

Is There a Crisis of the Modernity? The Problem of Theory and Practice

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I. Introduction

In Vienna in 1935 the philosopher Edmund Husserl read a paper entitled “Philosophy and the Crisis of European Humanity” by which he intended “to awaken new interest in the oft-treated theme of the European crisis.”[1] In another lecture in 1935 Husserl spoke on “The Crisis of the European Sciences and Psychology.”[2] The crisis of European humanity is the same thing as the crisis of the European sciences, because the European or Western aspiration to guide all human or political affairs by reason or science had fallen into perplexity. It shows some recognition of this crisis that this aspiration was originally and traditionally termed the Enlightenment, but recently it is more often termed “modernity,” which appears to endorse the historicism that followed Enlightenment thought without endorsing the Enlightenment’s legitimacy or the prospect of irreversible historical progress.

My intention in this paper is to show how the crisis identified by Husserl may be helpfully articulated as the problem of theory and practice, and that it is helpful to understand it as a problem that emerges from the re-orientation of the relations between theory and practice engendered by early modern philosophers such as Bacon and Descartes. The central difficulty may be expressed in outline as follows: the early modern philosophers promised a science that would more practically effective than classical philosophy, by positing that the ends of life, including the ends of philosophy or theory, are practical. The problem is that if philosophy or theory is merely an instrument to practical ends it is ultimately difficult if not impossible to resist the claim that theory is only rationalization or ideology and not true or leading to the truth. At the least it means that one can only have a non-scientific or non-philosophical understanding of the ends of life.

I shall first outline Husserl and Nietzsche's analysis of the crisis of modernity, before turning to the re-orientation of the relations between theory and practice by Bacon and Descartes.

II. Husserl

According to Husserl, the crisis of modernity is most readily visible in the disproportion between the natural and the human sciences. The natural sciences have succeeded in bringing about "a true revolution in the technical mastery of nature," because "mathematically exact natural science" has been able to reduce the various appearances of nature to a "systematic approximation on the basis of elements and laws that are unconditionally universal" (*Krisis* 315-6). The human sciences, on the other hand, although "richly developed," have so far failed to accomplish the same task for human, that is, for intellectual or spiritual (*geistig*) matters, although this accomplishment was promised by the early modern philosophers who developed the methodology that made modern natural science possible (*Krisis* 315). Instead, the success of the natural sciences has led the human sciences to mimic their methodology, and so to objectify human beings or to homogenize human nature to non-human nature (*Krisis* 316-7). The decisive issue is the failure of modern science to treat of "purposes, values, [and] norms," that is, of human ends, because, Husserl argues, it tends to reduce the *psyche* or soul to the body.[3] The result is that science cannot endorse its own reasonableness or legitimacy. Husserl insists that mathematical physics is "a triumph of the human spirit," but one that cannot show by mathematical or physical means its own worth or value and its proper role in human life.[4]

In essence, Husserl's response is that Europe must make good on the promise that early modern philosophy made to provide a new and comprehensive science of nature including and especially of human nature. He calls for an understanding of European humanity which, although it is not and cannot ever come to completion, is guided by an "intellectual or spiritual *telos* [end], in which is included the particular *telos* of particular nations and of individual human beings," precisely because it aspires to be universal (*Krisis* 320-1). This requires an historical or historicist conception beginning with "what the Greeks call philosophy," which, "[r]ightly translated, in its original sense, means nothing other than universal science, a science of the world as a whole, of the unity of all beings," as against the particular sciences (*Krisis* 321). This characterization of classical philosophy is true to the extent that it aspired to the universal science of the whole of which the human being is a part, and that it found reason to be essential to human nature. Yet that led the classical philosophers to understand the life devoted to reason to be superior to the life devoted to practical or productive ends, that is, for theory to be superior to practice. There could never be a final reconciliation of theory with practice or, in short, Enlightenment on a political as opposed to an individual scale. Thus, they did not believe, to speak anachronistically, in history as a dimension of being in which such deficits could be made up. Reason could understand, but never rule politics. On the other hand, the classical philosophers were just as concerned as Husserl to legitimize philosophy or to show that the grounds of the life devoted to reason are rational. From the classical point of view philosophy is either never in crisis or it is always in crisis.

