked when the aim of control and social engineering is brought to light. The establishment of a cult of the Great Being, Humanity, in *Catechisme positiviste* (cf Comte 1957) was not the musings of a perturbed mind, but the logical consequence of the motive of domination of nature hidden in the belief in progress, which in Comte's case assumed a scientific form (rather than the practicalist rationalism of the Enlightenment). In Comte freedom becomes the victim, for it is reduced to behaviour

in conformity to natural law, and thus becomes the 'freedom' of the scientist to technical manipulation.

And in Marx's positivistic mind-over-matter game, matter itself becomes cultured in the process of its domination by man — what men are, is what and how they produce in relation to their physical environment (Marx 1977: 160). The history of consciousness and culture remains the dialectically inverted reflection of the history of production (Marx 1977: 172). Finally, the split between mind and matter (alienation) and the dominance of the mental over the material returns to harmony when the division of labour disappears in (yet another!) final phase of history (Marx 1977: 189-91) — the summit as the product of progress through regression. "Contradiction" and "revolution" are the Marxian equivalents of Kant's "defects" and "catastrophes".¹⁰ Marx knows no other reality than historically cultivated material nature.

Darwin's metaphor of 'natural selection', working through "the war of all against all" (cf Darwin 1968: 115-6; Venter 1996b: 214 ff) provides the avenue for his retroprojective method: projecting the competition motive and selective breeding programmes from his contemporary culture onto millions of years of the linearly progressing 'natural history' of the past. Humankind's 'lower' functions are completely included in this naturally selective breeding process, but (again!) somehow the socio-moral function immanently transcends it through the mechanism of the balance of short- and long-term instincts (cf Darwin 1906: 945-6). And Freud compressed the nature-culture dialectic back into the personal psychological history of the individual in terms of the struggle between the superego (socio-cultural control) and the id (natural desire).

To summarise: major thinkers — not only philosophers — of the nineteenth century followed the lead of the eighteenth century and developed their thought in terms of the history of progress. Reason is still at the summit for them, though all too often reduced to

10 These are reiterated in Kuhn's (1975) "anomalies", "crises" and "revolutions" in the history of science, but without the 'summit', since the belief in progress has collapsed.

scientific (scientistic) or even deductive rationality. The progressive elevation of humankind to the status of master of nature remained, even where a kind of naturalism reduced human freedom to the likeness of a free-falling stone. The Comtean cult of Humanity as the Great Being of the final positive phase of historical progress expresses in a spiritual way the Kantian formula that humankind is a goal in itself. The pretence of expressing the final phase and summit of history is conspicuous in some thinkers (Hegel, Marx, Comte).⁸

5. Irrationalism

Reality as history in the format of the nature-culture dialectic remains as at least one important form of Western thought after the eighteenth century. The inversion of progress (the idea of a return to nature or the dominance of the natural) became stronger as irrationalism took hold. The *a priori* acceptance of progress became doubtful; in some cases this ended in a pessimistic atmosphere of decline (Spengler); in others in an activist attempt to create progress (Pragmatism). And, with irrationalism, the belief in universal norms (inherent in the first meaning of 'ideology' as the science of the Idea) and in man as the moral species collapsed and was displaced by 'realism', 'naturalism', 'romanticism' ('sentiment-alism'), the brutalisation of 'ideology' into the truth of the leader, and technocratic managerialism as the kindest form of 'personality cult'.

Irrationalism and its consequences are already found in Nietzsche. The theory of evolutionary progress (with its retroprojective method) is here organismically complemented by a theory of decline, completing the self-repeating historical cycle of eternal recurrence (Nietzsche 1964: 241-7). One can therefore visualise the cycle of recurrence as a circle of which the halves represent the evolutionary (progressive) and the degenerative (regressive) phases respectively. But one could also divide the cycle into the Dionysian lower half (nature), and the Apollinian upper half (culture) (cf Nietzsche 1920:

8 This leaves us with the question of the validity of the pretence: how is such an overview of history, cosmic in its intention, possible from a position immanent in history?

20 ff). Evolutionary progress from the Dionysian to the Apollinian overcomes the natural (as animality), and a romantic return from the Apollinian culture to the Dionysian nature represents the complete reality for Nietzsche. Nietzsche's eternal recurrence nears pantheism in its organismic representation of history (also expressed in occult symbols such as the eagle and the serpent in Zarathustra), and thus also nihilism: for if everything is divine, then the arbitrary will of the most powerful in the upward struggle holds — as D H Lawrence concluded (cf Venter 1996b: 220 ff). Reality is a self-enclosed mystical historical cycle — no more.

