

Interpretation

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Review Essay

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In chapter 9¹ (“Lucretius on Rebelling against the ‘Laws’ of Nature”), Paul Ludwig’s Lucretius confirms a lesson Bartlett attributed to Plato and Aristotle: nature (including death) is to be *accepted*, rather than mastered (compare 105 and 122). Ludwig further confirms the affinity both Bartlett and Minkov had pointed to between religion and modern science: both enterprises are expressions of a will to defy death, not to speak of a will to power. On the other hand, Ludwig’s Lucretius would seem to disprove Nadon’s quasi-Nietzschean argument that ancient Socratics (if not, more generally, all *idealists*), as closet materialists, sought to master nature in secret.

Ludwig shows that Lucretius would regard the quest to master nature, and modern science in particular, as lacking reflection on our mortality and thereby as needing to be purged of utterly vain interests (124). Modern science would be further committing the error of believing that nature functions according to abstract-symbolic or overarching “laws” (begging for a lawgiver, be this human or otherwise): for Lucretius there can be only “rules of compound” understood as free or “democratic” *alliances* (Ludwig renders Lucretius’s *foedus* as “covenant”) between “atoms,” the infinite determinate

¹ This is the second part of a two-part review essay. The first part appeared in issue 45, no. 2 (2019) of this journal.

entities populating an utterly indeterminate, overall senseless “void” (123–24). Now, since Lucretius understands the “alliances” between atoms—atomic “compounds”—as temporary “truces” in the context of “a kind of warfare of clashes” leading to periodic conflagrations (125), the very notion of a science of natural laws (modern “Science”) would make no sense to him. What is more, for Lucretius belief in nature’s “laws” would be especially pernicious insofar as it would invite (a “backslide” into) religion or theology (122 and 126). Yet, in the very act of reducing the human (and visible) to the subhuman (and invisible)—thereby conceiving nature as destructive of ethics—Lucretius cannot avoid speaking of inanimate “atoms” (ultimate reality) in *human*, not to speak of religious (“conventional”), terms: while failing “to save certain appearances,” Lucretius also fails to account for their ground (127).

In spite of his failures, Lucretius insists that rational life is reducible to the irrational and inanimate, just as Leibniz would elevate the latter to the former. Yet, Lucretius’s “reduction” emerges in the context of ethical concerns: the philosopher’s aim is to free himself and others from all religious hindrances to the life of the purest possible pleasure, which coincides with the greatest possible indifference to nature or death (128–29). Lucretius’s ethical concerns are such that he would rather lie—or poetize—about nature, than concede the possibility that nature is subject to a superhuman authority (129–31).

Whether or not Lucretius understands his account of nature as a mere *expedient means* serving his ethical ideal, it is clear that he does not want us to think of natural science as an end in itself—lest we mistake his “science” for a religion whose merciful gods Lucretius suspects of demanding of us a terrible price (130).² Lucretius seems to accept that natural science has natural or necessary limits compelling the scientist to lie, if only for a “good” cause. Neither nature, nor any “scientific method,” but an ideal irreducible to both science and nature provides a standard for science. It is that very ideal that compels Lucretius to invoke gods that are none other than self-projections of Epicurean philosophers (130–31).³

Ludwig supplements his review of Lucretius’s natural science with doubts concerning modern natural science, which apparently no longer believes in immutable natural laws (130). While silent about the notion of a “multiverse,”

² For an elegant satirical reference to “the infinite mercy of the Most Merciful and Most Terrible God,” see Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Black Cat.”

³ In compelling itself to reject any appeal to gods, modern natural science shows to be moved by a non-Epicurean, social-minded, progressive ideal.

Ludwig reads recent developments in natural science as leaving space for divine intervention by indicating that something does come from nothing, after all, and that an intelligible order does not require infinite time to emerge.

Received views of natural science as “materialistic” are further unsettled by 1) the re-emergence of an Aristotelian-like account of “things”—defined primarily by their effort to use their material (131)—as well as by 2) reflection upon ends: in the supposed absence of anything eternal, is scientists’ contemporary turn to pure, ethics-free “theory” futile (132)? Would contemporary natural science be “superior” to its ancient precursor simply by conceding that, if all is in motion, then science itself must haplessly be, as well? Today’s “science” stands in the shadow of a theoretical bankruptcy marked by the conclusion that reason (science) itself is rooted in the passions (the unscientific): science’s own method is couched in the very unruly passions, the very mortality it is supposed to channel, if only for science’s own sake (133).

Ludwig ends his intervention with a critical reflection on the *practical* end of modern science: deliverance from a death entailing the *impossibility* of indefinitely progressing empowerment (133–34). In spite of an earlier suggestion that modernity ultimately views power as subservient to contemplation (132), Ludwig now suggests that modern science promises mere empowerment (means devoid of ends), rather than the channeling of power into the glory of science or knowledge itself. Are we then to understand modern science’s promises in terms of a charm, perhaps even a drug, inducing us to accept stooping under an otherwise disagreeable monastic yolk?

Ludwig’s critical argument that modern science leaves us (especially those of us who are not scientists) with a life to endure as “self-imposed Hell” (134) is mute before the possible objection that modern natural science is the learning vehicle (form or mind) of man’s self-transformation in a self-transforming universe: our “Science” might be a universal “adventure of ideas” (Whitehead) inviting us to transcend any and all preassumptions concerning the nature of Being. Yet—Ludwig might interject—were our “Science” to truly be such a wonderful adventure (an ascent, as it were, of material life to a purely spiritual one), it would be eager to follow Socrates’s old advice to reexamine *first of all* its own preassumptions concerning what Being is or is not (where, as means stand to their inherent ends, what we do is of secondary importance vis-à-vis the investigation of the reason why we act).

In chapter 7—“Return to Nature vs. Conquest of Nature in Rousseau”—Arthur Melzer finds Rousseau at the crossroads between early and late modernity. The first striking lesson to be gleaned from Melzer’s reading of Rousseau is that the philosopher’s return-to-nature project arises as the radicalization of the early modern quest to conquer nature (138, after 5). Rousseau’s critique of modernity on modern (though “essentially classical”) grounds, or modernity’s own self-critique, appears to be the self-critique of what Melzer describes (purportedly against the grain of “Christian thinkers”) as “a drive to control everything, to master and alter nature” (249; even though Melzer’s sentence brings to mind St. Augustine’s *libido dominandi*). In the hands of an immoderate posterity, Rousseau’s moderating critique, based on an awareness of the precariousness of the modern project, opens the door to the view that nature itself empowers us to best govern it: our modern drive to dominate nature would ultimately be nature’s own; science itself would be the product of an evolution that may very well point beyond science.

The extent to which modernity’s self-critique leads to the rise of a late modern or Nietzschean will to power/life seems to depend upon Rousseau’s strategic propensity to invite a “new nature-religion” in order to support his “political and psychological” interest in a universal “healthy and happy life” (139). Late modernity tends to ignore the ethical ground of the rise of its conception of nature, thereby misunderstanding itself.

Melzer’s Rousseau echoes lessons spelled out in earlier chapters, where the popularization of natural science is “simply bad” for two reasons: 1) cosmopolitan, peace-loving natural science undermines the traditional civil life and order required to avert anarchy; and 2) natural science is good only when pursued by “genuine philosophers” as an end in itself, rather than by war-loving “ordinary men” as a means to self-empowerment. In Rousseau’s words, “it is good for there to be philosophers provided that the people don’t get mixed up in being philosophers” (141).

While ancient peoples were kept at bay by being made subservient to civil “morals and virtue” (i.e., to civil religion, or a religion of state), moderns are domesticated by being made mutually subservient in an ever-expanding web of financial interests (142, 144). With modernity, all religious authority is to be overcome as an obstacle to a happiness fostered by progressive, technologically mediated empowerment of a collectivity over its natural resources (143; compare Ludwig’s conclusive reflections on modern materialism as “prevent[ing] us from being happy”). The most notable defect of the modern alternative is that, by fostering universal greed, it tends to promote—if only covertly—a

conception of law as means for “mutual deceit and exploitation” (144), or for the rise of an oligarchy dominating tyrannically over hapless masses.