Philosophy, as concerned with the whole, is concerned with the truth, or with what always is, however “always” (*aei*) is to be understood. But the only non-arbitrary starting point for philosophy is our ordinary opinions, and the most comprehensive horizon for our ordinary experience and opinions is formed by the character of our political community: thus philosophy is legitimized by showing the inadequacy of the standards of the political community of which the philosopher is a part. In a sense, the justification of philosophy is thus always a point of crisis from the point of view of the political community, although this theoretical crisis need not become a practical one, because politics does not have theoretical foundations. This is unlike the modern situation, of course, wherein we have sought to provide an explicitly theoretical ground for our political institutions.

I cannot here even begin to judge of Husserl’s suggestion that phenomenology can make good the promise of enlightenment by the only theoretically relevant criterion, which whether or not it is true or leads to the truth. However, as Husserl insisted, the struggle between a genuine philosophy or successful Enlightenment is played out on the level of political or historical actuality (*Krisis* 343). On this ground, I shall turn to Nietzsche, whose influence over the articulation and exacerbation of the crisis of modernity is unparalleled.

III. Nietzsche

It is often acknowledged that something like Nietzsche’s understanding of human nature underlies a great deal of our intellectual life. This should seem paradoxical, because it is Nietzsche’s contention that the greatest enemies of genuine human nobility are the modern notions of democracy and freedom, based on equal rights.[5] The interpretation of Nietzsche is controversial, and he is one of those authors who seems to have anticipated and objected to every possible line of interpretation of his works.[6] As with Heidegger, the scholarship has shown reasons not to draw a straight line between Nietzsche’s thought and, say, Nazism, as was once commonly done. However, again as with Heidegger, there have been scholars who wish to claim on the contrary that his thought is compatible with democracy, because it is ultimately apolitical or antipolitical.[7] This reading cannot be sustained. We can learn much from Nietzsche, and we do not elide what we can learn by having to recognize recognize that he claims his decisive insight is that the success of the “modern ideas” of equal rights may lead humankind to degenerate into a state of herd-like homogenization, an era of what he calls the “last man.”[8]

In many cases Nietzsche’s attraction seems to be his critique of morality and especially his critique of morality as a dogmatic remainder of Christianity (*BGE* 62, 202). This is an example of his comprehensive teaching that nature provides no meaning for life, and so no standards may be derived from human nature to judge particular ways of life: all moralities are imposed upon nature (9, 188). This teaching is often endorsed because it seems to offer the maximum extension of the human freedom originally enjoined by modern philosophy. That is, we need only remove the imposition of moral teachings and form institutions for the protection of people’s freedom, and then both society and individual creativity will flourish. There are difficulties with this apparent solution to the political problem. Might there not arise the problem, anticipated by Nietzsche, that a

society based on such principles risks self-destruction (*BGE* 201)? One may also legitimately wonder if this society is really the true path to genuine diversity. In any case, Nietzsche himself draws precisely the opposite conclusion. He claims that such a society invites the alienation of its members and so risks self-destruction because it mistakes freedom for lassitude (e.g. *BGE* 208, 202). If there is no human nature then, he claims, every activity that elevates humanity is, “as opposed to *laissez aller*, a piece of tyranny against ‘nature,’ likewise against ‘reason’” (*BGE* 188). Such tyranny may be experienced by us as a “subjection to arbitrary laws,” but Nietzsche asserts that it is only from such “protracted *obedience* in one direction” to such arbitrary and irrational laws that there “always emerges and has always emerged something for the sake of which it is worthwhile to live on earth, for example, virtue, art, music, dance, reason, spirituality.”[9] Thus, there is no moral imperative in nature, but it is therefore somehow “nature’s imperative” that “Thou shalt obey someone and for a long time: otherwise thou shalt perish and lose all respect for oneself” (*BGE* 188).

This thesis of Nietzsche’s is associated with the second reason why some are attracted to his thought. If nature is completely indifferent to human ends, political institutions cannot be based on reason, because reason itself is a posterior to the will. Reason always only comes along after the event to rationalize what the will has done. The priority of the will over reason, or of art and creativity over rationality, might seem to restore some of the depths of experience eclipsed by the more utilitarian or calculating strands of early modern thought. Since life is the will power, and hence opposed to nature, “we fabricate the greater part of our experience,” and thus “one is much more of an artist than one realizes” (*BGE* 115). We create our experience of the world from the ground up, beginning with sense perception, through language, to our social institutions, culminating in the values that guide our way of life and the construction of those institutions. Nietzsche retains the classical view that philosophy is the highest way of life, but this now means that it is the peak of the falsification of our experience: philosophy is not contemplative or theoretical, it is poetic and creative, inventing rather than discovering the truth: philosophy is the most spiritual will to power. (*BGE* 11, 12). Nietzsche thus sees philosophy as the culmination of political power and of artistic production, a final reversal of the relations of theory and practice in classical philosophy.

