

interpretation

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page

1

leo strauss

preliminary observations of the gods in
thucydides' work

17

howard white

rembrandt and the human condition

38

jerry h. combee

nietzsche as cosmologist: the idea of the
eternal recurrence as a cosmological
doctrine and some aspects of its relation
to the doctrine of the will to power

48

marvin perry

arnold toynbee: nationalism as a
"false god"



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REMBRANDT AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

HOWARD WHITE

The quest of this paper is the quest for the human soul, as I believe Rembrandt understood the human soul to be. As I am not an art historian, I shall have to show that one may find the human soul as a painter saw it by relating art history to the history of political philosophy. Just as in the history of political philosophy there are regions, times, and influences, yet each political philosopher must be one in his own right, so it may be in the history of art. There is, however, an important difference. Philosophy has known but one revolution in its tools: a methodological "logical" one. Of course, there is the invention of the printing press; but that has probably enabled men to pass as philosophers who, as Rousseau said, "in the days of the League would be known only as fanatics." Art has known several, perhaps many revolutions: canvas, chiaroscuro, the use of shadow to make a rounded figure, and so on. Seldom is there reversion, at least a formal one. Perhaps Cézanne has something in common with antiquity, but not technically. Perhaps Cézanne is closer to the classics than Rembrandt, which does not make him a better painter.

We consider it legitimate to speak of "modern political philosophy." So to speak is not to deny that political philosophers like Machiavelli, Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, and Spinoza were philosophers in their own right, who made original contributions to political philosophy. Yet they all differed so strongly, so markedly from Plato and Aristotle and other classical thinkers, and from medieval political thinkers, that it is today a commonplace to refer to modern and pre-modern political philosophy.

There need not be the same break in the history of pictorial arts. However, the deft use of shadows to create a rounded figure is called by one art historian "the most decisive revolution which art history knows."¹ Strange or not, the fact that it took place in the seventeenth century, the century of Descartes, sometimes considered the founder of modern philosophy, and a man whose portrait, as we shall see, Rembrandt drew, is worthy of notice.

I hope that the above will suffice as an introduction to my approach. It is not always easy for serious men to understand why the seventeenth century was a time of high hopes. Today the view that the universe is alien and incomprehensible often causes despair. Granted that there are still those who equate and take great hope from the prospect of the conquest, and therefore the comprehension, of the incomprehensible

¹ Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, trans. M. D. Hottinger, 7th ed., p. 21.

universe, there is a more thoughtful view: go to the moon; find what you can; you will never find God. There was a time, however, when men took delight in the alien character of the universe. To Francis Bacon, it meant the end of Aristotle's fifth essence, the *coelum fantasticum*. From Machiavelli to Descartes, it was a time of soaring hope, the hope that the *coelum fantasticum* might be replaced by a universe of man's making.

There is the same soaring hope in Rembrandt. Just as Aristotle seemed to Bacon and Descartes to forge chains, binding man so that he could not be free, so the classic art patterns seemed to impose restrictions, restrictions which were gradually removed by Titian, by Caravaggio, by Rembrandt, to make room for color and light. For hope one paid a price. Bacon knew that, and the wise men he created are full of compassion. Rembrandt implicitly raises the question as to why, in response to the development of universality, in the face of the great metaphysical systems like that of Descartes, it was necessary to turn to the soul and the self. John Donne wrote:

And new Philosophy calls all in doubt,
 The Element of Fire is quite put out;
 The Sun is lost, and th'earth, and no man's wit
 Can well direct him where to look for it.²

Both Donne and Rembrandt seem to suggest that the truth about the soul as soul (or self) is not essentially related to the truth about the whole. In a Rembrandt painting, it would be difficult for us to see the difference, if he saw one, between the soul and the self. Stand in gallery after gallery, and watch light and shadow play upon the youthful face, the aged face, the ageless face of the painter himself. Jakob Rosenberg postulates an exhibit of all the self-portraits. "We know altogether," says he, "about sixty painted self-portraits by the master, in addition to more than twenty etchings, and about ten drawings."³ This gives us a total of ninety, perhaps a few more. There will probably have been some losses. Of course there were precedents. Durer made self-portraits, one in the likeness of Christ. Then there were furtive portraits in group paintings. Rembrandt may have done that too (see the *Samson and Delilah* in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Since it is doubtful, I assume that self-portraits in group portraits are not included in Rosenberg's computation. Among great men there is nothing like Rembrandt's concentration on the self except, perhaps, in the abundance of confessional literature in Rousseau, and that comes much later. There are no real precedents for Rembrandt's concern with the soul and the self. What would the visitor to Rosenberg's hypothetical exhibit see? Growth, of course, growth in wisdom and compassion, and often, though Rembrandt led a life of much deprivation,

² "An Anatomie of the World," *Donne and Blake* (New York), p. 171.

³ Jakob Rosenberg, *Rembrandt: Life and Work*, rev. ed. (London, 1964), p. 37.

in happiness. Perhaps Rembrandt could not have known that when he painted his first self-portrait. And we perhaps cannot know whether he continued with the style because it was economical, because he found it successful, or because there was a genuine philosophical interest, whether perhaps, in either creating or seeking the self, he might find the soul. Something of the last may be suggested by Kenneth Clark's statement: "We know from Rembrandt's early etchings that one of his chief exercises was the observation of his face in a mirror, expressing every violent emotion that he was likely to need in his narrative pictures."⁴ This does not seem to suggest that Rembrandt's self was autonomous or unique, so much as that it was the easiest object in which to find the human. Of course, individuality in painting developed long before the existence of the soul became philosophically problematic. I have not seen the early self-portraits, except for one drawing in the Louvre, which is quite engaging.⁵ The portrait of 1634 (Berlin-Dhalen) shows an elegant and engaging young man. The portrait of 1640 (London, National Gallery) is similar but statelier. In 1650 (Washington, National Gallery), Rembrandt became a thinker, as seen in *The Scholar in his Study*. In the many later self-portraits Care grows. Insight also grows. The faces are full of wonder, and wonder, to Aristotle, is the beginning of wisdom. What the portraits show, in spite of the suffering, is the ascent of the soul and the strange light, to which we shall return.

