

The Question of Nihilism and the Knowledge of Being



Jünger, Nietzsche, and Heidegger on Nihilism

The aim of the present chapter is to determine the character or nature of (theoretical) nihilism. To do this, we will have to take up some complex questions concerning being and knowledge. We will touch upon both of them, and then seek to broaden and deepen our understanding in the following chapters of this first part.

Can nihilism be considered the “normal” condition of humanity today? Rather than trying to give a complete answer to this question, I intend to focus on a fundamental dimension of nihilism: namely, the *theoretical* one. Despite the myriad of analyses, can we really say that the essence of nihilism is immediately clear for us? This is highly doubtful. On the other hand, E. Jünger makes the particularly germane observation that “[d]efining nihilism is not unlike identifying the cause of cancer. The identification of the cause is not itself a cure but is preliminary to a cure. . . . To a large degree, to understand nihilism means to understand it as a historical process.”¹ Jünger makes several notable assertions here: there is still no adequate definition of nihilism; a definition needs to be sought; perhaps nihilism is a sickness akin to cancer, but hopefully can be cured; and its process is historical and universal.

Heidegger’s diagnosis is drastic inasmuch as he claims that metaphysics has always failed in its attempt to individuate the nature of nihilism: “Nietzsche never recognized the *essence* of nihilism, like every other metaphysics before him.”² Heidegger’s position only appears similar to Jünger’s, insofar as he claims to have already reached what Jünger only hopes to

attain: the nature of nihilism. We thus find ourselves asking the unavoidable question: What is nihilism? And is there such a thing as *theoretical* or *speculative* nihilism? If so, what is its essence? If such a thing does exist then the question as to whether it constitutes, in the final analysis, the decisive element of *every* nihilism—that element which casts a wide and decisive shadow over all reality—must remain open.

At first, we must point out that in our own time, “nihilism” is usually taken to mean a philosophical-cultural complex marked with at least some of the following characteristics: (1) the destruction of every sure foundation (Nietzsche’s announcement that “God is dead” expresses the crumbling of every meaningful foundation); (2) the denial of any finality of man or the cosmos, such that reality appears as a variable mixture of meaningless horizons: existence has no goal, the energy of life tends to nothing, and becoming has no final end; (3) the reduction of the subject to mere functionality; (4) all judgments of value are equally valid (such an assertion can easily be twisted to mean the following: every value judgment is invalid—or rather, value shows no connection to being anymore, but rather emerges from the obscure depths of subjective freedom). Nihilism thus has several aspects. But even in its last form as moral nihilism—a form that seems to tower over the cultural scene, both in the “moderate and urbane” version according to which all moral values are subjective and chosen only on the basis of individual preference, and in the radical version according to which any distinction between good and evil is effaced—reveals only a few elements that help determine nihilism’s essence. In fact, moral nihilism would not be possible without an underlying theoretical nihilism. When the vehement critique of all morals, as well as the will to power, made their appearance, nihilism’s dialectic had already passed through various stages and made most of its major decisions. K. Löwith offers a similar analysis in less speculative and more historical-spiritual terms in his book *European Nihilism. Reflections on the Spiritual Antecedents of the European War* (Laterza: C. Galli ed., 1999). If metaphysics searches for and formulates a response to the question of being and truth, then delving into speculative thought cannot but lead to the realm of morals. It would be a mistake for us to think that we have reached the heart of nihilism if we fail to reestablish contact with the central questions of metaphysics.

While there is considerable agreement among various descriptions of the symptoms and effects of nihilism, a search for its roots opens room for many disagreements that will have a decisive effect on discussions about how to overcome it. Any attempt to overcome an occurrence whose causes are unknown is futile. Jünger’s assessment at least puts us on the right methodological path—a path trodden previously by thinkers such as Nietzsche and Heidegger. While the two most remarkable strains of nihilism in contem-

porary culture proceed from Nietzsche and Heidegger, we must remember that not only are there other thinkers who reflected on the essence of nihilism, but there are those who show a nihilistic bend or who build their philosophy on an implicitly nihilistic foundation. Gentile's philosophy is worth mentioning in this regard.³

It is worth noting that for Nietzsche nihilism means devaluing the supreme values that belong to the supersensible world of Platonic metaphysics (from which the entire metaphysics of the West draws its inspiration), insofar as those values are no longer capable of informing history and must be replaced by a new set of values arising from the will to power (active nihilism). The old metaphysics was viewed from the perspective of "value" which should now be replaced with the will to power. According to Nietzsche, the division between the sensible world and the supersensible one (or "true world") is not only the essence of Platonism but of all metaphysics. Through this division, the supersensible world, God, ideas, moral laws, truth, etc. are progressively eliminated in an epochal dialectic forged with the sledgehammer of the will to power—which is part of being itself—and with the counterforce of life-values. At the root of this dialectic is the nihilistic idea that there is no response to the question "why." Inasmuch as truth—which is now dissolved into an infinite number of interpretations—does not exist anymore, and the intellect is incapable of offering an adequate response, a new experiment is called for. Perhaps humanity will be doomed by it, Nietzsche observes, adding: "Oh well. Let it be!"—since nihilism might be humanity's last chance. Perhaps this experiment might reach an active, affirmative, and complete nihilism. In order for this to happen, nihilism must be extreme, asserting itself as the paradigm of the spirit's highest power: a "divine" way of thinking according to the dictates of Dionysius.