Now, where modernity is bad, not merely for societies as a whole, but also for “individuals,” Rousseau departs from “abstract theorizing” to propose a practical remedy to modernity’s ills. Where no return to a healthy, ancient republican ideal is realizable in a modern world dominated by religiously spun tyrannical universals (*pace* French revolutionaries [145]), Rousseau’s advice to his ideal student (Emile) is to accept as inevitable his unhappiness, since “in the modern monarchical world...the public realm is hopelessly illegitimate and oppressive” (146).

Why is our technocracy inimical to “individual happiness”? First, the machinery of technocratic plutocracy is programmed to destroy all moderation, or any middle ground between the ascetic “complete extirpation” of all desire and the utterly unbridled desires of capitalistic societies.⁴ The problem with capitalistic societies is that they turn our otherwise “basic...innocent and healthy” *natural* desires into our anarchic, deceiving, tyrannical masters (147–48): unbridled, madly fueled desires rob us of all self-reliance, reducing us to a state of outright slavery. In such a state of radical dependency, we are continuously distracted from the reality of our present lives, by being driven to pursue ever-new idols, “in the direction of immortality” (150). Immortality turns out to be the target of our “deepest longings,” which we require “tremendous inner strength” to contradict (151). It is the task of the consummate hero to awaken “from the fantasy of immortality,” accepting death as his “inevitable end” (151).

In thus sketching Rousseau’s lesson for our age, Melzer leaves us, at least provisionally, with a contradiction between our *bad* “deepest longings” (purportedly grounding the project to conquer nature) and the “basic...innocent and healthy” desires of our *good* nature. The contradiction is at least partially solved where human nature is self-contradictory, or where man is himself by negating himself (thus always in the process of transforming himself), most notably by subjecting himself to necessary evils of his own making. Our “basic desires” would be good only as long as we regrounded them from an original soil of “mechanistic laws of nature” onto the plane of “law one

⁴ In speaking of Rousseau as rejecting the extremism of the “Buddhist ascetic,” Melzer does not notice that his expression is, in Buddhist terms, an oxymoron (Melzer may be thinking of a *Brahminic* ascetic). This is not to say that Buddha’s “middle way” (*mādhyaṃaka*) is compatible with Rousseau’s (*materialistic*) acceptance of death, since Buddha’s lesson probes death as door to truth, or even as consummate illusion (as Dante’s Platonic use of pagan and Christian imageries in the *Comedy* shows well, there is no need to struggle against illusions).

has prescribed for oneself” (154);⁵ hence the link Melzer highlights between Rousseau and Kant.⁶ In sum, our yearning for physical immortality would be redeemed (*felix culpa*) as medium for the rise of a legal order upheld *as if* it were eternal.

Melzer’s chapter does not ascertain whether our admittedly universal longing for immortality is originally flawed. Is our longing originally a mask for fear of death, as well as the unequivocal root of modernity’s quest to conquer nature or death, as Melzer’s Rousseau invites us to conclude? Conversely, would the abandonment of “the conquest of nature” ultimately require a materialist critique of *all* idealistic impulse towards immortality, as “inauthentic” (Heidegger)? (On p. 159 of chapter 11, however, Velkley indicates explicitly that mastery of nature presupposes a mechanistic conception of nature.)

It is unclear how Melzer’s Rousseau would respond to the objection that the materialist’s own “salutary fatalism” (151) is the *unnatural* mask of a will to life or power that our *natural* longing for immortality may help us transcend—not merely conceal. Otherwise put, Melzer’s analysis notwithstanding, it is hard to see how the sheer resignation of “self-concerned” citizens (141) in the face of death—as opposed to any quest for eternity—might ever serve as catalyst for the good life. Might Platonic idealism—though not understood as a mask for Epicureanism—fare better or best in helping us investigate the mystery of death, *beyond* the temptation of reducing death to a necessity that is as impervious to thought as is the will of the fiercest of despots?

“Exoteric” Platonism appeals to an original metaphysical (human) nature, or to the distinction between two worlds, that of Being and that of Becoming: the first is qualified by a noble, *good* infinity (absolute indetermination) that Platonic poetry calls us back to; the other, by a vulgar, *evil* infinity (relative indetermination) that Sophistry portrays—if only by way of fleeing it—as the only real one.

Failing to allow for an original Good (including the originally good human nature that Christianity evokes in speaking of a Second Adam, or of an original blessing), Epicureanism is vexed by an unnecessary struggle against human nature—a struggle that comes to light especially with

⁵ On modernity’s “transplanting” of man, see Giacomo Leopardi, “Prize Propositions Made by the Academy of Sillographers,” in *Operette Morali*.

⁶ The project at hand may be summarized as follows: where human thought tends *naturally* to return to its infinite perfection—a perfection that is beyond thought—our natural inclination ought to be reoriented towards a goal achievable in *this* world. We must struggle to “translate” death into life (cf. Rousseau’s *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*).

modernity's universal proselytizing of an Epicurean soteriology. Plato's ironically "apologetic" Socrates testifies to the fundamental alternative of a poetic disclosing-conversion of the deceptive infinity of ends habitually dominating our senses, to their enlightening, ontological antecedent: the infinite depths of meaning, or of death. Through Platonic poetry, the mortal dreams we are ordinary lost in are redeemed as mirrors of the infinite irreducibility of Being (immortality).⁷ Whence stems, finally, the capacity of Platonism—exoterically understood as opposed to any mode of Epicureanism—to help us live in our unjust societies without struggling, or feeling compelled to flee them.

Further difficulties, however, affect Melzer's account of the evils of technocracy. To begin with, the account is contradicted by the fact that the (capitalist) machinery of production of vain distractions (fetishes) characterizing our technocratic bureaucracies does set heavy restraints upon our desires by creating "dreams" (not least of them those of the "news" entertainment industry) serving as boundaries of our imagination. As Aldous Huxley warned the twentieth century, the democratic unleashing of desires presupposes a machine domesticating them—purportedly, lest our desires end up devouring us. What is more, as instruments of the modernist project, our technocracies would seem to be set up to allow natural scientists (including the likes of Rousseau) to pursue their quest for knowledge, relatively unhindered by popular misologic suspicions (140). Is it not in the interest of Epicureans that modern capitalistic technocracies offer us a "poetry"—including a "nature-religion" à la Rousseau—distracting "ordinary men" from the ground of their ignorance, lest (over)exposure to this ground, as to *truth*, convince us that ordinary life, or a life of civil obedience, is not worth living? And are our "masses" not continually distracted or entertained precisely by the death-bound present ("this moment") that Rousseau's nature-religion itself would call us "to live in and enjoy" (151)?

To be sure, the present that our bureaucratically fed generation "enjoys" (or succumbs to) is a technocratically mediated illusion; our hypermediated

⁷ Platonism's "redemption" stands as consummation of a pre-Socratic, ancestral yearning for eternity. Even if for preliterate or prehistorical peoples the world of the dead was infinitely more important and indeed real than that of the living (to the former were dedicated stone temples, or "doors" to eternity, from early dolmens to Rome's Pantheon), pre-Socratic man seems inexplicably "condemned" to live, even as he bears witness to eternity in his every doing (consider, e.g., the animal drawings of Lascaux as "signs" or "premonitory recollections" of man's coming, i.e., of the revelation of *logos*). With Socrates, death is a reminder not only that man as *logos* hides, i.e., that he is eternal (whereby the living are destined to return to an underworld), but that human, poetic life is a precious, blessed gift, being the consummate, universal sign of the eternal hiddenness of *logos*. Man is the "sign" (his life, the signaling) in which the eternal *logos* speaks to, or gathers, all "signs."

present is hyperfrustrating. Rousseau's life-simplifying nature-religion—as the theatrical stage he planned for our world (139 and 141)—promises greater intimacy with death, or a life “in the true world” (152); it promises less frustration and more enjoyment. Yet, the Epicurean foundations of Rousseau's proposal bring it to naught. For, by *merely accepting* death, Epicureanism alienates us from what death might *mean*—from the *inner reality* of death. Thereby Epicureanism invites, and so fails to undermine, popular proliferation of illusory defenses against death, “walls” rendering palatable or sweeter the bitter inexorability of the supposed ultimate senselessness of death, which is to say, of our lives.