I mentioned that Rousseau had a similar absorption with the self. From the time Rembrandt painted his first self-portrait, around 1630, to the time Rousseau completed his last work, *Rêveries d'un promeneur solitaire* (1776) about a century and a half intervened. These two men, different as they were, had two things in common, a concern for the self and a deep compassion. It seems probable, however, that Rembrandt, unlike Rousseau, was entirely free of *amour-propre*. His reasons for presenting a long series of self-portraits are probably not the same as Rousseau's reasons for writing a large body of confessional literature. Rousseau gives a reason at the beginning of the *Confessions*. He wants to show "a man in all the truth of nature."⁶ Such a claim does not necessarily deny selectivity, and it is well known that there is some selectivity in the *Confessions*. The reference to Rousseau is not intended to suggest that Rembrandt could possibly have had in mind himself as a natural man in Rousseau's sense. If Rembrandt painted two self-portraits a year, even these may be selective, as there may be gaps which his brush did not capture. Selective or not, however, his large and continuous output of self-portraiture does suggest that, at some time, his concern with the

⁴ Sir Kenneth Clark, *Rembrandt and the Italian Renaissance* (New York, 1964), p. 4.

⁵ F. Lugt, *Inventaire des dessins école Hollandaise* (Paris), 1149.

⁶ "Un homme dans toute la vérité de la nature," *Œuvres complètes* (Paris, 1952), vol. 1, p. 5.

self became permanently fixed as a concern, legitimate and responsible, to exhibit to the world. In other words, the expression of self had to be one means of showing what is proper to mental and spiritual growth. Already one can anticipate Jakob Burckhardt's criticism of Rembrandt for employing vulgar themes.⁷ Burckhardt writes: "One can wonder whether this constant examination of his own features with the help of a mirror was good for him. Maybe the strange blinking of the eyes which gives some of his portraits such a dreadful expression came from this habit."⁸ Yet the self-portraits have none of the confessional pleadings of Rousseau or, for that matter, of St. Augustine. Rembrandt has precedent enough in portrait painting, in Durer, in Franz Hals. That is not the point. The point is the search for the self, and, through the self, the human, a search which has nothing to do with the guilt which bothers the Christian confessional and the natural confessional alike.

The search for the human in Rembrandt must take us occasionally to Descartes. Descartes lived the greater part of his mature life in Holland, and wrote in 1631, "You must excuse my zeal if I invite you to choose Amsterdam for your retirement and prefer it not only to all the Capuchin and Carthusian monasteries, to which many worthy people retire, but also to the finest residences in France and Italy."⁹ Rembrandt, as I have noted, made a portrait of "Cartesius." Its present whereabouts are unknown.¹⁰ What is compelling is that Descartes must have sat for Rembrandt, and the leading philosopher of his time and the leading painter of his time may have had something to say to one another.¹¹

Descartes wrote, "Mais, tout de même que les peintres ne pouvant également bien représenter dans un tableau plat toutes les diverses faces d'un corps solide, en choisant des principaux qu'ils mettent seul vers le jour et ombrageant les autres."¹² This statement is somewhat paradoxical. It says that painters cannot present in a painting all the different "faces" or "surfaces" of a solid body, and it seems to refer to seventeenth-century art, perhaps to Rembrandt in particular. The statement appears in a

⁷ "Rembrandt," in *Kulturgeschichtliche Vorträge* (Leipzig, n.d.). Translations from Burckhardt's essay have been made by my wife.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁹ Letter to A. Balzac, Amsterdam, May 5, 1631, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 941-42.

¹⁰ J. Bolten, ed., *Dutch Drawings from the Collection of Dr. G. Hofstade de Groot* (Utrecht, 1967). A footnote refers to the handwritten "catalogue of the Valerius Rover collection, library of the Municipal University, Amsterdam." There is a drawing in the Louvre, not in the Lugt inventory, which is a portrait, apparently of a *philosophe*, with a globe at his feet. This may be Descartes.

¹¹ There is another relationship. Descartes and Rembrandt had a mutual friend in Constantijn Huygens. The letters Descartes wrote to Huygens were warm and friendly. Huygens was also the first to recognize Rembrandt's genius and to recommend him to royal patrons. Huygens, the father of the physicist, was the one person who certainly knew both Descartes and Rembrandt well.

¹² "Discours de la méthode," pt. 5, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 154.

paragraph in which Descartes refers to “un trait que quelques considérations m’empêchent de publier.” This is generally taken to be a reference to *Le Monde*, and the principal “consideration” is believed to be the fate of Galileo. Hence perhaps what a painter could not do Descartes would do if he could. However, a friend suggests the possibility that chiaroscuro is a form of concealment or *ombrage*, that the painter’s concealment was related to Descartes’ concealment. Chiaroscuro is a form of concealment, and Rembrandt, like Descartes, was a master of concealment.

We should see the relation between Descartes and Rembrandt in quite another way. Rousseau was not the first philosopher to be concerned with the self. Descartes’ *Discours de la méthode* may be considered an autobiography, though not a confession. We have already seen his comparison of his own way with that of seventeenth-century painting. Much earlier in the *Discours* he says he will “be glad to show, in this discourse, what are the ways that I have followed, and here to represent my life as a painting [tableau].”¹³ If his life is a painting, it is obviously a self-portrait, or a series of self-portraits.¹⁴ Insofar as the *Discours* is an autobiography, it deals with the development of Cartesian thought, and it is therefore a series of self-portraits. As with Rembrandt, the *Discours* represents an ascent,¹⁵ yet an intellectual ascent. The question of subjectivity, a subjectivity perhaps common to Rembrandt and Descartes, may be raised. Is Cartesian morality purely subjective? Is it idiosyncratic? Yet in the *Discours* II, Descartes tells who are the people who should not imitate him in the rash (“ni avoir assez de patience pour conduire par ordre toutes leurs pensées”) and the modest.¹⁶ By implication, we can tell who should imitate him. In part 6, Descartes adds that “perhaps the public has some interest in knowing these things.”¹⁷ His morality, then, has a following. Publication begets imitation. At the beginning of part 3, Descartes presents the famous analogy of the two houses,¹⁸ the one in which he must now live, and the one that is being constructed. Here is a *morale par provision*, and, again by implication, a definitive morality. If the provisional morality is just for himself, the introduction of subjectivity into philosophy bears a close relation to Rembrandt’s self-portraits. As mentioned above, that is probably not the case. However, there is something else that is new, and that is the emphasis on solitude for philosophic reasons. Descartes refers to himself

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

¹⁴ Gregor Sebba writes: “The self as *res cogitans* can clearly and distinctly know its own substantial nature. . . .” “Time and the Modern Self: Descartes, Rousseau, Beckett.”