For Heidegger, metaphysics is inherently incapable of thinking "being" and "ontological difference." Metaphysics itself is nihilism, because it turns to the question of *ens* rather than "being" (*esse*). It is only onto-logy: "Oblivious of being and of its own truth, Western thinking since its beginning has constantly thought beings as such. . . . This thinking that has remained oblivious of being itself is the simple and all-bearing (and for that reason enigmatic and unexperienced) event of Western history, which meanwhile is about to expand itself into world-history. . . . The interpretation of the supersensory world, the interpretation of God as the highest value is not thought on the basis of being."⁴ All of metaphysics, as metaphysics, has forgotten being; its history, therefore, insofar as it is the history of the truth of *ens*, is the very essence of nihilism: "Nowhere do we meet a thinking that thinks the truth of being itself and thereby truth itself as being. . . . The history of being begins—necessarily begins—with the *forgottenness of being*."⁵ Consequently, nihilism, which was a necessary companion along

the metaphysical journey, “is the fundamental movement in the story of the West,” finding its highpoint in the “Nietzsche problem.” Nietzsche’s thought is understood as the final stage of the entire Western metaphysical enterprise: “[S]ince metaphysics, through Nietzsche has deprived itself of its own essential possibility in certain respects, and therefore to that extent other possibilities of metaphysics can no longer become apparent. After the metaphysical reversal carried out by Nietzsche, all that is left to metaphysics is to be inverted into the dire state of its non-essence.”⁶ In Heidegger’s estimation, metaphysics is in error because it has not reflected on the truth of being. This error, however, is to some extent necessary as being escapes and hides: “In its essence metaphysics would be the unthought—because withheld—mystery of being itself.”⁷

The Nature of Nihilism

Two incommensurable analyses of the nature of nihilism emerge from our considerations so far: nihilism as the devaluation of supreme values and as the forgetting/oblivion of being. Our considerations thus lead to a further question: Have the depths of the problem of nihilism been completely plumbed by Nietzsche and Heidegger? Has its nature been truly grasped and its foundation understood? To answer these questions we will have to engage in a radical determination of the problem, which involves the nature of thought as well as the questions of being and metaphysics. The methodological principle from which we begin our reading of nihilism is summed up with the idea that its determination is a *theoretical* act, because only on the basis of a knowledge of the truth of being can we establish the nature of nihilism. This is the first step we must make: a step all the more important when we consider that the contours of nihilism are still vague.

The task of philosophy, as repeatedly proposed since ancient times, can be summarized as the attempt to answer a question: What is being? (Aristotle made this observation, even though he maintained that the question could be reduced to another: namely, “What is substance?” In asking this question about being as such, we are seeking the truth in the sense that the original and primary essence of truth lies in its relation to being and its manifestation of being.) On the other hand, our investigation revolves around the essence of speculative nihilism, which in every time and place has been precisely what it is today. So if we hold up to our mind’s eye the term *nihilism* and focus on it, we know that it alludes to “nothing,” and perhaps more precisely to a “rendering into nothing” or “annihilation.” And what is annihilated in theoretical nihilism if not the truth of being? *Speculative nihilism therefore concerns the process of annihilating the truth of being*, which can occur to various degrees until it culminates in a final and

complete negation. Nihilism proceeds by the *forgetting of being*, which is connected to the abandonment of *real knowledge*: that is, to an *antirealist paradigm*. The result of this process is summed up (cf. chapter 15) in the crisis of the doctrine of epistemic knowledge, as well as in the substitution of contemplative freedom directed at truth—whose aim is knowledge—with the will to power and utility.

Realism and antirealism are determinations of thought, not of being. They both concern the spirit in its quest to relate to and to attain knowledge of the real. Thought is ultimately measured by that which stands in front of it. To exist in the presence of being and to be grounded in the transparency of knowing it: this is realism. Its opposite is theoretical nihilism. The starting point of any misguided theory of cognition—which occurs whenever we presume to reach being by starting with the abstract, the logical, or with a priori forms—is found precisely in our failure stay connected with reality. These initial suggestions will suffice for the moment to clarify why we assign a quite different meaning to “nihilism” than those used by Nietzsche or Heidegger. Do we call it “nihilism” because through it being falls into nothingness? Do we call it “nihilism” because it seeks to reflect on the nature of nothingness? Or do we call it “nihilism” because it leaves Leibniz’s above-quoted question unanswered? No matter how fundamental these questions are, none of them comes into play in the reflection upon theoretical nihilism. Rather, our interest is the ontological-gnoseological problem of the truth of being and our knowledge of it. Hence, I intend to use the expression “speculative nihilism” explicitly in its connection to the denial of realism through a process that seeks to clarify the “pathological” (i.e., nihilism) in light of the “normal” (i.e., realism) and vice versa.

If *nihilism*, *the forgetting of being*, and *antirealism* constitute a triad where each member is implied by the other, we still need to determine more thoroughly both the noetic-ontological process through which they are woven together and the process that refuses to embrace being as the highest good of the intellect. It seems that the latter is related to a deviation from the normal way we intend knowledge and the relationship between thinking and being (and, in the final analysis, the very essence of truth). It eschews the intellect’s orientation toward the object, its true homeland, and thus falls into a forgetting of being. By referring to the concept of truth, we place ourselves at the center—or rather at the height—of nihilism, because its apex consists precisely in the abandonment of the notion of truth as conformity of thought and things: in other words, the idea that there is no structure in things by which thought can measure itself because of an *unsurpassable chasm between thought and being*. This was the step which Nietzsche took and Heidegger repeated, for both of them, in different ways, inherited modern dualism and representationalism.