A “secret affinity” may be finally evinced between Rousseau and our “nature mastering” societies, insofar as—witness Melzer—by no means do contemporary technocracies prevent Epicureans from calling decadent masses to flee their “hopelessly illegitimate and oppressive” societies in search of properly Epicurean happiness (146). If it is true that the process of “globalization” pretends to embrace four-dimensionally all that is human—feigning to shelter man from violent death, as if the anesthetic effect provided by our fetishes amounted to anything better than a palliative in the face of life's horrors—it is at least equally true that the universal technocracy in the making retains an air of indifference to the proliferation of communities (both in and out of academia) of Epicurean discourse thriving in the shade of tyranny. In short, considering the impossibility Rousseau finds of a return to the lofty morality of Sparta (145), the technocratic Leviathan seems to offer the best tradeoff for present-day Epicureans.

Velkley's chapter 8—“Kant on Organism and History”—retraces the rise of a metaphysical morality to the tension between two coexisting elements in Kant: the appeal to nature as supporting modern man's ascent to secular freedom (freedom as a good in itself), and belief in nature's mechanistic character (156–59, 167). The tension in question begs for reconciliation brought about by a sovereign moral or action-guiding judgment deducing (supersensible) meaning by applying the laws of human reason to the objects of natural science (163–64, 167). What judgment achieves is *evolving* exposure of the ground of the tension between our self-organizing powers of practical understanding, and nature perceived as a machine. Whence Kant's ultimate rejection of a mechanistic understanding of nature (although Kant leaves open the possibility that nature is “an ‘intentional technic,’ in which

mechanical laws are employed to achieve purposive organization,” beyond our understanding [167]).

Whereas nature is a machine *extrinsically*, or insofar as it remains exposed to human manipulation, nature is not *intrinsically* a machine, insofar as it possesses, on the plane of individual organized beings, “formative force...a force inexplicable on any analogy with a known physical ability” (165). Likewise, nature may be attributed a *telos* relatively to the rise of man’s liberty, but not with respect to the immanent interdependence of living organisms (of “beings in which everything is a purpose and reciprocally means” [166; compare 252n47]). Nature *in itself* baffles our reason (164). Yet, while arguing that there can be no science of nature *itself*—no absolute biology—and thereby no ultimate mastery of nature, Kant also *contributes*, if only indirectly, to the expansion of modernity’s nature-mastering project (162, 166, 169). As Velkley’s analysis leads us to conclude, by formally shutting natural science to nature’s ground (167), Kantian moral metaphysics *justifies* natural science’s quest to master a nature symbolically abstracted out of nature’s mysterious depths (see 251n21): whereas ancient *pure* metaphysics invites a contemplative return to nature’s source, Kant’s *practical* metaphysics (in the wake of Descartes’s “‘dynamic’ and expansive vision: of reason as progressively unifying the whole of what is available to human apprehension” [161]) invites us to handle nature as a means to human empowerment, if only by exposing natural science’s own conceptual apparatus or formal laws to possible revision.

More specifically, Kant calls natural science to subject nature to the “final purpose” (*Endzweck*) of a man whose “culture” is understood as latter end or “ultimate purpose” (*letzter Zweck*) of nature’s own development (167–68; apparently Velkley adopts the terms “end” and “purpose” interchangeably). Nature refines man *as if* it intended him to become nature’s lord (*Herr der Natur* [168]). De facto, nature prepares man for his supreme mission, “the full autonomy of the human species” (169), by subjecting man to innumerable evils—not least of them that of war—compelling man to enter a world of “sciences and fine arts”: “on the whole,” these institutions prepare man to awaken to his destiny (168–69).

As consummate beneficiary of nature’s own workings, or as being made *capable* of willing his consummation *beyond nature*, cultured (i.e., skillful, righteous and disciplined [168–69]) man is fully justified in making use of nature, yet again only in the interests of the final consummation of his own faculties (compare 253n56). To simplify Velkley’s analysis even further, we

may say that for Kant our nature-given or natural power justifies our making use of nature to fulfill our power beyond nature: when considering the whole human species, what we *can* do is what we *ought* to do. And yet, the justification of our “cosmopolitan” power (of the formal or superficial autonomy of our reason) requires that we expose ourselves to the fundamental possibility that nature does not *intend* us to master it—i.e., to exploit it in the service of the realization of a universal, free society—or that the autonomy of our reason (our certainty to be controlling nature) is an illusion or dream that nature feeds us to “remake the human” (170), that is, to compel us to serve the interests of an *unfathomable* evolutionary process that both begins and ends beyond us.⁸

The title of Gillespie’s chapter 12—“Beyond the Island of Truth”—refers to Kant’s vision of the modern, Enlightened or scientific world as an island of *factual* truths (organized, beyond Humean skepticism, in terms of the strict structures of human consciousness) floating in an ocean of illusory values (171–72). The natural surroundings of Kant’s seemingly water-proof fortress are irreducible to natural science’s perception of them. It is the task of “morality and religion” to testify to all that in nature transcends the measurements of natural science. As Velkley had already suggested, for Kant, moral and religious judgment shows natural science its limits, and thereby the *possibility* that nature provides rational support to science itself: moral and religious judgment (“practical reason”) produced through the application of natural science (“pure reason”) to nature helps confirm natural science’s freedom to quantify nature without troubling itself with questions of value or quality (173).

Yet, Kant’s “solution” to the tension between scientific reason and value judgment (whereby pure reason subjects itself to practical reason, as if to invite the latter to justify pure reason), or Kant’s attempt to save natural science from Humean skepticism, stands on a notoriously problematic account of (“bifurcated”) human consciousness (our “reflective capacity for sensing and thinking”) as inadequately grounded (174, 179). Gillespie’s chapter is dedicated to exploring Hegel’s attempt—and failure—to solve the fundamental problem of consciousness vexing Kant’s enterprise by *confirming* the inherence of reason in nature.

⁸ By exposing the groundlessness of Kant’s deontology, Velkley deflates Kant’s critique of happiness (168), inviting ipso facto a positive reevaluation of classical virtue ethics.

Hegel represents a post-Kantian effort to expand the subject-object sense of consciousness (*Bewusstsein*: “known-being” or “being that knows”) by thinking of consciousness as evolving from natural individualism, to the social life of a rational community, followed by the “absolute consciousness” of “autonomous, rational citizens” (and characteristic of “art, religion, and philosophy”), and ending in the “absolute knowing” (*absolutes Wissen*) of “God” (174–75). Whence the possibility of describing a “history” of consciousness *desiring* to rise from subjection to natural objects (“unthinking being”), to their integration via the negation of subjects, into the final realization of the object *as* subject. This historical synthesis of known object and knowing subject is what Hegel announces in terms of Science (*Wissenschaft*), or even of God himself understood as “the very rationality” of the scientific society having awakened to its own global history, and thus, too, to the true nature of God.

Being rational, the “history” of Science, or the arduous path leading to the rise of the scientific society, entails three poles: an eternal, pure “logic” of unfolding; a nature conforming structurally to the logic, a nature always ready-and-waiting, so to speak, to fuel the rise of Science; and a terminal, absolute or divine-like self-consciousness (175 and 254n10). By thus integrating within Science’s own genesis all that, with Kant, might have threatened Science, Hegel resurrects “traditional metaphysics” on the basis of its Kantian critique (176).