Along another line, irrationalism found expression in the feminist literary ridicule of male rationalism, the recovery of nature in the depths of the stream of female experience, and the search for a deeper experiential link with the environment both as brute and as bride, in the works of Virginia Woolf, notably *Orlando* and *To the Lighthouse*. The attempt to recover the natural may explain the focused interest in matters of the body in the twentieth century. Rationality has made itself 'unnatural'; the logical is plunged into a struggle for legitimacy in the face of different forms of the subrational (including biotic life and the environment) claiming to be the only natural or authentic form.

And if one combines Rousseau's belief in the educative power of the state with Nietzsche's idea of the governing will to power, the result is the main tenets of Mussolini's historical ontology (the state as the spiritual, the eternal; the individual as the transient material) (Mussolini 1935: 7-12, 141; cf Venter 1992b: 202). The universal norms of rationalism are concentrated in the leader as the personification of the state's will to power. The Sartrean form of historicised reality, situationist individual world construction (as in *Qu'est-ce que la littérature*), knew no way forward with the ideology of the state (or nation) concentrated in the leader.

The nature-culture dialectic persists in present-day culture, such as the neo-Romanticism found in films like *A River Runs Through It* and *Dead Poets' Society*. The latter, for example, may unmask the dead bones of rationality, tradition and convention (culture), but it leaves us also with the catastrophe of simply following pleasure and passion (nature), and yet idealises the hedonistic teacher in his recovering of

the natural in the boys. Another presently popular form of neo-Romanticism is the cosmic evolutionism of the New Age movement. In New Age thinking the cosmos itself is God in development. And real spiritual life is to be in harmony with the spiritual forces in the universe which, in this pantheism, implies a harmony with nature also. The technical mastery of nature is replaced by a romantic and mystical recovery of the natural (the non-rational, the feminine) in humankind and in the environment (cf Venter 1992b: 203ff).

6. Conclusion

This article has aimed at contributing to the understanding of modern thought by pointing to a shift which has generally gone unnoticed: the historical turn of the eighteenth century. It is an attempt to show, with the help of selected examples from the Western intellectual tradition (touching on various areas of the intellectual tradition, not only philosophy), that at the heart of the eighteenth century lies a shift from a hierarchical ontology with God at its summit to a historical ontology with rational man at the eschatological summit of progress. This is not to deny that one can characterise this shift as 'rationalism' in the sense that reason has become an absolute point of reference in this historical ontology; but for the present essay the focus was the structure of the historical turn as such. Defoe and Rousseau (in contrast to the static view of Hobbes) are examples of the gradual shift away from the idea that God structures the world in the direction of the belief that reason structures the world through autonomous mastery of nature. The relationship between 'nature' and 'culture' shows a dialectic — the first 'gives birth' to the second, yet there is an opposition and a struggle between the two, which in terms of the faith in progress is (or will be) finally won by rational culture.

Some important rationalist thinkers of the nineteenth century, such as Hegel, Comte, Marx and Darwin, have retained the historical approach to reality, in terms of the nature-culture dialectic, although sometimes hidden by the limitations of technocratic scientism (as in Comte). This shows that the historical ontology had established itself and provided the framework of thought for major thinkers. It determined the focus of writing — a cosmos centred in humankind —

and the interpretation of basic terms ('matter' contextualised in production by Marx). Though this essay has not proceeded so far, one could surely follow these lines through to present-day thinkers by focusing on the heirs of Hegel, Comte and Marx.

Another line traced is that of irrationalistic thought, especially where it reveals a romantic tendency. This current retained the nature-culture dialectic but proposed a return to nature as the subrational in the human being and the environment. This clearly shows that the historical turn, although now with its basic terms inverted, remains a factor in irrationalist thought. That it occurs not only in Nietzsche (a philosopher), but also in Virginia Woolf and D H Lawrence, in present-day cultural products such as films, as well as in popular thinking like the New Age philosophy, gives an indication that the historical turn is still an ontology to be reckoned with. Careful investigation may show it to have had a much wider impact than the present limited detection of its traces has shown. It may, for instance, be possible to show that Foucault's focus on historical epistemes in *Les mots et les choses* and his later interest in networks of power still reveals the blinkers of the historical ontology. It may also be demonstrable that the power structures of late capitalist technocracy still express the motive of cultural mastery of nature by man (albeit now without the normative moderating power of reason).

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