I would thus offer the following analysis: the essence of speculative nihilism consists (and has its origin) in the incapacity to reach being through eidetic-judicative visualization. This fundamental event is strictly tied to the metaphysical crisis of the intellect (*intellectus/nous*) and hence to the abandonment of intellectual intuition: the intellectual intuition of being reached through judgment. According to the picture I have sketched—the details of which chapter 3 will fill in—the intellect, the highest level of man's cognitive faculty (even higher than discursive activity, which belongs to reason [*ratio*]), is understood as a *faculty of being and of first principles*, or as an “ontological sense” radically diverse from Kant's a priori faculty which is not perceptive but rather synthetic-constructive.⁸ The decisive question hinges upon the issue of whether *intelligere* is understood as *intus legere* or *inter-ligare*. The first term alludes to a noetic apperception of reality in which the intellect celebrates its marriage with the being of things and actualizes itself in contact with the nucleus of intelligibility and the mystery contained in being. Otherwise, if we follow Kant's critique, the intellect works only as a connective faculty, imposing a priori forms onto sensible material: consequently, the process of cognition is divided into sensible intuition and the constructive, formative operation of the intellect which is never intuitive on its own. (It is relevant to observe here that this completely transforms the idea of truth: “truth” remains a kind of conformity but not a conformity between intellect and thing: it is rather the conformity of a representation with the laws of a priori unification of the spirit.)

From this emerges a further determination of theoretical nihilism which I would like to explain: once the immediate intentional relationship between thought and being is obscured, we cut ourselves off from the noetic apprehension of things so that it is no longer possible to answer the question “why.” Hence, we deprive the intellect of one of its principal tasks. It seems to me that the refusal to admit even a partial immediacy is typical of most philosophical positions today. We can even say that such a denial is the very entryway into the dominions of both fallibilistic epistemology and the hermeneutics of infinite interpretation. The importance of immediacy, however, concerns not interpretation but perception. The phenomenon attests to itself. It “gives a reason” for itself, as Husserl rightly maintains: “This is the principle of all principles: that every intuition originally offering itself is a legitimate source of knowledge—that everything which offers itself to our ‘intuition’ in an original way (in its flesh-and-blood reality, so to speak)—is to be accepted just as it gives itself” (*Ideas*, I, §24).

The nature of speculative nihilism is therefore defined most rigorously as the *forgetting of being*, *antirealism*, and the *denial of the notion of truth as conformity of the mind with the thing*. This seems to culminate in the complete abandonment of the intellect in favor of the will (Nietzsche), in

the resolution of the entire process of reality into a pure act or “autoctisis” (“auto-creation” or “self-constitution”) of the transcendental *ego* (Gentile), and in the destruction of the concept of truth as *adaequatio* or conformity (Heidegger). The reduction of knowledge to a never-ending interpretation, the absolute conventionalism of opting for axioms and language, the fallibilism that dissolves every philosophical assertion, and finally the unconditional self-certitude of calculative domination, all appear as stops along the road to theoretical nihilism. Along this path it seems impossible to give answers to the three questions that, according to Kant, encompass the entire task of philosophy: What can I know? What must I do? What can I hope for? We cannot answer the second and third questions insofar as there is no satisfactory response to the first. Corresponding to theoretical nihilism as antirealism are the “infinity of interpretations,” “antifoundationalism,” and the reduction of philosophy to a literary genre with no claim to truth. This is asserted in various ways by authors ascribing to contemporary contextualism including Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, Vattimo et al.

According to our analysis, nihilism and philosophical realism place themselves on opposite trajectories. With realism, the split between the world of thought and the world of things inaugurated by Descartes, pursued by Kant, and re-proposed by logical empiricism and again by various sectors of radical hermeneutics, is overcome. The antirealistic attitude easily becomes a smokescreen for voluntarism insofar as the will seeks to become the master of being since being cannot be known by the intellect.

Another aspect of major importance that merits our consideration is this: the opposition between the two triads—“realism, antinihilism, and the idea of truth” and “antirealism, nihilism, and the crisis of the idea of truth”—suggests a connection with the notion of “person,” insofar as nihilistic philosophies are also philosophies of the “*neuter*” since they refuse to recognize a proper sense of personal existence. They are not personalist philosophies. In Nietzsche and Gentile we find a significant overcoming, and finally an elimination, of the personal subject. In Heidegger’s case, it is enough to note, and I borrow this observation from Lévinas, that in his world we meet trees, fields, and rocks more than persons.

We can at least propose a strong thesis and then try to back it up: namely, the alternative between realism and nihilism is immediately also an alternative between personalism and nihilism. By leaving aside both the *cogito ergo sum* and the attempt to establish a complete philosophical system on pure reflection, realist philosophies formulate the Cartesian dictum in the following way: *res sunt, ergo ego cogito res*. Neither do these philosophies stop here: they also maintain that the highest level and mode of existence is existence in a personal form. Far from being an inadequate “thing-ism” which itself leads to the primacy of *neuter* (the *it*), *Seinphilosophie* recognizes

the importance of the “I” and the “you” as personal pronouns. Thinking about the “I” and the “you” is therefore a dialogical philosophy that leads to a *metaphysics of the first person*, which on the theological side includes the conception of God as absolute Person. This conception, already evident in Aristotelian philosophy and its articulation of God as thought thinking itself (we do not know personal subjects without thought, just as we know no thought that does not adhere to a personal subject), reaches an apex in the self-revelation of the divine name: *Ego sum qui sum*. God is the absolute “I,” and that absolute “I” is being itself, an infinite ocean of existence. God is at the same time *esse ipsum* and the supreme “I.”

From the potent seed of antirealism, the forgetting of being, and the critique of the notion of truth, along with the intervention of the will, sprout two further troubling aspects of nihilism. The first one is the denial of the principle of reality, a clear anti-creationist thrust, and an anti-paternal resentment: it is worth noting that contemporary forms of nihilism negate creation and give voice to the philosophy of de-creation, according to which everything that exists is worthy of perishing within the context of a complete odium of existence (Dostoevsky perceives this element of nihilism with extraordinary acuity in his creation of the character of Stavroghin). The second involves a complete loss of contact with being resulting in a lack of meaning, purpose, and reason, to the point that Nietzsche presents an even deeper qualification of nihilism: “nihilism: it lacks an end, it lacks a response to the question ‘why?’” It implies a perpetual lack of meaning that culminates in the doctrine of “eternal return” or “eternal recurrence” (*Ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*). At the inner core of nihilism we encounter an attitude that can be summed up as follows: “It makes no sense to ask ourselves about being and reality; we can only ask ourselves how we should proceed to transform things.” Later we shall return to these important themes and examine further Nietzsche’s justification for these descriptions.