¹⁵ *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 126, 179.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

as a man "qui marche seul et dans les ténèbres."¹⁹ His praise of Holland is the praise of a country that permits solitude, where he can live as in a desert.²⁰ That solitude has something to do with the task of modern philosophy. This contrasts strangely with the acts of the citizen-philosopher—with the remarks Socrates is made to utter in the *Phaedrus*.²¹ It is not our concern here to develop this point, but merely to show that Descartes has an affinity with Rembrandt in subjectivity. We are still a long way from the *promeneur solitaire*.

A self-portrait is not necessarily a soul portrait. Leo Strauss writes: "Not a few people who have come to despair of the possibility of a decent secularist society, without having been induced by their despair to question secularism as such, escape into the self and into art." Note that, in this sentence, art and self have a peculiar affinity. One can understand that affinity if one realizes that the role of individuality in art is necessarily strong. The joining of art and self contrasts with the more traditional joining of imitation and soul. Strauss continues: "The 'self' is obviously a descendant of the soul; that is, it is not the soul. . . . The soul is a part of an order which does not originate in the soul; of the self it is not certain whether it is a part of an order which does not originate in the self."²² Yet modern philosophy continued to treat the soul as soul, asserting that the person was not purely autonomous. Descartes wrote a work on the "passions de l'âme," and even Locke wrote of the soul. Some philosophers still do.²³ Whatever the soul is in Rembrandt, and there is no easy answer to that, it is somehow related to his own predecessors, like Titian and Caravaggio, and to what was happening to the relation of man to the cosmos, from Machiavelli to Descartes. There is still a soul in Rembrandt, but it is not the Platonic soul. It is well known that modern philosophy in general, and Descartes in particular, replaced the supremacy of virtue over the passions with the supremacy of the passions.²⁴ Rembrandt certainly had a hierarchy of the passions, wherever he got it. He either replaced virtue by passions or identified virtue and passions. Before we can understand the hierarchical structure of the soul, we must first treat of other things in Rembrandt, of motion and rest, of the instrumentality of the sense of touch, of the biblical picture, of the transformation of the celestial or supernal light into the terrestrial or diurnal.

I am aware of the rashness of suggesting that Rembrandt raised philosophical questions. I hope I can show that the suggestion is less

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

²¹ Plato *Phaedrus* 230D-E.

²² Leo Strauss, *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York, 1968), p. 261.

²³ Kurt Riezler, *Man Mutable and Immutable* (Chicago, 1950), p. 111.

²⁴ See esp. Richard Kennington, "Descartes," in Leo Strauss and J. Cropsey, eds., *History of Political Philosophy* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 379-95.

rash than it appears to be. I think that one might study certain painters, including Rembrandt, just as scholars have studied the philosophy of Goethe, or Coleridge, or Shakespeare. It still remains to establish this view in the perspective of the whole. In one respect we are not plowing virgin soil but treading beaten paths. There is a distinction between what is called in art-historical jargon the "painterly" (*das malerische*) and what is called the "linear." According to one art historian, this distinction was understood in antiquity.²⁵ In the sixteenth century some artists chose what had previously been rejected. They chose motion over rest, indeed, appearance over reality.

Jakob Burckhardt writes of Rembrandt, "He subordinated the subject, no matter what it was, under the two elementary powers: light and air. Rembrandt does not care about the true form of things. Their appearance is everything."²⁶ One may question this interpretation of appearance and reality. On the one hand, all art may be an illusion. On the other, why should rest be more real than motion?

That people have believed that there was a higher reality, in God, or in being, is clear. Artists have tried to paint God. It is doubtful whether anyone can paint God, any more than one can paint "being," in the Platonic sense. The visible world is the world of becoming. What seems likely to be new is not so much the relation between appearance and reality, in what Wölfflin called "the most decisive revolution which art history knows."²⁷ There are new techniques in the rendition of light and shade, and in these things Titian and Caravaggio were Rembrandt's teachers.

If baroque artists thought that they had found the "truth," they have something in common with modern philosophy. Though there may well be objectivity in taste, to compare Titian and Rembrandt, Plato and Aristotle, is beyond the province of us professors. To say that is not to deny that any reasonable man will prefer Shakespeare to his contemporaries. He would be a rash man indeed who compared Shakespeare and Homer. Since Wölfflin must have it, however, that "the historian" judges otherwise (apparently without investigation) than the baroque artist,²⁸ we must stay for a moment with the relative merits of appearance and reality. For appearance to be superior to reality, reality must be incomprehensible. That is certainly, though oversimplified, what Bacon believed. In discussing the portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels (Berlin-Dahlen), Wölfflin writes, "We see that the emphasis no longer lies on being but on becoming and change."²⁹

If Wölfflin means this distinction in the Platonic sense, I have said

²⁵ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, p. 20.

²⁶ "Rembrandt," p. 112.

²⁷ Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History*, p. 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-59.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

above that it is doubtful whether Platonic "being" could be imitated in a painting. However, this is certainly not an universally accepted principle. I am not sure that Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, did not mean to suggest that a great tragedy, with a catharsis of pity and fear, would be an imitation of being. Wölfflin should have asked first, "What was Rembrandt's view of reality?"

If what we are really talking about is motion and rest, the Greeks sought motion. So did Michelangelo. Rembrandt was certainly a master of change, if that is becoming. Recession gives an impression of movement, but it is not recession alone. There is movement in the *Descent from the Cross* (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.). There is the impression of movement in the *Night Watch*. There is the man rising from his chair in the *Syndics* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). It is possible that Rembrandt is giving expression to one of the leading tenets of modern thought, the alien and incomprehensible character of the universe. It is possible, but not likely. Since I think it unlikely that he got such a notion from Bacon, could he have gotten it from Titian?

Rest is sometimes related to moderation and motion to daring. Valuable as moderation is traditionally held to be, there is a level at which it is a negative quality. "However ambiguous that daring, that *mania* which transcends the limits of moderation on the political plane alone, it comes into its own, or is in accordance with nature on the plane of thought," says Leo Strauss.³⁰ Daring in thought, however, need not mean daring in expression. Often it does not, as Strauss, in his studies of writing and reading between the lines, has shown us. Daring, or frenzy, "mania" in Platonic thought, is supplemented by extreme care in construction of a dialogue. Rembrandt was not careless, but he was extremely bold in execution. He did not innovate "slowly, like time," as Bacon urged. His treatment of motion was bold innovation.³¹

Whether motion is closer to reality than rest, whether the tactile is closer to reality than the visible, a higher reality is still possible. The roles of faith and skepticism in the High Renaissance are moot, and there is a great deal to be said about them. I suppose that there is no question, however, about the piety of Giotto. *Madonna and the Child Enthroned*, for example, appears to be a genuinely devout picture. I take it as an expression of a belief in a spiritual reality. The central position of mother and child contributes to the expression of piety, but there is much more to give the impression of profound religious conviction than many pictures, even of biblical subjects, do not.