While integral to Hegel’s attempt to “save” Kantianism, Hegel’s account of nature has long been criticized, even by Hegelians, as “dead” (Croce). Now Gillespie sets out to reconsider it in the light of the problematic character of its notable detractors’ standpoint:⁹ a natural science that is essentially materialist or reductionist (notably of the macroscopic to the microscopic, of life to the inanimate, of human freedom to subhuman mechanics, of ends/whys to means/hows [176–78]).¹⁰ Hegel’s account of nature makes sense as an attempt to provide a rational synthesis of modern natural science and what it ignores to its own detriment, namely, its own existential background (or Husserl’s *Lebenswelt*, “lifeworld”—though Husserl is not once mentioned in the volume

⁹ While stressing that oft-critiqued aspects of Hegel’s account of nature are merely accidental (ultimately inconsequential) to Hegel’s system, *and* retraceable to the imperfect natural sciences of his day, Gillespie assumes that the modern doctrine of “evolution” (rejected by Hegel) is simply right (254n28).

¹⁰ Gillespie’s reference to ancient, prescientific or “mythological” thinkers asking “*who* the cosmos was” (176) inspires the deduction that, by abstracting its “how question” from the “what question” of ancient natural science, modern natural science manifests a will to fulfill the apparent impulse of ancient scientists to transcend poetry.

under review). With Hegel, these two hemispheres must be thought together, or dialectically (whereby, beyond Kantian ambiguities, we draw reason *out of* nature, instead of being limited to *impose our* reason on nature), lest the two remain unfruitfully at war with each other (178–79). The consummate fruit of the dialectic of the human and the subhuman, as of “freedom and natural necessity,” blooms at “the end of history,” with the rise of “the rational state” in which, to paraphrase Gillespie, nature or death emerges as “an intrinsic element” of civil life and order (179–80).

Yet, Gillespie’s positive reconsideration of Hegel’s “nature” is followed by heavy concessions to critics. Insofar as Hegel’s system is supposed to be fully rational, it is vexed by a lingering problem, namely, the “mysterious” character of its grounding necessities, especially that of the self-liberating projection of the realm of *unconscious* pure logic (reality in its absolute idea) into nature, but also that of the transition from objective nature to human self-consciousness (Spirit) (180–81). What sets the system’s “rules” in motion? Hegel’s “obscure and problematic” answer—his last-resort appeal to immanent necessity—falls short of the idealism of Hegel’s Christian neo-Platonic predecessors, who could self-consistently invoke a mysterious, hypostatic consciousness grounding the transition from the One to nature, and from nature back to the otherworldly One through man (sacred history).¹¹

Given Hegel’s failure to provide a rational account of human consciousness (the failure of his attempt to free us from the threat of modern natural science’s seemingly dehumanizing drive to reduce conscious life to any of its inanimate, quantifiable objects), what allows us today to resist the empire or tyranny of infinite unconsciousness? Rather than by pointing to an idealism that, being unconditionally open to a consciousness presupposed by nature itself, is free from the modern (Gnostic?) compulsion to quantify infinity,¹² Gillespie crowns his analysis of Hegel’s failure by casting our present

¹¹ Gillespie’s analysis falls short of relating Hegel’s “consummation” of Kantianism to Christianity’s “consummation” of Judaism via the revelation of a hitherto hidden “Second Adam,” *alpha* and *omega* of the sacred history of man (of a man cardinal to the constitution of the subhuman)—even as Christianity may be said to “borrow” from philosophy’s general quest for the universal background of “law.” With respect to the question of Hegel’s “idealism,” Gillespie’s discussion would have especially benefited from conceding that Christianity counters any *libido dominandi* (not to speak of a “will to power”) by understanding the relation between man (spirit) and the world in terms of self-sacrifice: man (through the cross, or by letting himself be immolated—cf. Socrates) becomes the catalyst for the world’s salvation (from blind, mechanical necessity). Yet, for Hegel, self-negation comes through armed struggle, or war: where there is only *one* world, the “winner” is not the meek.

¹² Footnote 20, p. 254, suggests that all idealism entails the imposition of consciousness on the unconscious.

predicament in Nietzschean terms, invoking the radical uncertainty of our fate (182).

Lise van Boxel's chapter 13—"Separating the Moral and Theological Prejudices and Taking Hold of Human Evolution"—explores the limits of Nietzsche's retracing of morality to theology. Van Boxel's exploration reminds us that, when uprooted from any metaphysical foundation, morality cannot be other than man's mask for a will to power—a mask that with the Nietzschean prophet serves *finally* (fatefully, presumably not providentially) or *consciously* as propitious mirror (188–90). At the heart of Nietzsche's revelation stands a secular *felix culpa* (compare 191).

Nietzsche's genealogy of morality proceeds through two stages, by first reducing all personality or center of (moral) consciousness to a Cartesian-like *ego*, which is then reduced to underlying unconscious motion or forces. The relativizing of morality (perspectivism [186–87]) is a prelude to the tyranny of genealogical motion, or "evolution," where being (determination), especially *conscious* being, is a function of unconscious becoming (the author speaks of "motion of the becoming that is the being's being"), entailing the despotic irrationality of the indeterminate (189, 191). Otherwise put, our moral determinations ultimately expose (us to) our progressive ("growing," "ascending," etc.) creativity (echoing Hegel's rationality?), rather than any perfect or self-contained being (as Aristotle's *noeseos noesis*) (190).

If it is the progressive nature or impulse of becoming that allows man to transcend his past, we may conclude that human life (the present) is the result of the interplay of mechanical necessity (the past) and a fully vital or self-conscious *end* (the future) that Nietzsche's genealogy necessarily presupposes—contrary to van Boxel's suggestions (190–91). Indeed, van Boxel reads Nietzsche's ultimate *good*—"the *fundamental* good" of "growth" or "vitality"—as merely an image of speech that may best contribute to liberating our creativity from all presupposed ends (*ibid.*). Van Boxel writes as if we could think of growth independently of any necessary end—as if a mere Kantian "as if" (an "ideal" or construct of human consciousness) sufficed for us to *really* progress; as if reality (real growth) could feed or stand upon mere supersedable, contingent illusions, including that of death. Accordingly, van Boxel concludes that a becoming (reality) without dying (an expendable illusion)—which is to say, the infinite perpetuity of the present—is (in principle?) conceivable (191–92).

Perhaps, then, for Nietzsche, growth itself is ultimately an illusion we use to “move” beyond it. Indeed, boundless growth or progress would seem to entail the sempiternal stilling or circular self-affirmation (falling short of eternal stillness) of the present; whence Nietzsche’s *amor fati*, the unconditional embracing of the impossibility to escape the present in its necessary disposition, as “eternal return of the same.”

Are we not then to conclude that Nietzsche presupposes a *real* end—coinciding with an ultimate awakening—after all? To be sure, insofar as it is predicated on the negation of the eternal fullness of being, Nietzsche’s “realization” does not so much entail the awakening from a dream (and certainly not an awakening presupposed by all dreams—as with Zhuangzi), as the dreamer’s “awakening” to the absolute character of dreaming: the “awakening” of the Nietzschean “superman” coincides with the broadest possible “perspective.”¹³ This “super-perspective” is achieved in or through Nietzsche, as at once radically new (insofar as previous thinkers had not yet risen to it) and primordial (insofar as it belongs to the fundamental reality of things): at the *end* or universal boundary of mankind’s journey stands a *coincidentia* of the *alpha* and the *omega*—an “absolute moment” that resembles intimately the sempiternal “end of history” (entailing the terminal synthesis of time and space, or the final resolution of diachronic strife into synchronic harmony) previously announced by Hegel (and, we might add, still rehearsed stutteringly by present-day astrophysicists).

Mark Blitz’s chapter 14—“Mastery of Nature and Its Limits”—opens by questioning the vulgar view that modern technology is compatible with nature conceived as bereft of any of the strict limits invoked by our intellectual traditions (193–94). The best counterview Blitz calls forth is Heidegger’s, whose message is introduced in terms of a call to be responsible for our historicity, or radical finitude, beyond which we—as self-determining, yet contextual, resolutions aiming at possible ends—cannot go (196).