Realism and Real Knowledge

The abandonment of the doctrine of intellect and intellectual intuition leaves a gap between thought and being which we must now analyze by starting with the realistic premise that knowledge does not terminate in an idea or concept, but leads to the thing itself. It does this in the sense that the object (either sensible or intellectual, though here we are referring to the latter) immediately attained in the knowing act is the thing itself and not some substitute for it. There is no reason for us to believe, however, that there is nothing of the real behind the idea (as Berkeley maintained), or that there is something that remains absolutely unknowable to us (as Kant held when he introduced the *noumenon*); rather, we must maintain

that the *idea is the thing itself insofar as it has become an object of thought, "living" intentionally in thought: "id quod intelligitur primo est res, cuius species intelligibilis [i.e., the concept] est similitudo."*⁹ Through the mediation of the concept, therefore, the real object is attained. By proffering one or many concepts, intelligence becomes the thing itself, considered according to one or another of its various aspects, while never forgetting that the thing enjoys two forms of existence: one in the spirit and the other outside the mind. In order to avoid equivocation, we must recall that the meaning of "thing" is of course not reducible to a material thing that can be seen and touched. That would make realism nothing but a banal "thing-ism." "Thing," which translates the Latin *res*, is a transcendental, and signifies all that can become the term of a knowing act.

According to Thomas Aquinas and his commentators, knowledge does not pertain to the predicament of "action," but rather of "quality"; it is an immanent spiritual becoming in which the subject, by knowing the "other," is perfected by hosting within itself the form of the "other." In the cognitive act, intelligence not only conceives "being" by forming a concept of it, but in conceiving it, it perceives and reaches it. Because it is an object of formal—as opposed to total—abstraction, the concept of being is not the most generic and empty of concepts (as Hegel thought), but is, rather, analogous and transcendental.

On the basis of John of St. Thomas's analysis, the act of knowing effects a spiritual or immaterial *identity* in which the knower becomes the other as other (*fit aliud in quantum aliud*): "*cognoscentia autem in hoc elevatur super non cognoscentia, quia id quod est alterius ut alterius . . . possunt in se recipere*" (knowing subjects raise themselves above non-knowing things by the fact that they can receive within themselves that which is properly of the other as other).¹⁰ In the cognitive act one becomes *the other*, not just *other*. It is immediately clear that a great abyss separates these two formulas. To become the other as other means to accept otherness *totally*, but precisely as *totally other*. It is an acceptance rendered possible by the unlimited intentional opening of the spirit, and on the practical plane by responsibility, care, and *agape* for the other. Insofar as it is a faculty of being, *intelligence is a faculty of the other*, a process in which the other is far from reduced to an inanimate, "dead," or impersonal being. The reduction of otherness to the "I" and his identity represents a phase in the crisis of the doctrine of knowledge. What I am proposing here is that the other is the true nourishment and lifeblood of intelligence. Among several authors who err on this decisive point is Lévinas, who maintains that thought conformed to the object implies a closure against the infinite, and in the end a philosophy of power and injustice.¹¹ But the intellect's opening and its quest of conformity with "the other" rather involves an acknowledgment

of inadequacy, especially with respect to the infinite, toward which we are inadequate par excellence. Lévinas has rightly protested against the idea that to know is to identify the other with oneself—with the transcendental “I” that dissolves all otherness (we can think of the Gentile’s actualism). He has shown the need for a metaphysics disconnected from power and domination by returning to formulas that, in their insistence on otherness, demonstrate their affinity with the formulas of the philosophy of being.

The intentional identity between intellect and object which occurs in the original opening of thought toward being (which Parmenides had already foreseen) is the most basic truth and fundamental condition of judicative conformity.¹² Naturally, truth understood as “conformity” cannot be reduced to a notion of “truth” akin to a static or passive photograph of the real. According to John of St. Thomas, knowledge is always a spiritual process that does not consist in acting transitively upon a thing or in the production of a thing; it is a process in which the subject carries within itself the form of the other in such a way that in the cognitive act, a communion between subject and thing occurs, each of which remains distinct in being. It is a communion that manifests an intentional unity between knower and known so intimate that they form an even greater unity than that of matter and form. While the latter arises from an entitative composition, the former is immaterial and intentional. Intelligence would simply turn upon itself and produce nothing but representations of itself if it did not know something new and if it were not open to otherness and nourished by it.¹³

In these last considerations, a fundamental happening/event comes to light: human reason can never operate in an a-personal way: there are no impersonal functions of the spirit. Even though Popper had spoken of an “epistemology without a knowing subject” when he hypothesized a neat separation between the cognitive act of the mind and the proposition arising from it, such that the truth would not belong to the knowing “I” but pertain exclusively to propositions (the “world three,” to use his terminology), we believe that such a position would jettison the personal character of the relationship between intellect and object in the sense that human knowledge implies two poles: the personal individuality of the act of knowing and the universality of the object (being). If the entire person thinks and wills, any suggestion of an epistemology without a subject comes curiously close to the Averroistic thesis of the unicity of the intellect.