Apollonius of Tyana asked a group of Egyptians why Egyptian pictorial representations of the gods were so grotesque, representing irrational animals rather than gods. When asked what Greek statues were like,

³⁰ *The City and Man* (Chicago, 1964), p. 299. But see Bacon's essay on boldness: "Boldness is ill in counsell, good in execution."

³¹ Cf. Rosenberg, *Rembrandt*, pp. 139, 146.

Apollonius replied in terms of reverence, the reaction which, he said, should be encouraged by the statue of a god. When then asked whether Phidias and Praxiteles and the others went up and saw the gods, so that they knew what the gods looked like, Apollonius replies that that was done by creative imagination. In other words, Apollonius, in defending Greek sculptural representations of the gods, abandoned the traditional view that art was imitation for a doctrine of critical imagination.³² We are not here concerned with the origin of this view or its relation to Aristotle's discussion of imagination in the *De Anima*.³³ A view that imagination is nobler than imitation because it presents what the artist does not see, a view similar to that which Philostratus attributes to Apollonius, seems essential to religious representation.

For Rembrandt, the question of the higher reality remains doubtful, though more can be said about the subject. Is not the compassion so evident in the face and hands of the father in the *Return of the Prodigal Son* a clearly Christian piety? Certainly Rembrandt knew his Bible well. He painted religious pictures in Calvinist Holland, though Calvin opposed religious painting. The use of imagination to give a visible shape to God or, apparently, to Christ was unlawful. What was lawful was what was presented to the eye. In other words, imitation was lawful.³⁴

Rembrandt did not follow in Calvin's steps, at least in this respect. I am not interested in pointing out profanities and jokes in the treatment of biblical subjects, as Balet and one of the art historians he cites seem to be.³⁵ I am seeking the human soul. The subject matter may tell us something of what the artist sees the soul to be, but the subject matter alone is hardly sufficient. In the *quattrocento's* representation of virtue and holiness, there is a serenity which strengthens the impression of the subject matter. In Rembrandt, as in Descartes, passions tend to replace virtues, but not all passions are equally pervasive. Burckhardt writes of Rubens: "Rubens is as rich in figures of evil as in figures of virtue. We see, generally in violent action, Discord, Envy, Hate, Deception, Rage, Ignorance, Slander and so on, while Rebellion appears as a many-headed hydra. Yet all these figures blend most harmoniously with the ladies and gentlemen of the court and the aristocracy. . . . they are, for the most part, introduced with unerring propriety."³⁶ Panofsky says something similar about Titian: "Titian's world extended all the way from the idyllic to the tragic, from tenderness to brutality, from the seductive to the repulsive, from the sublime to the almost—though never quite—vulgar."³⁷ Seldom is a contrast between great masters

³² Flavius Philostratus *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 6.19.

³³ Bk. 3.3

³⁴ *Institutes* 1. II.12.

³⁵ Leo Balet, *Rembrandt and Spinoza* (New York, 1962), pp. 173-78.

³⁶ Jakob Burckhardt, *Recollections of Rubens* (London, n.d.), p. 117.

³⁷ Irwin Panofsky, *Problems in Titian* (New York, 1969), p. 91.

so striking. "Along with Homer, the greatest story teller," Burckhardt says of Rubens.³⁸ Rembrandt was not a storyteller. He had visions. His greatest vision was the vision of the good life. He denied himself—one is inclined to say, deliberately—Titian's range. Figures of evil were not his wont. They do exist. There is David in *David and Uriah* (Hermitage, Leningrad). The cruelty is unmistakable. Yet even *David and Saul* (The Hague) are lonely rather than evil, and arouse compassion. There are those who see prurience in Susannah, but you have to look very hard to find it. That is perhaps not all. He tried his hand at the unsympathetic passions, but they did not stay long with him.

There are two or four passions which dominate Rembrandt's painting, as far as I can see. I say two or four because it depends upon whether you identify love and compassion or curiosity and wonder. In Rembrandt, love and compassion frequently go together, as in *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, in the old men, of whom he was so fond, in the blind Homer (Mauritshaus, The Hague), in the pictures of Anna and Tobit from the Apocrypha. The compassion which is expressed by the father in the *Prodigal Son*, compassion for the prodigal, is shared by Rembrandt and surely by nearly everyone who looks at the painting. Compassion implies a certain inequality. Love, of course, does not.

The other passion is wonder, or, perhaps, curiosity.³⁹ Rembrandt was like the father of Solomen's House, in Bacon's *New Atlantis*, who had "eyes as if he pitied man." There is compassion in the self-portraits, but it is mingled with happiness and thoughtfulness. Moreover, in the self-portraits, it is Rembrandt who shows compassion. He is not the object of compassion; if he were, he would be guilty of self-pity, which would be absurd. The problem of equality and inequality presents difficulties, so that perhaps we should unite love and compassion and speak of care. As noted above, the *Prodigal Son* shows the care of the father. The three men on the right are somewhat shaded. Whatever passions they do express, they do not seem to share the compassion of the father. The older brother, if it be he, has a red cloak and a beard like his father, but apparently not the noble care. The beards contrast with the shaven head of the prodigal. The upright posture contrasts with the humility of kneeling. The prodigal's face is not turned to the spectator. In this he resembles one of the figures, clearly the more distraught, in the *Parting of David and Jonathan* (also in the Hermitage, Leningrad). Love goes out to the penitent and the father. It goes out

³⁸ Burckhardt, *Recollections of Rubens*, p. 157.

³⁹ Wonder is not a passion in Aristotle, at least not the wonder of the *Metaphysics*. It is partly painful, because it accompanies ignorance. Nevertheless, it leads to philosophy, obviously not by a quick conversion but rather through study and contemplation. It is, therefore, a habit. Wonder becomes, with Descartes, the first passion discussed in the *Traité des passions de l'âme* (Paris, 1952), pp. 723ff.

in one picture to the returning, in the other, to the parting. If your son ran away to the East Village, would you greet him with such sympathetic passion? The father could, and Rembrandt knew that this was no ordinary father.