For Heidegger, the manner in which we relate to our empirical context (or to “every entity with which we deal”)—indeed, the very order or meaning we see in it—stands in function of our *possible* (contingent) ends. Even in the case of technology, seen as a specific manner of relating to the world and presupposing one specific conception of finality, we do not confront the

¹³ See Leo Strauss on Nietzsche’s “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” ed. Richard Velkley (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 187–90.

world “neutrally” or naturally. Technology is not a mere, value-free tool. Indeed, the world technology presents or “frames” for us is a specific one of endlessly exploitable material (“endless reserve”), including both man and nature, and fueling the peculiar conception of our ends underlying technology: technology entails a drive to master both nature (“object”) and man (“subject”) whereby both are forced into a relation of mutual mastery (negation?) achieved through and under a technological imperative (196–97); is technology, then, supposed to incarnate Hegel’s “Reason”?¹⁴

Now, while technology’s transformation of nature and man was unknown to antiquity, the ancients did set the historical stage for it, according to Heidegger, by moving away from a fluid understanding of being as generation in and for itself, to a more static one of being as self-determination (198). In this latter case, being is conceived as open to *partial* exploitation—a first historical step towards the rise of an obscurantist technological approach to man and nature as objects of radical exploitation or violence (*hic et nunc*), rather than as self-disclosing realities (199).

Heidegger’s bleak vision of technology entails, however, a *felix culpa*, for, by an irony of history, technology is supposed to expose essential human features hitherto left occluded. As consummate expression (“last stage” [203]) of our will to power, technology manifests today, with unprecedented force, the relativity or illusory nature of all ends. Having demolished all previous ends as partial or provisional masks, expressions of our will to power, technology has completely exposed human finitude, allowing us to finally see past our will to power. As we witness humanity from the greatest perspective (cf. Nietzsche) of a will to power, we open ourselves, and thereby technology as well, to hitherto unnoticed—and “unpredictable”—dimensions of being (200). Heidegger’s own proposal is to view men as finite individuals “co-responsible,” together with their heritage, for the ordering of the world as mirroring its grounding will to power, lest this will render us oblivious to our radical nakedness before a “fearsome” reality (199–200). More specifically, the single human being is to project his “dying” resolutely (presumably insofar as he has access to nothing beyond mortality), thereby exposing himself as belonging to a whole “people” understood as repository of its history (Blitz

¹⁴ Compare Walter Benjamin’s reading of technology as mastering the relation between man and nature (instead of mastering either on its own), or as educating men to encounter nature in a genuinely universal manner (Walter Benjamin’s 1928 “To the Planetarium” [*Zum Planetarium*], in *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott [London: New Left Books, 1979], 174). Does technology provide a *positive* or liberating synthesis of nature and man? Do nature and man *meet* ultimately through or in technology? Is technology the consummation of ancient *poetry*?

does not provide a clear account of the manner in which, for Heidegger, I am bound to my “people”).¹⁵ It is only as part of a national heritage that I can possibly escape the tyranny of technocracy (both in its capitalist and communist guise), and begin “dealing with things” in a most illuminating (“authentic”), notably poetic, way (presumably, in ever-growing awareness of the interplay of our shared will to power and its unfathomable ground [200–201]).

Having questioned Heidegger’s critique of technology in the light of Heidegger’s infamous relation to Nazism, Blitz proposes to accept Heidegger’s lead in a qualified manner: while welcoming Heidegger’s pointing to the natural limits of technology, Blitz tries to disengage the German’s critique of technology from any “new understanding of being” (202). For Blitz, modernity’s new conception of human finality can, in principle, serve genuinely philosophical interests, especially since technology fails to exhaust our inner resources, eradicate our inner life (involving, e.g., “love, integrity, faithfulness [and] ordinary loyalty”—in a word, partisanship), or render obsolete all knowledge unmediated by technology, and thus the very distinction between reality and illusion (202–3). More positively, technology is supposed to have the liberating effect of allowing us to cherish what is good for its own sake, rather than under the sway of any authority (divine or otherwise [202]).¹⁶

Blitz concludes that, try as it might to free its possibility from locality, technology remains bound to our own finitude or particularity, failing to complete us, or to incarnate genuine universality (204). In this respect, technology does not pose a serious threat to imperfect man, especially where his prudently or politically guided “self-consciousness...spirals upward” to “something eternal and unchanging” (203, 205). For Blitz, what remains to be shown in detail is the manner in which the “variety” of modern or technologically mediated modes of knowledge may serve genuinely philosophical ends (*ibid.*).

Adam Schulman’s chapter 15—“What Is Natural Philosophy? The Perspective of Contemporary Science”—explores the possibility that “modern theoretical physics” contributes substantively to “the speculative program of ancient natural philosophy” (206). Schulman’s steppingstone is a common

¹⁵ Blitz’s generic bibliographical reference to Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (256n5) does little to explain how Heidegger understands his relation to the German *Volk*.

¹⁶ Blitz says nothing here about the widespread mind-numbing, moral-atrophying, and politically destabilizing effects of technological hypermediation. If no tyrannical regime can silence human thought, some might, nonetheless, alienate it systematically from the public sphere.

opinion about Socrates and Aristotle: the first is supposed to have simply rejected natural philosophy (the pursuit of knowledge of nature),¹⁷ whereas the second is supposed to have pursued it as eminent aspect of knowledge in general (206–8). Schulman cites David Bolotin’s 1998 *An Approach to Aristotle’s Physics* as one recent attempt to reconcile the two positions by arguing that Aristotle’s “natural philosophy” (including the rational structures it attributes to nature) is merely the expression of the Stagirite’s attempt to defend natural philosophers’ reputation in the face of a dire threat of persecution. Bolotin further argues that even modern physics is merely a manner of speech, insofar as it constructs pragmatic models of nature that “predict” physical occurrences (“observable events”), without necessarily corresponding to their real causes: modern “science” may work for us, but it does not even try to see nature as it is (209).

Schulman counters Bolotin’s reading of natural science, by arguing that 1) natural science or philosophy has always sought at least some degree of light into the ultimate nature of things, while 2) modern physics has added significantly to premodern knowledge of nature. Our critical appraisal of Schulman’s arguments follows below.

With respect to Schulman’s criticism of Bolotin, it may very well be that the conceptual constructs produced by modern natural science can serve philosophy as “poetic” mirrors of eternity. If so, however, what might qualify them as superior (i.e., more enlightening) with respect to the poetic constructs of premodernity, other than their accounting, or at least pretending to account, for problems technological science has produced itself? Is it more enlightening to envision the earth as *loving* the sun, or as being dragged by the star’s mass on a spatiotemporal continuum? Insofar as modern technological sciences understand themselves, their very language, much more literally or superficially than classical poetry understands itself, they also tend to be less revealing of truth proper, that is, of “the Nature of nature.”

To echo Mansfield’s critique of modern physics, we may further ask whether we need to add *data* to those of ordinary experience in order to awaken to the nature of things. Does nature speak to us best or most properly

¹⁷ Schulman refers to Socrates’s abandoning natural philosophy (in the *Phaedo*) in favor of an investigation of human things. No mention is made of Socrates’s unrepudiated interest in Anaxagoras’s “mind” as key to the constitution of the totality of things (Plato, *Apology* 97c1–2). Does the Socratic “second sailing” entail—as Dante’s “other voyage” (*Inferno* 1.90)—the need to approach nature (“the metaphysical”) through the human (“the ethical”)? Would modern natural science welcome Platonism’s “ascent to nature,” as an *ethical* or profoundly human problem, mobilizing the *totality* of man, prior to becoming any *specialized* or partial field of inquiry?

in ordinary life, or in laboratories? Do we hear nature best when we heed ordinary *logoi* (Socrates), or when we try to grasp its “voice” without waiting (phenomenologically) for it to speak to us *prior to* our seeking it, in the political environment in which nature itself raises us (cf. Velkley’s reference to the role nature has for Kant in the rise of “culture”)?¹⁸ Whatever claims our physicists may raise, they remain in need of explaining their “revelations” in terms transcending the confines of their specialized frameworks (213), and not merely condescendingly, but by way of asking the “prescientific” world if physicists’ special revelations make ultimate sense or not.