In the act of knowing, Spirit, World, and Being are related to one another from the beginning in virtue of the intentional opening of the spirit to the whole: *anima est quodammodo omnia*. According to Aquinas, the soul exists in man as the *situs* of all forms, such that it becomes in a certain way the totality of beings by receiving within itself all of them in the multiplicity of their manifestations.¹⁴ Intelligence is an open and new

life in the sense that spiritual beings live, besides their own life, the life of other beings. By means of the intellect, a cognitive relationship—not one of domination—is formed with the real. It leaves being to “be” as it is, but knows it nonetheless. It respects it in a pure “beholding,” without overcoming or violating things as they are. It brings them intact into itself through the concept in order to contemplate them and nourish itself with them. Man therefore recognizes himself as part of an order in which something of being’s intelligibility shines forth.

The act of thinking intellectually does not involve a *representation* in the sense that a representing *subjectum* produces an object (or at least does not impose its own a priori forms upon it), but rather a *perception* that respects objects: it accepts being as it is and lets it be. Ideas *present*, but do not *represent*: the same abyss that separates *becoming the other* and *becoming other* lies somewhere between presenting and representing. Knowledge is a manifestation that respects the Other. Contrarily, in the activity of representation, the will’s ordering power is at work, where thought—now focused on arranging, managing, using, etc., rather than knowing—consents to the promptings of the will. If the intellect and the thing known constitute an immaterial identity in the moment of knowing, then this constitutes the apex of *intellectual freedom*. It reaches its fulfillment when the intellect welcomes being and transports it to the pure realm of thought, rendering itself fecund in the production of a mental word or concept. There is a dialectical triad in intellectual knowledge, which in its totality is thought itself, and which is articulated in three phases of the “immanence” of thought in itself: of its “procession” toward things and of its “return to itself” in a way analogous to the neo-Platonic triad of Plotinus and Proclus. But it is nothing more than an analogy, since for Plotinus and Proclus the triad is the ontological law of the procession from—and return to—the One, whereas for us it means only the law of the intellect in its thinking “being.”

With the preeminence of the intellect we reach two important aspects of knowledge: (1) by adhering to the known object, the intellect acquiesces and achieves self-realization. In this way, we come to the true meaning of *episteme*, perhaps even more original than its meaning as incontrovertible knowledge. *Episteme* is that stable knowledge that is tied to an act by which the intellect comes to rest in silence with the object (cf. *Cratylus*, 437a); (2) Knowledge is the expression of a “being-with.” The ontic-cogeneration of my “being there” and the “being there” of the other is linked to the generation of a cognitive relationship of the subject with the other in a communality that itself is an intentional identity.

Metaphysics is *theory*. That is, it is an orientation toward being, toward the real, and toward the world with a cognitive-contemplative intent; it does not intend to dominate or manipulate, but only to welcome within itself

reality as given. Theory therefore is a primordial and original expression of human existence; it would be a mistake to take it as a defective or impotent moment of praxis. These considerations allude to the doctrine—perhaps the preeminently classical doctrine—of the superiority of the speculative intellect over the practical intellect: the knowledge of being and its subsequent connection with wisdom is the primary role of the intellect. Through the act of the speculative intellect, which is a personal embrace of being after its struggle with it, the search for truth on the part of the subject is made explicit. By knowing truth, the speculative intellect keeps the practical order and the entire ordering of culture in their proper place. For this reason, the crisis of the speculative intellect spreads its effects in every direction. Metaphysics is therefore opposed to the ideology of technological scientism, which reduces being to “matter plus energy”: to a substrate totally available for any kind of transformation under the guidance of the subject’s will. Inasmuch as *theoria* is turned to a pure knowledge of things just as they are, metaphysics is neither praxism nor an auto-poiesis of the transcendental “I,” nor is it the autoctisis of Thought. By searching for pure knowledge and avoiding the snares of a false consciousness, metaphysics helps keep man away from various forms of ideology.

With the crisis of the intellect’s surge toward being and truth, conceptual knowledge loses its force as something real, and it is considered a production of consciousness or the result of a process based on consent. This position, more deeply ingrained than one would think, exerts its influence on today’s postmetaphysical “contextualism.” Contextualism means rigorously circumscribing any cognitive claim within its specific historical, social, linguistic, or ethnic context, in the sense that the truth basically consists in intersubjectivity reached through agreement and is sustainable only by a certain cultural lexicon. Given postmodernism’s abandonment of metaphysics, contextualism intends to do away with metaphysics by embracing the philosophy of the subject. Nevertheless, metaphysics reemerges in an oblique way through an analysis of the speaking subject’s performative acts, which are attributed to the underlying practices and structures of linguistic production in which the relationship with being is simply an “x” and knowledge melts away into genealogy.

What Does It Mean to Think?

The foregoing considerations are mostly aimed at the original and elemental moment in thinking: namely, the formation of the concept (apprehension). But they already hint at the consecutive phases of judgment and reasoning. We will deal with the question of judgment in later chapters. Nevertheless, our considerations have brought us to a point where we can propose an

answer to the following question: *What does it mean to think?* It is a question that resounds through the centuries and to which Heidegger dedicated much time, though he failed to reach a satisfactory answer. Kant, for whom thinking meant hosting representations in a conscience, also failed in this regard.

Thinking is originally to conceive an idea and to express a judgment. It is simultaneously an *identification* through apprehension and a *placing in relation* of subject and predicate by means of a proposition: the intentional identity of the knower with the thing known by means of a concept, and the establishment of a relation between two different notions by means of a declarative statement, through which a conformity with the real is sought, and which presupposes the formation of those notions in the original moment of thinking.