Let us return to the *Jewish Bride* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). We may here recall that many, perhaps most, of the titles are not Rembrandt's. This fact is significant in the case of some pictures. Burckhardt says that "perhaps even the master's last picture, called the *Jewish Bride*, until one has a better name for it," could be called a genre picture.⁴⁰ The love in the picture is tender. The touch of the groom's hand is light and devoid of sensuality. The passions are intense but subdued. The spectator experiences wonder. The mystery is enhanced by the fact that happiness is mingled with shyness. Therefore one may feel compassion as well as love. Or consider the head of Christ (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). Not inexplicably, Jesus is suffused with care. What of the visitor to the museum? Does he feel compassion for Jesus, or does he share Jesus' compassion for humanity? Perhaps both, the former being the key to the latter.

There are numerous portraits of old and elderly people. There are two in the Hermitage. One is labeled *Portrait of an Elderly Man* and shows sorrow. The other is called *Old Man in Red* and shows overpowering care. The hands are heavily veined. The brow is wrinkled. Older and sadder than the *Elderly Man*, he wears a skull cap. He cares, and one cares for him. In London (National Gallery) there is an old man in an armchair. He is also careworn and tired. His head rests upon his hand. The hand calls witness to care, as it does in the *Prodigal Son* and the *Jewish Bride*. The man in the armchair seems to be more well-to-do than the figure in the portrait marked "probably" Rembrandt's brother in The Hague (Mauritshaus). There is a similar careworn face, but the drabness of the cloak contrasts strangely with the bright red of the man in the armchair or the old man in red. Also in London, there is an *Eighty-Three-Year-Old Woman*. She is withered, and the picture is compassionate.

There are other instances: the pictures of Anna and Tobit, like *Anna and the Blind Tobit* in the National Gallery (London). There is *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Again, Jeremiah's face is resting on one of his hands. In the *Woman Taken in Adultery* (National Gallery, London), the atmosphere is one of pity. The light is on the penitent woman and on what appears to be the vacated throne of the high priest. The judgment of Jesus takes place below the throne. One finds compassion where one would expect to find it, in the *Good Samaritan* (Louvre, Paris). The *Apostle Paul* (National Gallery, Washington) sits, again

⁴⁰ "Rembrandt," p. 122.

with his head supported by his hand, his pen idle in his right hand, his brow full of perplexity. He is singularly unlike the philosopher on the other side of the gallery.

Let me add one precaution. Care is a passion common enough in art, in tragedy, in many forms of expression. Rembrandt did not invent it. The way we feel towards these old men is not different from the way we feel towards Durer's portrait of his mother. The point I want to stress is twofold. First, there are, in the totality of Rembrandt paintings, a great many showing care, indicating that care was perhaps his primary concern. The second point is that the things Burckhardt notes that Rubens handled with such propriety—discord, envy, hate, and so on—are excluded. Is it true that Rembrandt did not know enough anatomy for certain subjects? That he had the wrong kind of models? But if a great artist eschews the expression of evil, is it not likely that he was saying, "This is not my way"? Something I think Burckhardt misses is the possibility that Rembrandt did certain things deliberately, and for philosophical reasons. If Rembrandt knew Rubens' *Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus* or the *Rape of Hippodameia*, he did not choose to imitate them. If rape is in the Italian classical tradition, a Dutchman has as much right to belong to the Italian classical tradition as a Fleming. But that was not his way. The prodigal son was a rash young man, but he was not a rapist. The woman taken in adultery broke one of the commandments. But that no one cast the stone shows that the sin was widespread enough.⁴¹

The kind of people for whom Rembrandt has compassion are people troubled by nature—old age, blindness—or by circumstance, like poverty. If Rembrandt painted for all time, as he must have known he did, he must have expected his profound human sympathy to touch the hearts of men for centuries. He may have known that Descartes wrote "qu'on se pourrait exempter d'une infinité de maladies tant du corps que de l'esprit, et même aussi peut-être de l'affaiblissement de la vieillesse, si on avait assez de connaissance de leurs causes et de tous les remèdes dont la nature nous a pourvus."⁴²

Did Rembrandt see an end to the suffering he depicted, as Descartes did? Something took place between the High Renaissance and Rembrandt, something of a philosophical nature, but we must see more clearly what that was.

We must next address the question of whether we are dealing with wonder or curiosity. Rembrandt drew and painted the mysterious, the penumbral. He also drew and painted the commonplace. The *Jewish Bride* is an object of wonder, the *Slaughtered Ox* of curiosity. One should further make a distinction between two kinds of wonder, the wonder that is the end of art and the wonder that is the beginning of

⁴¹ John 8:3-12.

⁴² "Discours de la méthode," pt. 6, p. 169.

philosophy; the wonder of Aristotle's *Poetics*, and the wonder of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*; the wonder that Horatio sees at the end of *Hamlet* when he refers to "woe or wonder" and the wonder that permeates the *Tempest*, the incipient or philosophical wonder. It is the philosophical wonder with which Rembrandt was concerned.

If we walk across the room from the *Apostle Paul*, we see the portrait labeled *The Philosopher*. He may not be a philosopher at all, but he seems to be wondering. The lips are slightly parted; the gaze is intent. He wears a blue chain, but the colors are far from garish or prodigal. His identity is apparently obscure. If this portrait was painted in 1650, Spinoza was eighteen, and Descartes was dying in Stockholm. One may wonder, however, at obvious perplexities without that wonder leading to philosophy.⁴³

Burckhardt writes, "Sometimes he [Rembrandt] uses costumes of a past period to great advantage. The etchings throw more light on the matter of dress: either extremely rich and colorful, or rags. There are Turks, strange old men, Jews, cripples, beggars, draughtsmen absorbed in their work, finally thinkers and perhaps philosophers."⁴⁴ It will suffice for the time being to accept Burckhardt's great authority for "perhaps philosophers." To Rembrandt's philosophical concern we must return.

There is also the *Anatomy Lesson of Professor Tulp*. It is said that the painter did not care for the picture. Among the students, some do not care for the lesson either. Yet at least three look at the professor and the corpse with intense curiosity. Would any contemporary professor ask for more? There is the *Syndics* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). Eyes are aglow with interest and concern. There is *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer* (Metropolitan, New York). We have seen touch used to show compassion or care. Here we see contemplation through the fingers. Julius S. Held writes of Aristotle's hands, "One rests on Homer's head, while the other touches the chain. . . . The philosopher looks neither at Homer nor at the chain. Yet we cannot help seeing that this melancholic countenance and far-away glance are in some way linked to both these objects."⁴⁵ Held seems to be right that the countenance is melancholic. Aristotle wrote that all truly outstanding men, including philosophers, were melancholic. This remark was widely current in the Renaissance. It is cited by Cicero.⁴⁶ Rembrandt could have known it and applied it to Aristotle himself. The notion of Aristotle as melancholy was widespread. One possible suggestion is that Aristotle was melancholy in contemplating the *Poetics* because he knew that he could not complete it,

⁴³ Aristotle *Metaphysics* 982B.