A further difficulty arises there where Schulman presents modern physics in continuity with ancient counterparts, which, however, are radically discordant with the “progressivism” of modern natural science. Modern physics is “progressive” in the sense that it sees its branches as closer to truth than the science’s principles are. In its “growth” (and “sedimentation”), modern physics is primarily a discipline of addition, rather than subtraction (its *via negativa* is a function of its *via positiva*): it “discovers” problems by way of increment (especially of complexity), rather than by unearthing essential presuppositions or ontological antecedents (whether à la Oedipus, or à la Socrates); whence the difficulty of ascertaining whether it aims at deepening our awareness of problems (*vita contemplativa*), or at “solving” them (*vita activa*).

Our physics is essentially opposed to an ancient science for which the value or significance of scientific developments depends, philosophically or rationally speaking, upon the value of the principles the developments stem from. The developments are mere extensions of the principles, extending the principles’ own faults (if only under the corrective weight of the unknown). In this respect—*pace* Schulman—“armchair philosophers” can judge modern natural science *even without* making “a considerable effort to understand the principal theoretical achievements of modern science,” where the achievements in question are *built upon* the grounding principles of modern science (210). To be sure, here we speak of principles in a classical sense, or ontologically. It is by reading “principles” as governing modern science’s development merely methodologically (rather than semantically, as well), that Schulman asks how twentieth-century scientific “discoveries” may have positively

¹⁸ In drawing “ideas” back into the polis (Cicero), Socrates returns nature under laws, interpreting the physical in the light of laws—nature in the light of art. Insofar as it presents nature in terms of art, the Socratic “turn” or “return” opens the door to a conception of nature as divine art, or more precisely as God’s art (the art of a God of nature). Giambattista Vico would later interpret the Socratically derived Christian conception “back” to its source, understanding the divine art in terms of the activity of the human mind at its metaphysical roots.

contributed to ancient natural science (211 and 219; Schulman speaks of “principles” in a modern fashion, as objects of mathematical discovery, rather than “metaphysically,” as that which makes any objective discovery possible in the first place [212–13]).

This is not to argue that modern natural science may not have stumbled upon “discoveries” that compelled it to reconsider its very principles, or *raison d’être*. Certain experiences may have served as *motives* for modern science’s return to its roots, and thus to an ancient orientation or *telos*. Yet, philosophically speaking, such experiences would not *add* any value to ancient science; they would merely draw us back to what modern science had long presented itself as progressing from. (This applies also to Einstein’s own contributions to *modern* physics, leading to the abandoning of early modern appeals to “external forces” [214].)

What is more, in order to overcome its genesis, contemporary modern science would need more than any empirical “discovery”; it would need to engage *actively* in an examination of its own “sedimented history” (Husserl)—a history stemming from an “intentional genesis,” and so standing as propaedeutic to an investigation of the “intentional history” of that genesis.¹⁹

Yet, the essential character of modern science’s principles would seem to prevent modern science from engaging in any serious phenomenological self-investigation. For, Blitz’s argument notwithstanding, the principles of modern science do imply, beyond a specific conception of human finality, a notion of nature itself, and thus of being, that is inimical to philosophy in its classical sense. What is especially inimical to classical philosophy is the notion of life as *quantifiable*—a notion implying that the hiatus between “the limited” (*peras*) and “the unlimited” (*apeiron*), or between body and

¹⁹ See Jacob Klein, “Phenomenology and the History of Science,” in *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert B. Williamson and Elliott Zuckerman (Annapolis, MD: Saint John’s College Press, 1985), 72–73. Husserl, as suggested above, is regrettably absent from the volume under review (his phenomenological critique of modern natural sciences is not resolved in Heidegger’s critique of technology, or in a Kantian critique of reason). Husserl highlighted the fundamental inadequacies of the naturalism essential to modern “European sciences.” To speak in simpler terms, though not simplistically, what is most problematic about naturalism is that it tends to blind us to the universe’s essential presuppositions—i.e., to that which allows our empirical “discoveries” (including those of psychology) to come to sight in the first place—thereby divesting all of our discoveries of proper meaning or sense. Naturalism compels our natural sciences to trade depths for superficial variety, or to treat “data” (phenomena) as shut to and graspable independently of purely intelligible *essences* (noumena). In short, naturalism pretends to sever the umbilical cord (“intentional history”) by which phenomena are retracable to pure pre-conditional thought. In this crucial respect, to speak in Straussian terms, with modern science (via the secularization of Christianity) “the end” becomes more important, even infinitely more important, than “the beginning.”

mind, is “measurable”—as if mathematical formulas could *progressively* resolve the tension between finitude and infinite indetermination. (For an early penetrating critique of the principles of modern science, see the works of Giambattista Vico—unmentioned in the volume under review.)

Schulman shows little or no concern with the kind of critical questions raised here. Thus, for instance, our author sees Einstein’s work as having “altered forever our understanding of space and time” (212)—as if it were undoubtful that Einstein’s work involves *absolute progress* with respect to *all* previous understandings of space and time (in spite of Schulman’s later qualifications that Einstein’s “discovery...has *not yet* been challenged in any serious way,” that Einstein’s “discovery of space-time” undoubtedly “made significant contributions to the *modern* project of the conquest of nature,” and that “it seems likely [that Einstein’s discovery] will remain a fundamental principle of physics for as long as human beings inquire into the nature of things” [213–14, italics added]).

Schulman’s elegant *apologia* of Einsteinian physics notwithstanding,²⁰ from the standpoint of uncompartimentalized thought, it would seem that, via a sophisticated juggling of formulas, Einstein invites at best *experiments* in conceiving our everyday life experience, rather than actual knowledge of the pre-empirical, but also not-merely-mathematical, principles of constitution of our experience. To adapt Vico’s critique of Galileo to Schulman’s argument, Einstein misunderstands mathematical symbols as autonomous of any pure metaphysics.²¹

This is not to say that we have nothing important to learn by reflecting upon the teachings of modern natural science. Consider, for instance, Einsteinian physics’ suggestion that the “proper time,” but not the “proper space,” of an empirical object can be concretely abstracted from the object’s space-time continuum (213; compare 216); or quantum physics’ indication that the fundamental element of matter is not “an indivisible *atom* of action, but a universal *measure* by which the action in any process is to be counted and interpreted” (215, 218). Does modern science necessarily tend to conceive

²⁰ Philosophically speaking, Schulman’s *apologia* is justified as suggesting that Einstein helped dispel the *modern* illusion of measurable “forces” independent of and responsible for objective phenomena. With Einstein, the “forces” are unified (most notably as a space-time continuum), as intrinsic to the phenomena (213–14).

²¹ On p. 214, Schulman writes: “In my opinion, the postulate of absolute space-time is therefore fully entitled to be called a *prote arche*, or first principle, of nature in the Aristotelian sense.” See also Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), chap. 1.

nature autonomously of metaphysical unity as horizon of pure intelligibility? Is modern physics “genetically” (pre-)disposed to reach its twentieth-century conclusion that the “fundamental units or elements (*stoicheia*)” of nature are measurable or quantifiable (whether or not in terms of a “Planck quantum of action h ” [217–18])? Finally, does modern physics escape the limits of determinism, including the *weak* determinism deducible from Schulman’s account of quantum “probability” (217)?

Is Schulman right in reading the empirical “success” of quantum predictions as confirming that modern physics has discovered “essential” features of nature (218), *or* is the success in question relative to a combination of factors including modern expectations or blinders (including the type of mathematics, or understanding of number, grounding “quantum field physics”), not to speak of man’s place in the universe?

An even more fundamental question concerns the ontological status of nature-qua-nature. As a philosophical invention, “nature” points away from the universe of mysterious or divine authorities, at least until Socrates sets out to rediscover nature at the very heart of our “normative” world. Wouldn’t a rigorous assessment of any “discovery” or “revelation” (218) of modern physics require a *phenomenology* exposing modern physics as one special modification of Socrates’s return to nature? (Compare Mansfield’s account of the modern invention of “facts,” and Gillespie’s treatment of Hegel’s critique of modern sciences’ unduly abstracting means from ends, i.e., of treating genesis mechanically.)