I hope the reader will excuse me if I insert an autobiographical anecdote here which has gradually matured through the years of preparing this volume. Step by step, as I reflected on the authors and schools of various philosophical persuasions, I noticed with surprise that an invisible thread seemed to run through all of them. Each attached a great importance to judging without placing much importance, if any, on apprehension, conceiving, and the formation of the concept. I was struck by the fact that such an emphasis appears in logical neo-positivism, analytic philosophy, in Frege, Wittgenstein, hermeneutics, actualism, and postmetaphysical thought; in Nietzsche, Heidegger, Popper et al. In looking back over his intellectual apprenticeship, it is telling that Gadamer writes: "We had learned that thinking was charting out relations, and it really seemed to be correct that one should reflectively put a thing in a certain relation and then make a statement about this relation, which one called a *judgment* (p. 61). . . . But suddenly we learn (from Heidegger) that thinking is showing and bringing something to show itself."¹⁵ For Gadamer and others, before the Marburg lectures with Heidegger, thinking meant placing in relation and therefore judging. The same held for Wittgenstein.

Particularly germane are the famous statements made in the second line of the *Tractatus* ("The world is the totality of facts, not of things")¹⁶ and in the beginning of Section 4 ("Thinking is a proposition endowed with sense"). Since things are apprehended in a concept and facts by a judgment, the fact that the world is constituted by facts and not things implies, by way of isomorphism between language and reality, a primacy of the proposition over apprehension. Wittgenstein is essentially saying that to think is to judge, whereas silence enshrouds the pre-predicative moment of thinking. Frege held the same position before Wittgenstein that thought is the meaning of an utterance.¹⁷ If the relationship is so strict between thinking and uttering as to be practically univocal, we might ask: Is that which precedes the utterance (in the pre-predicative moment) already a thought?

If we respond negatively, a further question arises: If it is not thought, then what is it? If we answer affirmatively, then how does apprehension occur? After Frege and Wittgenstein, Popper held that ideas (expressed in concepts), terms, and words are without any philosophical importance, while assertions, propositions, and theories are of immense philosophical importance. To the question “What does it mean to think?” Popper responds that to think is to formulate theories (i.e., complexes of judgments) that can then be tested. His polemic with linguistic analysis and relative philosophy always prevented him from taking into consideration the element of how the concept is formed and its relation with the thing, leaving his realism unrealized, fragile, and incomplete.

The authors who in different but converging ways assign unquestioned priority to judgment over apprehension imply that in the end it is less important to ask, “What is a dog?” (a problem of essence) than to assess whether the proposition “dogs are animals” is true or not. Such an attitude adequately explains why Popper placed such emphasis on theories (e.g., “world three”) expressed only in judgments.

The loss of thought’s intentional-realistic character and of the corresponding forgetting of its original moment—i.e., the formation of the idea as a sign or similitude of the object—is one of the sources of theoretical nihilism.

Existential Intellectualism as Anti-nihilism

If the intellect’s proper work of accepting or “seeing” being is left incomplete so that we never reach the level of a pure contemplative knowing, then the way of philosophy as theoretical knowledge of the real remains blocked: at most it can only be physics. We thus risk understanding the world only as an obscure and self-enclosed entity with no internal ordering and consequently an object for dominion or transformation through the will to power; or contrarily as a place for mystical-poetic experience in which one seeks, by means of the evocative force of the poetic word, a nostalgic access to being.

In relationship to the triad “antirealism/forgetfulness of being/critique of the idea of truth,” nihilism seems an event that progressively interested *modern* metaphysics precisely as *modern*: a situation from which we can escape only by means of a knowledge of being obtained through *Seinphilosophie*. In such a philosophy, anti-nihilism unfolds as *existential intellectualism*, in the sense that it moves with the intellect toward existence itself: not just toward this or that existence, but to existence as such in its transcendental breadth reached through a decisive noetic act in which the intellect, by conceiving the idea of being and forming a judgment of existence, reaches the root of reality: or rather to the very act of existing (*esse/actus essendi*) of

things. Such knowledge occurs in the form of an intellectual intuition—not a pure one, as Plato thought, but an abstractive one, starting from sensible knowledge and the abstracting-judging activity of the intellect, which we may also call a “judicative intuition” since it takes place through a judgment of existence. Far from being a type of generalization reached by induction from a plurality of empirical representations, the abstractive intuition, precisely in virtue of being an abstraction, reaches the universal in the individual.¹⁸ We must note that intellectual intuition occurs through a twofold movement of activity and receptivity: a movement that does not occur in sensible knowledge insofar as it tends toward receptivity. The active openness toward being and the trustful acceptance of it are already alluded to in terms that have been revered throughout the tradition: the agent intellect and the passive intellect.

By designating the philosophy of being as “existential intellectualism,” we assign strict primacy neither to praxis nor to theory. The importance which this book attributes to the intellect is to be understood as relative to the one, true primacy of any realist-existential philosophy: the primacy of *beingexistence*. Neither essence, nor practice, nor theory, nor will, nor doing, nor acting occupies the highest rank: only existence, which the intellect turns to in order to know it. Theoretical activity holds prime of place in the order of knowing, though not in an absolute sense, because it is completely relative to the knowledge of existence.

In post-Kantian philosophy, which tends to overemphasize the negation of intellectual intuition (in fact, this is the decisive and all-encompassing presupposition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*), we find that the most radical negations of intuition can be summarized into four types: first of all, that of Nietzsche (in this respect he remains completely in line with Schopenhauer and Kant), vividly expressed in his anti-Platonism; that of Gentile (in the wake of Donato Jaia, Bertrando Spaventa, and Hegel), which he extends through a consistent critique of all forms of realism and Platonism; that of Carnap, where the author confuses intellectual intuition with something obscure or “mystical” and thus fails to recognize that it is expressed in concepts and can therefore be tested) and of analytic philosophy in general; and finally (though more indirectly than directly), that of Heidegger, according to whom there is no intellectual perception of *Sein*, but some kind of “experience of being” (*Erfahrung des Seins*). Through different paths, each ends up propagating the same exhortation: “no more metaphysics!” Such is the final assertion of every consistent form of theoretical nihilism. This suggests that we can interpret the decline of certain strands of modern philosophy as the inevitable result of the abandonment of the doctrine of the intellect.