⁴⁴ "Rembrandt," p. 123.

⁴⁵ Julius S. Held, *Rembrandt's Aristotle* (Princeton, N.J., 1969), p. 39.

⁴⁶ Aristotle *Problemata* 30.1; Cicero *Tusc.* 1.33, 80: "Aristoteles quidem ait, omnes ingeniosos melancholicos esse."

that he could not discuss comedy, as Plato had done in the *Symposium*. It is possible but highly speculative.

Homer is much like the Homer in the companion piece in the Mauritshaus. He is apparently blind, but, in the portrait in The Hague, the hands show Homer's wonder; the bust, of course, has no hands, but wonder is in the right hand of Aristotle, as well as in the eyes.

The mingling of care and contemplation is visible in *A Franciscan Monk* in the National Gallery (London). In one of several pictures of the Holy Family, this one in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, there is apparently no manger. The furnishings are Dutch. Joseph is dozing. The baby is sleeping. Mary is reading a book, which I suppose to be the Old Testament, lighted by the strange light which, as so often, seems to have no source. One cannot see the Virgin's face, but the light shines on her book. Wonder is again suggested. Because the setting is almost cavernous, the picture bears some relation to the pictures treating philosophers or savants which show light in a cavernous setting. We shall turn to those later. Wonder is hardly seen, but the setting implies wonder.

It is clear that any great work of art induces wonder, the wonder that is self-sufficient, the wonder in the *Poetics*, the wonder in Horatio's "woe or wonder." It is perhaps rarer for incipient wonder, the wonder of the *Metaphysics*, to be one of the leading sympathetic passions in an artist's imaginative presentation. Yet it so dominates the Rembrandt corpus as to eliminate any comparison with the cruelty of *David and Uriah*, the terror of *Belshazzar's Feast* (London, National Gallery), the loneliness of Saul (*Saul and David*, Mauritshuis), or anything else that might suggest a likeness to Rubens as Rubens appears in the passage I quoted from Burckhardt.

We must turn to sight and touch. It is obvious that every painter makes use of sight and touch in order to paint a painting. We are not here attributing a *Zeitgeist* to the seventeenth century, as is sometimes done in the alleged diversion from the "tactile." We are talking about touch, or the tactile, as Rembrandt understood it, as an instrument of understanding. In *Belshazzar's Feast*, the mysterious hand from the book of Daniel is reproduced and so are the Hebrew characters. The writing on the wall is a way of enhancing and understanding Belshazzar's terror. In *Lucrezia* (National Gallery, Washington) the right hand, holding the dagger, appears to be resolute, though the eyes are sad. Old men show tiredness, resting their faces on their hands, as in *Jeremiah Lamenting the Destruction of Jerusalem* or the *Old Man in an Armchair*, mentioned above. The light and tender touch of the groom in the *Jewish Bride* gives the viewer a sense of tenderness, and the shyness which shows not only in the face but also in the touch of the bride arouses compassion. The father lays his hands upon the *Prodigal Son*. Compassion is in the touch as in the sight.

If hands are instruments of compassion, hands are also instruments

of wonder or curiosity. If touch is conspicuous in the *Anatomy Lesson*, hands are equally conspicuous in *Homer*, where the blind poet extends his hands, as though he saw with them. And Aristotle lays his right hand on the bust of Homer, one sage contemplating another sage with his hands more clearly than with his eyes.

To make this a little clearer, let me refer to the classical belief that sight was the noblest of the senses and to the essay of Hans Jonas on "The Nobility of Sight,"⁴⁷ where the author gives some of the reasons for the move in classical antiquity from sight to philosophy. Yet Jonas also notes the nobility of touch: "An organ for real shape-feeling exists probably only in the human hand, and there is more than coincidence in the fact that in his hand, man possesses a tactile organ which can take over some of the distinctive achievements of his eye. There is a mental side to the highest performance of the tactile sense, or rather to the use that is made of its information, that transcends all mere sentience, and it is the mental use which brings touch within the dimension of the achievements of sight. . . . Blind men can 'see' by means of their hands, not because they are devoid of their eyes, but because they are beings endowed with the general faculty of 'vision' and only happen to be deprived of the primary organ of sight."⁴⁸

Such a statement helps us to understand Rembrandt's portrait of Homer. To Aristotle, however, touch was the most pervasive of the senses and the most necessary. But to Aristotle neither the pervasive nor the necessary count for very much.⁴⁹ Pervasiveness is clear. Even the blind mole has touch. Necessity is also clear. We touch food; we touch a member of the opposite sex. We need food and, while individuals may not need sexual intercourse, the human race does. But the unnecessary things, like thought, are, to the classics, higher.

I do not know that the first to repudiate this teaching was Machiavelli, but I do know that Machiavelli did repudiate it. "Men in general [*universalis*]," says Machiavelli, "judge more by the eyes than by the hands, because each judges by seeing, few by feeling. All see what you appear to be; few feel what you are."⁵⁰ As Leo Strauss says, "in order not to be deceived, one must be close to the deceptive things and immune to false imaginations."⁵¹ There is also a flight from reason. Obviously visions are included among the deceptive things, and cannot be touched. So too is the Platonic *eidos*.

I cannot say how far Rembrandt followed Machiavelli or whether he had even heard of this passage. He was not particularly political in the narrower sense of the term, though he cared for the independence of

⁴⁷ In *The Phenomenon of Life* (New York, 1966), pp. 135-56.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 141-42.

⁴⁹ *De anima* 422B-28ff.

⁵⁰ *The Prince*, ch. 18 (near the end).

⁵¹ *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, Ill., 1958), p. 203.

Holland.⁵² He was passionately concerned with how men should live. Certainly touch does not have for him the universal validity it has for Machiavelli as a source of understanding. I have mentioned the use of hands. Let me quote Burckhardt on Rembrandt's understanding of the human eye: "Rembrandt knew the effect of eyes as few others did. He knew how to make them shine under the shadow of a hat or a cap with strange fire."⁵³ Whether Rembrandt followed Machiavelli regarding sight and touch, in some ways he was still a modern man. Certainly one of his greatest pictures is the *Jewish Bride*. Through touch it elevates the admittedly tender and admittedly restrained but still sexual *eros* far beyond what the classics would have done.