Since Nietzsche thought that only conditions of danger produced the cohesion of purpose that elevated human life, he looked forward to great wars in Europe to compel “the breeding of a new ruling caste for Europe.”[10] He therefore interpreted modern democracy as an incoherent attempt to put an end to danger and to suffering, or to the conditions for all human culture (*BGE* 224-5, 208, 229, 124). While we are likely to be struck first by the injustice or the invitation to injustice that such claims exhibit, there are some considerations that might give us pause. The original arguments for human rights and liberal democracy were founded upon particular teachings about human nature understood as the passions that guide reason, as in Hobbes, or about human rationality in its opposition to such passions, as in Kant. It is not easy to deflect Nietzsche claim that, if there are no natural and so rational standards for human action, then such teachings are in fact expressions simply of the own will of their authors rather than truths. The same difficulty can be expressed in another way, by asking whether there does not seem to be

an imperialistic element to some aspects of modern thought, which under the guise of the renunciation of metaphysical truth legislates for all humankind what it should know, do, and hope, to take Kant as an example.[11]

Secondly, there clearly is some homogenizing element in the globalizing power of what is called economic rationalism, whose trajectory will apparently be to allow no particular culture or way life to retain any differentiation that goes deeper than the expression of consumer preferences (cf. *BGE* 202).[12] However, even if we admit these claims, and if we also leave aside the justice of Nietzsche's specific claims, we must still raise the question of the status of Nietzsche's own thought. That is, if all philosophy is the expression of the will to power, if there are no phenomena or there is no "text" only interpretation, mustn't his thought too be only the expression of his own will and so merely another interpretation with no claim to being true? I cannot see how there can be an adequate answer to this question.[13] Furthermore, if we re-admit the question of the justice or otherwise of the implications of his thought, it does seem clear that the twentieth century showed us that there are some prospects worse than democratic leveling. Our alternative is to re-examine the understanding of nature that Nietzsche accepts.

IV. The Problem of Theory and Practice in Early Modern Philosophy

Both Husserl and Nietzsche accept that nature is, as the early modern philosophers defined it, indifferent to human ends or to the particular kinds of beings that there are. Nietzsche in fact asserts his thought is the proper culmination early modern philosophy: the will to power as the truth of all beings is the final conclusion demanded by the thesis of modern philosophy or science that there are by nature only efficient causes and no final or formal causes, and so by nature no differentiation among human ends.[14] The early modern philosophers justified this thesis by a critique of the priority that classical philosophy gave to theory over practice, that is, the claim that speculation or contemplation is the highest human end. In contrast, the moderns promised a new, practical philosophy, whose precision would allow it to have a revolutionary effectiveness. A principal statement of this program is to be found in Part VI of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*. [15]

In the *Discourse* Descartes, whose importance for modern philosophy is not controversial, explicitly takes aim at classical philosophy in its contemporary scholastic form. For the classics, philosophy was a science or an aspiration to a science of the beings, demanding a precision and mode of discourse relative to each kind of being.[16] The early moderns sought to understand all beings by way of universal laws or elements, which abstracted from the particular kinds of beings we experience. Their model was the arts in the older sense of a craft, *ars*, or *techne*, a body of knowledge formed to bring about some goal already known, and in which there can be manifest and collective progress over time. Such an understanding of philosophy requires one to argue that all human passions or desires are publicly commensurable. This properly speaking is Enlightenment, because it enables one to argue that in principle everyone one may understand the end of science,

even if its technical details remain obscure, and so there may be popular approval of science as the instrument by which humanity must overcome a hostile nature to satisfy its desires (*Essays* 78).[17]