Yet, Schulman gives little or no thought to the possibility that the consistency of twentieth-century physics is ineluctably bound to a specific “mode of vision”—a “technological” manner of seeing things that tends to distort and obscure our prescientific experience of things, in the interests of confirming the fundamental expectations of modernity.²²

Bernhardt Trout’s conclusive chapter—“Quantum Mechanics and Political Philosophy”—is essentially a defense of the thesis that mind is a function of matter (225). Trout stresses that, by introducing chance as an irreducible

²² Thus, for instance, Schulman welcomes the primacy of time over space supported by modern physics, as accidental to modernity’s principles. Yet, where today’s physicists speak of time without space, but not space without time, might we not discern the shadow of an early modern abandoning of any eternal mental horizon? (On the fictional character of timeless space, see e.g. Schaub’s Montesquieu citation on p. 79.)

constituent of natural processes, quantum physics (hereafter, QP) leaves space for “the political” as relatively independent of the nonpolitical, with the tacit understanding that the nonpolitical is simply subpolitical.²³ Trout seems to understand his argument as surpassing that of Lucretius, insofar as the Roman would have readily dismissed political life as unworthy of any serious study. Yet, for Trout the political remains subservient to natural philosophy, best (re)incarnated (today) in the research of modern physics (231).²⁴

To critics wishing to reduce QP to early modernity’s “scientific method,” Trout responds that QP has gained “astounding new insight into the nature of the world”—well beyond the expectations of early modernity (230). Just as nature’s mechanisms alone cannot account for properly human life, so too can early modern philosophy not account for late modern physics’ discoveries (223–25, 231–32). What is key to the rise of QP is the thesis of the irreducibility of nature to mechanical necessity, or of the present (genesis) to the past (data).²⁵

QP’s response to mechanical determinism entails the purported discovery and revelation of “underlying physical laws” (221) or “inviolable principles” (223) “found in the world” (230), as opposed to being imposed upon the world, and governing chance (224). The relative mathematization of chance as essential constituent of all physical (subconscious) processes is supposed to allow QP to fully or intelligibly integrate man (consciousness),

²³ In stressing that QP entails a specific interpretation of phenomena, rather than the introduction of new phenomena, Trout does not address QP’s fundamental interpretation of phenomena, or its *hypothesis* that nature is a machine. Trout takes for granted QP’s rough equation of the nonhuman with the subhuman—of the limits of our conscious life with the unconscious “life” of the microscopic (see Ludwig’s earlier discussion on Lucretius on “life”). Whether or not moved by the mere assumption that the superhuman is a projection of the human (man’s misconstrual of the subhuman), Trout presents QP as helping us free ourselves from the illusion that the human derives from its perfection.

²⁴ Trout’s chapter summarizes old arguments grounding human freedom in a combination of mechanical necessity and chance. See, e.g., Jacques Monod, *Le hasard et la nécessité: Essai sur la philosophie naturelle de la biologie moderne* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1970), e.g. 130, 161, 173, 193. Trout’s arguments are in harmony with Monod’s insistence that modern science imposes itself as “objective” framework for best understanding all value judgments. Hereupon, modern science *presupposes* the absence of any objective value other than that of a quest for knowledge in a universe devoid of inherent value (Monod, 191, 195). Modern science does not *discover* the absence of objective value purely on the basis of any objectifying analysis of the universe. On the contrary, the analysis—its very structure and orientation—*presupposes* the absence it pretends to confirm. By the same token, the analysis contributes to imposing blinders upon us, against the very possibility of objective value, and thus, too, of “right in nature.”

²⁵ QC’s thesis is essentially a restatement of one expressed, *mutatis mutandis*, by Machiavelli (see Mansfield’s chapter).

and thereby all dimensions of causality, into a “theory of everything” (TOE), that is, a final account of physical (subconscious) nature (223, 225–26).

A synthesis of QP and the physics of gravity (theory of general relativity)—that is, the synthetic account of “the four fundamental forces” (the weak nuclear, the strong nuclear, the electromagnetic, and the gravitational) that are supposed to govern the universe (222, 224)—could allow natural scientists to reduce “in the end” the human (“political”) to the nonhuman (“nonpolitical”) into an “ultimately homogeneous” whole, without denying, however, the ultimate heterogeneity “in kind” of things that “fluctuate” in and out of “a space-time continuum” (231–32). So, while inviting recognition that “there are independent wholes that must be understood on their own terms,” modern physics strives to finally understand the mutual irreducibility of wholes/kinds in the universal context of a homogeneous combination of mechanical necessity and chance. That is why philosophy “should,” or even “must,” try to devote itself to QP and its “complex mathematics” (229, 231). For “there is no reason not to think that any remaining” trace of Platonism (the quest for man’s ultimate irreducibility to the subhuman) is fated to fade away into history (225).²⁶

QP consigns Platonism to the past, placing our future under the dominion of anti-Platonism, or the attempt to dispel the thought that prior to being in the world, that is, prior to becoming, somehow meaning, or man, simply *is*. It is supposed to be our *fate* to reject as anachronistic the “old” view that every answer is rooted in an original question, that every journey presupposes its proper destination, every movement its proper end, every becoming its completion, every body its mind, every desire a mover to return to, every man his divine perfection, every yearning its consummation, every immanence a transcendence. But can QP, or more generally modernity, dispense with the referring *back* to an end that is *given* prior to being discovered? Trout’s own arguments signal QP’s failure to achieve self-justification. QP is not self-evidently *right*. It cannot help exposing itself, its own foundation, to critical questioning. Nor can it compel Socrates to limit his examination of QP to his practice of QP (or to make the former dependent upon the latter). Socratism is still bent upon asking as regards the “soul” of QP—QP’s driving questions—no matter what “new island” QP may ask us to settle upon. Transcendence, in short, is not restricted to the domain of progress. All of us, including quantum

²⁶ Platonically speaking, prior to challenging Platonism (229), QP is challenged by both Platonism and our common sense, or imagination, to justify itself vis-à-vis permanent features of the world, which, however, QP places in function of its own work.

physicians as such, stand naked before the question of a “calling.” What “calls” us in the first place? Is it “History,” “Nature,” or perhaps a mere, if only eternal, “Logic”? Whatever answer we land upon, remains, in itself, open to investigation. Yet, Trout points to a criterion beyond question: *fate*. Its revelatory angels are scientific “facts,” which destroy any reason to transcend fate.

Trout does offer us a set of counterarguments, which are, however, far too weak to compromise Trout’s central argument. The counterarguments grant so much to their adversary that they end up serving his cause. What Trout’s strawman does not argue for is full-fledged Platonism, that is, the ontological primacy of mind/thought over both chance and unconscious necessity.²⁷ Accordingly, Trout fails to consider the possibility that it behooves the modern physicist to investigate the *common* foundations of his discipline (and thus to “bracket” his discipline phenomenologically) before demanding that others accompany him through the labyrinth or web of his *specialized* language. No matter how “utterly appealing [QP’s] power for gaining understanding” may appear to be (229), its appeal stands or falls on the physicist’s capacity to relate his discoveries to public discourse, or to render his “game” relevant to our most pressing question of right, a question leading us, in turn, back to that of “what is best,” and thus finally of *the good* in itself, that is, the perfection or purity of human thought.

As Mansfield’s chapter (esp. 29) helps us see, QP stands in need of justifying itself by appealing to a world of prespecialized consciousness (Dante’s “footpath of our life,” *cammin di nostra vita*), not merely by way of flattering “nonscientists” into serving a scientific cause, but primarily in order to make sense of itself. For, the *meaning* of QP comes to light only when illuminated by the *unity* of its conditions of possibility (its “background”), that is, by a language in which the natural and the human coexist fully. But such is the *poetic* language of prescientific men, the language every Socrates investigates by way of exposing the indissoluble nexus between his own ignorance and divine wisdom. That same language is abandoned, however, by QP (after the likes of Descartes and Spinoza), as the proper stage of philosophical investigation.