Before we can seek another universality, we must understand the diurnality of the supernal light. It is a strange light, as everyone knows, and its source is usually mysterious. There are a few paintings, drawings, and etchings where the light comes through the window, but here the mystery is retained because of the cavernous structure of the room or some other factor. "Rembrandt," says Burckhardt, "will probably remain the greatest painter of light of all time, because that is really all he wanted to be." Burckhardt adds, "We can see the light, but we only understand through the artist how beautiful and transfused with spirit it is."⁵⁴

Of course, Rembrandt had forerunners. One of them was Titian, but the light effects of Titian are quite different from those of Rembrandt. Radiances of divine light may appear in diagonal form, for instance in the three ceiling pieces at the Santa Maria della Salute in Venice. Panofsky points out that "from an iconographical point of view the series may be called a trilogy of homicide: homicide condemned by God (Cain), homicide prevented by God (Abraham), and homicide approved by God (David and Goliath)."⁵⁵ Titian certainly influenced Rembrandt, but the light is not usually, in Rembrandt, presented in such diagonals.

This is not a study of influences, but a word must be said about Caravaggio. There is nothing new in this; it is widely accepted in the literature. It is not so much the light, however, as the substitution of the human for the transcendent. *La Vocazione di San Matteo* (*The Calling of St. Matthew*) is called by Guttoso "one of the 'dipintichiave' [key paintings] of the entire history of art."⁵⁶ Here, Guttoso adds, "the choice of the extracts of life—a choice not casual—carries itself

⁵² He did paint at least two significant political paintings, *The Conspiracy of Julius Civilis* (in Stockholm), a tribute to liberty, derived from Tacitus, and *The Concord of the State* (in Rotterdam).

⁵³ "Rembrandt," p. 118.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁵⁵ *Problems in Titian*, pp. 33-34.

⁵⁶ Renato Guttoso, *Caravaggio* (Milan, 1971). p. 7.

out through the constructive and significant office of the light." I doubt that this is the usual use of light in Rembrandt.

The object of the strange light is varied. In the *Woman Taken in Adultery*, the light shines on the woman clad in white and on an empty throne (perhaps the high priest's), for which I can find no biblical authorization. The light is not on Jesus. In the *Prodigal Son*, the light shines on the tattered clothing of the returned prodigal and on the hands and face of the compassionate father. In *Jeremiah Lamenting* the light streams beneath and behind the prophet. In *St. Peter's Denial* (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), the light is on St. Peter's robe and on the bodice of the maid of the high priest.⁵⁷ In one picture of the Holy Family (Louvre), the light is on the Christ child but also on one part of the floor. In another picture of the Holy Family (Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), the light is on the sleeping Christ child but also on Joseph's turban, on large sections of the wall behind Joseph, and on the book Mary is reading. The light blends with the shadow, and the light may help us to understand each particular picture and what the artist chose to emphasize.

Not all shading is umbral; much of it is penumbral, enhancing the mysterious character of an object. Or, as Burckhardt says, "the most profound darkness is not quite black."⁵⁸ What is important here is that secular objects are sometimes penumbral and mysterious and sometimes lighted, suggesting enlightenment. Often the same objects are lighted in one picture, shaded in another. Often, in portraits, the face and hands best show the light. Not, however, in *Homer* (The Hague) or in *Old Man in an Armchair* (London), where the light seems to come from the robe. The play of light and shadow is lifelike enough. Rembrandt may have had no other design than to make use of the light to illuminate the simply human. Rembrandt never heard of the Enlightenment, and when he died (1669) the *siècle des lumières* had not yet arrived. Yet Descartes and even Bacon may be considered as belonging to the Enlightenment, if one does not insist on the French identification of light with a century. Bacon talked continuously about light: the dry light, the experiments with light in contradistinction to experiments with fruit, the merchants of light, and the lamps of the *New Atlantis*. Bacon, as d'Alembert said, "born in the depths of the most profound night, believed that philosophy was not yet."⁵⁹ Rembrandt need not have read Bacon. He need not have read Descartes, though he made a portrait of that philosopher. Scientific reasoning is known in Descartes' *Meditations* as the "light of nature." The metaphorical use of light is much older. But "let your light so shine before men" does not refer to human progress. Obviously the philosopher uses light figuratively, but the painter may

⁵⁷ Mark 4:66.

⁵⁸ "Rembrandt," p. 113.

⁵⁹ "Discours préliminaire de l'Encyclopédie."

use it both figuratively and literally. There is a problem. Did what was happening in painting from Titian to Rembrandt have a relation with what was happening in philosophy from Machiavelli to Descartes?

It seems to me likely that the difference between the High Renaissance and Rembrandt can be traced to his agreement or at least coincidence with Bacon and Descartes, but it is extremely difficult to say exactly in what way that is so. It is true that Rembrandt was not a philosopher. He was not compelled to be consistent. Yet Panofsky can speak of a *peintre philosophe* or a *peintre savant*, naming several like Leonardo and Durer.⁶⁰ He should, it seems to me, have named Rembrandt. Let us see first what Rembrandt did not accept. Much of the High Renaissance was skeptical. It can be seen in Raphael's paintings, in Leonardo's writings. But the classical-pagan element in the Christian tradition, the cosmos, Raphael certainly does not seem to have rejected at all. Orderliness is conspicuously present in the High Renaissance. Orderliness is united with skepticism. It is probably different with Rembrandt. His work does not demand the kind of belief in a well-ordered universe that Raphael's does.

Yet there is something in thought that Rembrandt did contribute. Long before Rembrandt, Hugh Latimer had said, it was chiefly through yeomen's sons that the Gospel was kept alive. The appeal to the lowly and the humble found its way into art. That is perhaps the link with Caravaggio. It is said that Caravaggio was influenced by St. Philip Neri. With Caravaggio as with Rembrandt it is the human side of the Bible and of hagiology rather than the transcendent which is predominant. Perhaps the resemblance ends here, except for the use of light, for in Caravaggio there is a strong element of violence, even brutality. There is little of this in Rembrandt. The compassion which the prodigal son, the Good Samaritan, the woman taken in adultery command is Christian compassion, and, even if Rembrandt was a modern man, a man whom the stream of Baconian-Cartesian thought had somehow impressed, he was also a man thoroughly conversant with the Bible and a man who took the Bible seriously. Can one accept the Christian way of life and reject the Christian order? Certainly there is a kind of wisdom in Rembrandt, a wisdom which accepts Christian compassion, coupled with the possibility that the need for that compassion may some day be obviated.