This strategy was first fully accomplished by Francis Bacon, who took his lead from Machiavelli's critique of classical political thought.[18] In Bacon's analysis, given the absence of formal and final causes, the end of philosophy is "to establish and extend the power and dominion of the human race itself over the universe," an ambition which "depends wholly upon the arts and sciences." [19] But to what end is this power to be employed? Bacon does assert that his natural philosophy will furnish a "moral and political philosophy," which would presumably concern itself with such ends. However, that seems to be impossible if there are no intelligible ends of human nature (*NO* I.80, cf. I.127). There is no way to subject the ends of science to science itself. This dichotomy emerges in Bacon's endorsement of the inventions or discoveries which have most aided "the empire of man" thus far, "namely, printing, gunpowder, and the magnet" (*NO* I.129). Bacon himself raises the objection that this reformation of philosophy as technology raises the possibility of "the debasement of the arts and sciences to the purposes of wickedness, luxury, and the like." Our version of the first problem is that the science that can manufacture such things as nuclear weapons cannot *as a science* provide any guidance whatsoever as to whether and how they should be employed, what areas of research should be developed, and so forth. Even if one blithely assumes that the misuse of technology by the major tyrannies of the twentieth century will for some reason not be repeated, the problem is not solved by saying that freedom demands we just allow things to develop as they may for the betterment of humanity. Such an answer just leaves matters up to the commercial market: should the profit motive determine, for example, the manner and extent of our developing powers in genetic research? Bacon, however, himself dismisses the objection that he has raised on the grounds that if the human race is only given power it "will be governed by sound reason and true religion" (*NO* I.129). This appears to be the original displacement onto history of the peculiarly modern hope, theodicy, or faith to the effect that progress would somehow solve an intractable problem, albeit one not evidently better founded than later versions (cf. *NO* I.92).

The paradox of the modern understanding of the relations of theory and practice can be seen in the image that Descartes describes his new mode of philosophy in the Preface to his *Principles of Philosophy*: the roots are metaphysics, the trunk physics, and the branches are mechanics, morals, and medicine (*Essays* 228). The meaning of this model is that there are practical and productive human ends, such as health, convenience, and good politics, that philosophy as a whole is an instrument to manufacture. But this means that the ends of life must already be transparent to the philosopher prior to the construction of philosophical instrument that is intended to bring them to fruition. Hence, if "morals," is meant to encompass the ends of life, including philosophy itself, then its appearance as one of the fruits of philosophy is in contradiction with the assumption that such ends have already been determined. At the very least this problem entails that philosophy conceived as a rigorous scientific instrument cannot question the ends of life because it is already formed by an answer to the question of human ends.

It is Descartes' philosophy that responded to Bacon's call for a "physics bound by mathematics" that really allowed for modern science to develop. In the *Discourse* Descartes rejects the "speculative philosophy of the schools," that is to say, the notion that theory is the end of philosophy, and offers instead a "practical philosophy" by which we may be able to

to render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature. This is desirable not only for the invention of an infinity of devices that would enable one to enjoy trouble-free the fruits of the earth and all the goods found there, but also principally for the maintenance of health, which unquestionably is the first good and the foundation of all the other goods of life...(*Essays* 74)

Descartes' formula for the science designed to produce this end is certainty for the sake of utility, or "a clear and assured knowledge of everything that is useful in life" (*Essays* 47): but our certain knowledge is instrumental to an end that cannot be known for certain. In this way "[t]he typical modern paradox is established: what is good is not known to be true, and what is true is not known to be good."[20]

V. Conclusion

In 1935 Husserl referred to the crisis of modernity as something frequently discussed and documented (*Krisis* 347). While it is still common to refer to the period in the midst of which Husserl spoke as one of crisis, this usually refers to the wars, crimes, and general political turmoil of the time. In the period of extended albeit fractious peace (or at least the absence of a world war) since 1945, which is perhaps now drawing to a close, there is radically less agreement or awareness that these practical affairs have a direct relation to the status of science or reason, or that the roots of our practical problems are theoretical, and that we are in a state of theoretical crisis. For example, Nietzsche and Weber resorted to the language of tragedy and fate to suggest the meaning of our being able to know only means and not ends.[21] Our contemporary social and political sciences, impressed by the authority that material success has lent the natural sciences, seek to combine the empirical precision and the denial of knowledge of human ends of such sciences in discussing human affairs, as may be seen in the distinction between facts and values, but they seem much less anxious about giving over our self-understanding to fate or history. At times it appears that the salutary lesson has been learnt that if there are no facts about values there can be no genuine value in distinguishing between fact and fiction, and so the basis of our sciences cannot themselves be scientific if the distinction between facts and values it to be rigorously adhered to. However, this recognition does not seem to have brought a renewed attention to the origins of this distinction in philosophical decisions concerning the status of theory and practice, but rather contributed to notion that theory is itself based upon practice, in the sense that it is a convenient fiction of some pre- or sub-theoretical desire, and so to the denial of the possibility of theory.

Husserl saw clearly that the key problem resulted from the success of the new philosophy or science in mastering non-human nature combined with our failure to provide a commensurate knowledge of human ends. I have suggested that this problem is helpfully

understood as arising from the philosophical orientation of the founders of modern philosophy, who reconceived theory and practice in a manner that rendered science incapable in principle of finding such knowledge of human ends.