At the same time, the description I am proposing seems to confer upon nihilism a more or less unitary character attributable to a single,

common origin. To demonstrate this, it will be necessary to investigate the presence of nihilism in a few select authors: in part II, we will turn to Nietzsche, Gentile, Heidegger, currents in hermeneutics, logical empiricism and analytic philosophy, and Habermas. Habermas himself can be taken as a representative of postmodern-postmetaphysical currents in philosophy, which, in failing to link the intellect's noetic activity with *theory*, opted for various forms of praxis and gave *practical reason*—weakly reformulated in a formal-procedural way—pride of place.

A Digression on Language, Thought, and Reality

Reflection on language is at least as old as (if not older than) philosophy itself, going hand in hand with it from the beginning—we can think of Plato's *Cratylus*. It accompanies the philosophical enterprise through the centuries. The problem of language, which has become such a heavily traversed terrain over the last several decades that its importance in twentieth-century philosophy is akin to that of knowledge in the modern period, is a river fed by the tributaries of hermeneutics, analytic philosophy, structuralism, and, in a certain way, phenomenology. In its most radical form, it gives the impression that there are no genuine problems for philosophy except linguistic puzzles, by which philosophy, and particularly metaphysics, would be cut away by the razor of linguistic analysis.

In the schools cited above there are various and at times contrasting descriptions of language, its birth, the relationship between history and its structure, symbolism, etc., which we will not be able to discuss here. Perhaps in the despair of arriving at any conclusions about the relationship between thought and being, this theme has been transformed into that of the relationship between being and language (considered by Heidegger as the dwelling place of being), or merely into the study of the language alone. In effect, the schools generated by Frege, Wittgenstein, Russell, and Carnap revolve around the study of language—either in its purified form as science or simply as ordinary language—as their primary object, either considered in itself or as an entryway to thought. Not a few philosophers of language place hermeneutical understanding on a pedestal of unquestionable universality in a way similar to *Truth and Method*, where understanding is not one possible attitude for the subject, but the mode of being of existence itself.¹⁹ Hence, the existence of “being-there” (*Dasein*) is considered hermeneutical in itself, according to an interpretation of *Dasein* that elevates language to a universal medium. Corresponding transformations of the concept of being accompany the method along the way. First of all, in conjunction with the metaphysics of finitude, being is taken as equivalent to the being of *physis* toward which *Dasein* is understood as “being-in-the-world.” Later,

“being-in-the-world” is identified with “being-in-language.” Subsequently, the most real reality of being is considered language under the radical rubric of the essential “language-ness” of being, according to which “being is language.” Such a position makes a much stronger statement than the following: “the being which can be understood is language,” for this implies a linguistic resolution-dissolution of existence itself.

It is well known that in *language*, just as in the more general theory of *signs*—of which language is an important, though no means the only, element—the signifying relation between “word” and “thing” plays a leading role. Insofar as language is, and cannot help but be, a system of signs, it is intrinsic to its nature that it denote something: in its signifying relation language is a carrier of a “referring to”—either to things or to objects which the word denotes and represents with creative liberty, since “no sound is by nature a noun.”²⁰ The semantic function performed by a name, be it proper or common, lies in its reference to an object; a name stays in its own place, so to speak, and expresses the mind’s cognitive intention. *Without the relation of signification there would be no language.* In other words, we can assume that spoken language was born after a phase of “language by gesture” conveying specific signifying relations. Human beings subsequently discovered that they were able to express those signifying relations in other ways: namely, through words. Recognizing the almost limitless possibilities of this mode of expression, the human race gave birth to various forms of language: practical, poetic, religious, etc.

Within this complex series of languages, let us consider specifically that which is directly conceptual as well as its corresponding type of knowledge, as opposed to that which is indirect and mediated. Our interest in language as a *direct* sign of the thing/object (in the sense that the *relationship* between the two is direct) is not meant to be a rejection or misunderstanding of another fundamental function of language: namely, the recourse we have to the “translated” sign, or to a system of signs coordinated among themselves and which lead to some “other.” In this case, a structure of direct and literal signification indicates something beyond itself by an indirect and figurative sign which can only be known through prior signs. It is a complex way of interpretation where the task is to decipher different structures of signification, whether they be various kinds of texts or a group of signs (e.g., dreams) that refer to the unconscious (as in psychoanalysis). By turning our attention to the *direct* sign rather than a translated sign, we underline the idea that language is the bearer of a reference to real existence, without which it would become a self-referential system of signaling in the way that a lamp can be reflected infinitely in a hall of mirrors.

There is no doubt that natural language plays a central role in human experience (in communicating, intending, and experiencing others and the

world), and that the prescientific life-world expresses this fact quite naturally. But we must ask: What allows language to be a medium between subjects? Natural language is an immense reservoir of intuitions and meanings that can feed our ontological search. Immanent to language and emanating from it is a “genetic ontology,” a sort of “universal grammar” in which we find a logic of being and its stability manifested by the enduring structures that stand at the base of language.²¹ In the linguistic forms of affirming and negating, of the whole and the part, the good and evil, lives a natural ontology immanent within language, of which the transcendentals are the supreme grammar. The speculative lexicon is different, though not separate, from the lexicon of natural language. They merge in a common horizon of questioning which is always present and stratified in natural language, and which expresses the intellect’s spontaneous functioning and its first apperceptions. What is essential to the word is the link between being and things inherent to all languages. In their variety, these constitute “national ways to being,” so to speak. On the other hand, historical transmission is by nature linguistic, but from this we cannot deduce that everything transmitted linguistically is historical; that would be to fall into a complete identification of the mode and content of what is transmitted.