What was said at the beginning of the discussion of the light is that Rembrandt made the supernal light diurnal. Burckhardt makes a great deal of fun of Rembrandt for choosing models as experiments in light and for having a hard time getting models, as they wanted to be something besides an instrument for illumination.⁶¹ Perhaps this is so. But it helps to indicate that light, both literally and metaphorically, is of supreme importance to Rembrandt. The light appears to be heavenly or divine

⁶⁰ *Problems in Titian*, p. 88.

⁶¹ "Rembrandt," *passim*.

light. It has the mysterious quality of heavenly light. Its source is not usually shown, and its objects are not only varied but apparently indiscriminate. It can shine from the body of a slaughtered ox. It seems to have divine origins, but it can be brought into the everyday. Essentially, its universality is a universality of this world.

When I first embarked upon the journey that took me outside my own field of political philosophy to the relations between the history of political philosophy and of art, I believed that I could establish Rembrandt's affinity with Descartes. I realize that that was an oversimplification. Richard Kennington writes, "In some part of the soul arises spontaneously the desire to esteem oneself highly."⁶² Yet why should one esteem oneself highly? Kennington quotes Cartesian passages about the "mastery and ownership of nature" and the "enjoyment of the fruits of earth in this life without pain."⁶³ The highest passion or virtue in Descartes, *générosité*, is a form of self-love, but it is directed towards what Bacon calls the "relief of man's estate."

Despite the great differences, did Rembrandt here have something in common with Descartes? Let us look again at the play of light and shadow. The spirituality of light the Dutch painter found in Titian. So, I suppose, did Vermeer. The relation of light to realism he found in Caravaggio. And this would be true if Rembrandt had never had Descartes sit for him. However, the works of Rembrandt show strong affinity with light, in the metaphorical as well as the literal sense. The mingling of light and shadow in the *Jeremiah* noted above is different from the sharp contrasts in the cavernous pictures. The Holy Family in Amsterdam is a cavernous picture. The light comes through the window, reminding us of the pictures of philosophers.⁶⁴ Why did Rembrandt paint those dark backgrounds, light coming through the windows, and figures apparently enlivened by the light chiefly as representatives of philosophy? Dark backgrounds are not uncommon. It is the mingling of blackness, sunlight, and cavernous appearance which is special. It is this which belongs to philosophers, particularly old philosophers. Age may be an object of compassion. But one does not pity the old philosopher contemplating the truth. As I mentioned, pictures sometimes go by different titles. The cavernous picture of the *savant* or *philosophe* in the Louvre is labeled *Le Philosophe*. Rosenberg calls it *Scholar in His Study*. He gives the same title to a similar painting in London.⁶⁵ There are numerous other illustrations of the search for truth and its relation to light. One is an etching, sometimes called *Faust*. This picture is not cavernous, but it has a dark background, a scholar rising to look at a

⁶² "The Teaching of Nature in Descartes' Soul Doctrine," *Review of Metaphysics* 26 (1972): 117.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

⁶⁴ Lugt, *Inventaire*, 1128.

⁶⁵ *Rembrandt*, pp. 266-67.

disc, and light streaming through the window. That in these pictures the source of light is less mysterious than in others, seems to indicate a *lumière naturelle*.

In putting forth the radical view which I am about to express, I must gather such evidence as I can, including one picture that I have not seen. The characteristics of the London and Paris paintings are massive darkness relieved by the light shining from the window on the *savant* or philosopher, cavernous appearance, and the presence of articles identifiable in the dark with some difficulty, like the spiral staircase. There is a picture in Stockholm called *A Scholar in a Lofty Room*.⁶⁶ According to a print, this picture is not cavernous, but it shares the other characteristics of the Paris and London paintings. There are some variations in other pictures. There is also an etching which I have seen in the Rembrandtshuis in Amsterdam, which purports to show *St. Jerome in a Dark Chamber*.⁶⁷ Here too there are sunlight, spiral staircase, darkness. Generally speaking, this contrast of quasi-total darkness with a foreground or a corner of sunlight is reserved for pictures of philosophers or scholars. It is proper to suppose that there is a relation between contemplation and this peculiar confrontation of darkness and light.⁶⁸

In the famous myth of the cave in Plato's *Republic*, the philosopher goes from the cave to the light and then is forced back into the cave to rule. He does not and he cannot take the light with him. The cave is the world, or, at least, the political world. It cannot be enlightened, for most men will see only shadows, and the darkness will never be dispelled. In the Enlightenment, however, as Allan Bloom says, the light is brought back into the cave of the world.⁶⁹ This distinction is one of the most important distinctions between pre-modern and modern political thought. Whether Rembrandt knew of this distinction, I do not know. Yet out of his work, I believe, could be created a new myth. The darkness of man's world remains, but one may suppose that, as progress continues, the sunlight would illuminate not only the philosopher but also the fruits of his work, and that the sorrow and care, so clearly seen by Rembrandt, would some day be dispelled, like the darkness of the cavernous chamber.

There is a certain relation with Descartes, though it would be hard to establish an affinity. To Descartes, the leading passion, and also the highest virtue, is *générosité*. As Kennington points out, *générosité* is a kind of self-esteem.⁷⁰ Descartes himself points out the similarity of generosity to the Aristotelean virtue of magnanimity, adding that it (*générosité*) is "comme la clef de toutes les autres vertus et une remède

⁶⁶ A. Bredius, *The Paintings of Rembrandt* (New York, 1942), no. 430.

⁶⁷ Hind, *op. cit.*, 201. See also 202.

⁶⁸ See also Bredius, *Rembrandt*, nos. 423-24.

⁶⁹ Allan Bloom, trans., *Republic* (New York, 1968), p. 103.

⁷⁰ "Descartes," p. 117.

générale contre tous les dérèglements des passions.”⁷¹ The generous man is capable of great things.⁷² Is Rembrandt, or Rembrandt’s *savant* in the cavernous study, Descartes’ man of *générosité*? To answer that, one would have to know whether the myth which Rembrandt created to replace Plato’s myth of the cave presents a kind of self-esteem. We can hardly know. All we can say is that Rembrandt accepted something from the tradition of Bacon and Descartes which is associated with what we now call Enlightenment—that with him as with them, the goal of contemplation became practical.

⁷¹ “Traité des passions de l’âme,” art. 161, *Œuvres complètes*, pp. 773-74.

⁷² *Ibid.*, art. 156, p. 770.