²⁷ Being all too eager to assimilate Aristotle to the cause of QP, Trout makes no mention of the Stagiraite’s distinction between two orders, which we may render here as that of nature and that of human discovery: that which is by nature *first* is discovered by us *last*. Vico would resurrect the distinction of Platonic extraction, by arguing against modern natural philosophers that art—indeed, the whole “civil world” of human artistry—shows us that the human mind subject to subhuman forces (chance and blind necessity) presupposes a “providential” and “metaphysical” human mind, a mind that is thus independent of the “nature” within which it is at work. See my “Autobiography as History of Ideas,” *Historia Philosophica: An International Journal* 11 (2013): 59–94; and my “Epistemology’s Political-Theological Import in Giambattista Vico,” *Telos* 185 (Winter 2018): 105–27.

Where the human world is no longer key to the natural, natural science can hardly escape remaining utterly lost in “the dark wilderness” (Dante’s *selva oscura*) of nature. Such is the fate of a QP appealing *positivistically* to power (“success,” “intellectual” or otherwise) as consummate source and repository of right. As if—given the assumption of absence of meaning *in nature*—the meaning of QP stemmed from its practice. Yet, the absence of meaning in nature is ultimately unproven, not to say unprovable. Nor does the appeal to sheer “chance” (signaling a “return” to Machiavelli, for whom *fortuna* prevents us from reducing nature to a mere machine [21]) justify the scientist in treating nature as a machine—surely no more than the appeal to a mysterious noumenon justifies Kant in treating nature *as if it were* a machine. Not *knowing* whether nature *intends* us to master it, or even whether it offers us particular certainties merely by blinding us to their general context, we are faced with the possibility that what eludes us in nature conditions our perception of nature in mysterious ways. QP is faced with the possibility of its own radical contingency.

Insofar as the value of QP’s “success”—of its *history*—is far from self-evident, QP remains faced with the question of the ground of QP’s “discoveries.” In what way, if any, are these “discoveries” *necessary*? In what way does *nature itself* justify them *for all times*, rather than as the fleeting, “hypothetical,” “reigning dogmas” that Trout is ready to settle for in characterizing QP (231)?²⁸

In considering our fundamental notions—above all those of “being” (unity), of “having” (“the two”), and of “power” (“the three”)²⁹—as defined only empirically, or via ever-renewable experiences, QP escapes radical relativism only by presupposing the possibility of a universal consummation of experience, a “moment” in the light of which our fundamental notions are finally defined forever.³⁰ Now, it is not clear why this “moment” must be a

²⁸ The concession that QP may be understood as the best available religion (decisively superior to any tribal idolatry [231]) is one of two cornerstones of Trout’s *apologia* of QP. The second cornerstone is given by the argument that in order to adequately judge QP one must work hard and at length though its complex mathematics (229).

²⁹ Where being (what is one with itself) *is*, it has a property (second to being), so that a third factor stands between the one and the other, a power in virtue of which being binds its property to itself, thereby identifying itself.

³⁰ For QP, or modern physics in general, our key operational notions are supposed to be defined by experiences (often new and unforeseeable) controlled by a “scientific method” (230) the validity of which is defined by the “success” of its implementation, i.e., the power with which it is practiced, where to know nature is to overpower it (in effect, the method is treated as “valid” where it appears to help us repel unconquered or dangerous, wild or untamed nature). Thus, for instance, the meaning of “time” is not *given* in advance, or sought as a fundamental presupposition, but given by the future full success of our method of controlling our experiences, i.e., of narrowing our experiences to what we

Hegelian “end of History,” rather than something given “in the beginning” as discernible only as we turn experience back upon itself speculatively, if only through “poetic production,” that is, in the mirror of fictions we forge as reminders of our transcendent immateriality. Why should our empirical discoveries or inventions be understood in terms of *progress*, rather than of *return*—in terms of “addition,” rather than “subtraction”? Ultimately, are we to understand full “enlightenment” or “being awake” as the result of progress, or as the condition of possibility of progress? Is knowledge or science possible aside from the Platonic question of “recollection” (*anamnesis*)? Does the scientist’s own deep yearning to make up for our ignorance—our lack of knowledge—not signal that ignorance entails *loss* of knowledge, just as our animosity against injustice or wrong suggests nostalgia for an original, only partially forgotten right?

Trout speaks of science’s motives as if they were merely empirical, or subject to being left behind by new scientific discoveries. Yet, the fathers of modernity testify to a visceral awareness of their need to anchor their quest in a universal standard knowable prior to or independently of any novel experience, suggesting that something about ourselves or our desires resists reduction to our findings. Otherwise put, far from being reducible to a scientific datum, science’s impulse stands as criterion for the interpretation of all scientific discoveries.

Now, if the scientist’s desire for knowledge is rooted in something deeper than an empirical “self” subject to unconscious (material) forces; if prior to desiring what is limited, we desire the infinite; then it makes sense to speak, after classical antiquity, of a double nature: a presupposed hidden one, and a presupposing manifest one; the former unconquerable, the latter conquerable relatively to the former understood as end.³¹

Mastery of Nature’s final chapter, more than any previous one, makes explicit modernity’s opposition to a classical antiquity represented, most notably, by Plato. While both modern physics and classical Platonism agree that we commonly live in a world of illusions, for classical Platonism alone do our illusions constitute a veritable *felix culpa*, or blessing in disguise—a fault redeemed “in advance,” or a merely apparent fault (in the sense that, to speak with the Gospels, Christ’s crucifixion marks merely apparently his

can control, even as we blind ourselves to the possibility that what we do not control (untamed nature) controls us into believing that we are in control.

³¹ See, e.g., Boccaccio, *Decameron*, Introduction to the “Fourth Day,” fourth paragraph to the end (p. 320 of the Einaudi edition, ed. Vittore Branca [Torino: UTET, 1956]).

defeat). Modernity, including QP, abandons the very possibility of *returning* to truth as the original/natural sense, meaning, or end of illusion itself, or, more concretely, of linguistic illusions.

As a Platonist, Vico was especially eloquent in reminding us that language entails a *felix culpa*: while we commonly speak to account for, hide from, or mask the unknown forcefully impinging upon us (so that, to speak Socratically, what we know signals what we do not), the “poetic” world of our linguistic fictions serves as context for reflecting upon our capacity to create, upon the relation between fiction and reality (“things themselves”), and finally upon the relation between the human creator of fiction and a divine creator of things themselves.³² In short, the poetic world serves as context for philosophy’s return to poetry’s hidden source: our poetic flight from ignorance (into the determinate) serves as occasion or motivation for our philosophical return to that of which we remain ignorant (the indeterminate). To echo Zhuangzi’s “butterfly” lesson, by reflecting upon our dreaming, we come to realize that the unawakened dreamer presupposes an actual awakened dreamer, whereby prior to existing as a man, thought is in itself (ἐν ἀρχῇ)—as per John 1:1. What Vico stresses is that we fall into our dream—our “poetic life”—accidentally, as we desire to find ourselves, but that our “fall” prompts us to rise back towards “the indeterminate nature of the human mind” (*l’indiffinita natura della mente umana* [SN44, “Of the Elements,” 1]).

Vico’s “classical orientation” towards origins or “death” is abandoned by modernity.³³ Thus with Velkley’s Kant, the noumenal seems to invite man to engage in the progressive mastery of natural phenomena, while with Gillespie’s Hegel, the “history” or concretely unfolding logic of the human spirit awakens us to our divine, providential inherence in nature itself, an inherence serving as fundamental justification for moving forward optimistically into the realization of the best society.

³² In Vico’s *De Antiquissima Italarum Sapientia*, chap. VII.3, “just as God is the artifex of nature, so is man the God of artifices” (*ut Deus sit naturae artifex, homo artificiorum Deus*).

³³ The authors of the volume under review would seem to all agree that “modernity” is essentially a project—rather than a “time”—that in principle anyone may, at any given moment, step out of.