Our considerations up to this point present three ideas worth pondering momentarily: in philosophy, language is not merely a pure object that can be studied apart from everything else; language is less relevant and primary than thought; and the most radical characteristic of thought is not linguistic. The immense importance given to language masks an misdirected tendency to sever language from thought and the experience that creates it and makes it meaningful; to hypothesize it as a reality in itself as a “pure object” capable of being studied *in vitro* apart from any life-context and the signifying relation of which it is a vehicle, as well as apart from its intrinsic reference to the thing/object. This method, though possible for linguistics, seems out of place in philosophy. Insofar as it expresses reality, it is thought—not language—that is true and correct, for the latter emerges from the realm of free productivity and does not always naturally represent the real. Language is not a photographic reflection of things (indeed, neither is thought, if we consider the immense freedom it has to create, manipulate, compose, and divide concepts. The mind does indeed enjoy its own freedom, but it is a freedom directed toward the perception of the real through the mind’s intentional act).

According to Thomas Aquinas, language originates in the intellect and has the character of a sign. It therefore has the capacity to manifest something other than itself. On the basis of a highly developed notion of *verbum* within the Christian philosophical tradition and its reflection on the Trinity, Aquinas adopts the position that within man is a triplex word: the

verbum cordis, the *verbum quod habet imaginem vocis*, and the *verbum vocis*.²² The first, conceived through the intellect, is the *verbum rei* or the immediate intellectual similitude of the thing itself. The second is the *verbum cum syllabis cogitatum*, and the third is the *verbum oris*—the vocal or pronounced word. The first is the most radical, insofar as an intuitive act of the intellect attains being in a prelinguistic way, and the “word” of the mind is not yet *cum syllabis cogitatum*. In forming the *verbum interius cordis*, thought precedes language: “I think, therefore I speak”; not “I speak, therefore I think.” The *verbum cordis*, which is tied to no particular language, is the object itself or the nature of the thing as thought: that is, the object as it exists in the mind as the result of the *emanatio intellectualis*, which is not a reflexive act but the intellect’s production within the very act by which it thinks an object. There is no reflexivity here because the concept does not express the spirit but rather the things themselves. We experience language as an imperfect and always perfectible *instrument* which we use to express what we know.

The formation of the *verbum cordis* (i.e., the concept) arises from the very act of intending: from the intellect in act emanates the concept in act.²³ This does not occur as a passage from potency to act, but from act to act. At the very moment the intellect is in the act of knowing, it has a *verbum cordis* within it. The concept can neither be formed before the act of intending nor after (in such a case the knowing act would not have an object): “*Intellectum autem in intelligente est intentio intellecta et verbum*” (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, IV, c. 11). This means that the mind, by constituting the universe of language as an autonomous totality, can reflect upon itself as a world of extraordinary richness. This method, however, involves an indirect or a “second look” type of reflection in which the real universe is neither posited thematically nor reached directly.

Let us now respond to the question “What is it to think?” by specifying further what is meant by the claim that: *the most intimate nature of thinking is not originally linguistic but a type of identification*, in the sense that there is a prelinguistic intentional identity between intellect and being. This was the venerable teaching of Parmenides, subsequently corrected and refined by Aristotle. At that level, it is the perceptive act that produces language and not vice versa. This seems to hold, for example, in the dynamism of color perception through the senses. The perception of a plurality of colors induces a corresponding linguistic production: a language which included only two color terms (such as black and white) would immediately be judged deficient and in need of reformulation. The anteriority of thought to language, which hinges on the mental act that abstracts intelligible information from the intentional import conveyed by the senses, makes it certain that the historicity of language is partial—and so, in a similar way, is that of being. One of the fundamental tenets of historicism is the identity of being and language

(leading to the dissolution of the former into the latter) understood not as an a priori but as an integrally historical and mutable structure. The fact that being is language means that it is an event, a “happening,” a completely phenomenologized transmission.

It would be a mistake to think that the most intimate character of thinking resides in vocalization. Such a position gives rise to irresolvable problems concerning the connection between language and reality, leading to the antirealistic and nihilistic thesis of infinite semiotics according to which the text, now open to an infinite number of interpretations, can only lead back to itself. The linguistic resolution of being (“being is language” is perhaps the most extreme reincarnation of idealism in a linguistic form) introduces a crisis into the idea of truth as a conformity between thought and the thing. If we assume that being is language, we lose all reference to the real objectivity of the object—the extramental, extralinguistic “thing” by which the correspondence is measured. By transforming the object into language and intending thought only in its linguistic function, the linguistic resolution of being embraces the idea that truth is conformity of language with language, where the denoting character of language as a “sign of the other” is severely compromised.

Is the philosophy of language the new “first philosophy”? The critique of language was one of the most important sources of skepticism in the 1900s based on the assumption that language, because of its historicity and mutability, constitutes an unsurpassable barrier between the knowing subject and reality. According to realism, the correspondence of thought and being is held to be more original and fundamental than that between language and reality.²⁴ At the risk of overturning some deeply rooted taboos, I would like to suggest that language has an indubitable and central, though not constitutive, relevance for philosophy. The most decisive reason in favor of such an assumption is that being is not language, but rather act or *energeia* (cf. ch. 2 and 3). Consequently: (1) speculative problems in philosophy do not present themselves initially as problems of language but of being and thinking; (2) philosophy’s primary task is not the analysis of meanings, but the knowledge of the real and of being; (3) there does not seem to be any compelling reason why the philosophy of language should become the new “first philosophy.”²⁵

The reason why language was given primacy of place at a certain moment in the development of modern-contemporary philosophy is a fascinating topic in itself. I have no intention to delve into it fully here, but I would nonetheless like to give a brief sketch of the reasons. If according to realism the relation between thought and reality is not a relation of *representation* but of *intentional identification with the other as such*, then in the course of modern philosophy beginning with Descartes, and with the rise of