My purpose has been to articulate the fundamental problem, to which there may be no ultimate solution. This is not a recommendation of despair but of clarity, which is the only proper basis for any theoretical and practical steps of our own. On the one hand, it always remains to us to pay closer attention to the specific texture of human action. For example, Jan Patočka has described the problem I have sketched in one essay as the “technological view of the world...[in which] there are really no distinctions in the order of beings; rather, all hierarchy is arbitrarily subjective, and practically there are only quantitative differences of power” (*Philosophy* 336). Patočka’s reflection upon the phenomena of sacrifice in this essay shows us the disjunction between the technological world-view and the inherent purposiveness of human action (*Philosophy* 335-9). On the other hand, however, to grasp the theoretical roots of our situation we need to re-examine the early modern criticism of classical thought. This in turn requires us to interpret the classics without modern presuppositions, for according to those presuppositions the classics have been decisively refuted. For example, the question of human ends is often posed as a choice between materialism and a cosmic teleology, with the addition that the classics were both teleological and claimed an absolute knowledge of ultimate or first causes. Yet in a central text describing the thought informing the founding of classical philosophy, Plato depicts Socrates rejecting both materialism and teleology, precisely on the grounds that they posit some unmediated access to the truth of first causes.^[22] As we approach the limits of our mastery of non-human nature and the cusp of our mastery of human nature through genetics, our need for a re-examination of these texts to see how we should put our powers to use remains as urgent as it ever was.

Notes:

[1] Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie, eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. W. Biemel, 2nd edition (The Hague, 1976; hereafter *Krisis* 1976), at p. 314. I have followed the translation of this text by Q. Lauer included in Husserl, *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy* (1965).

[2] Husserl, *Krisis* xiv. I have followed the translation of David Carr in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, 1970).

[3] Husserl *Krisis*, pp. 344. Compare the excellent summary by Jan Patočka in *Philosophy and Selected Writings*, ed. E. Kohak (Chicago, 1989), pp. 328-9; henceforth *Philosophy*.

[4] Husserl describes this tendency as a result of the “objectivism” or “naturalism” that characterizes philosophy and the sciences in the modern epoch, although its roots lie in the history of ancient philosophy (*Krisis* 339 and ff.).

[5] As might be expected, Nietzsche expresses this thought in a somewhat more arrestingly manner: “The *collective degeneration of man* down to that which the socialist dolts and blockheads today see as their ‘man of the future’ – as their ideal! – this degeneration and diminution of man to the perfect herd animal (or, as they say, to the man of the ‘free society’), this animalization of man to the pygmy animal of equal rights and equal pretension is *possible*, there is no doubt about that! He who has thought this possibility through to the end knows one more kind of disgust than other men do – and perhaps also a new *task!*...” (*Beyond Good and Evil*, tr. R. J. Hollingdale; London, 1990, section 203; henceforth *BGE*). References to Nietzsche will be to the standard section numbers. Citations in the text of this part of the essay will refer to the section numbers of this books. I focus on *BGE* because Nietzsche designates it his “*critique of modernity*” (*Ecce Homo* in *Basic Writings*, tr. W. Kaufmann, New York, 2000, “Beyond Good and Evil,” section 2).

[6] Nietzsche seems both to forbid access to his deepest and most dangerous thoughts to most of us, while writing in an incendiary manner on all sorts of topics. This paradox is expressed in, e.g., *Human All Too Human* (tr. R. J. Hollingdale, Cambridge, 1986), II.71; henceforth *HH*.

[7] A recent example is *A Nietzschean Defense of Democracy* by Lawrence J. Hatab (1995). The contents of this book should be compared with *BGE* 262 and 202.

[8] See, e.g., *BGE* 222, and on the last man, see especially the Prologue to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (in *The Portable Nietzsche*, tr. W. Kaufmann. Reprint: 1976; New York).

[9] Since nature is indifference itself it teaches “*narrowing of perspective*” (cf. *BGE* 9). Thus reason can be no guide to life, and specifically to what ennobles life. Thus, for example, Nietzsche can say, regarding Christian scholasticism, that “this tyranny, this arbitrariness, this rigorous and grandiose stupidity has *educated* the spirit; it seems slavery in the cruder and in the more refined sense, is the indispensable means also for spiritual discipline and breeding” (*BGE* 188, cf. 239).

[10] *BGE* 251. See *BGE* 208 and 209 on the “new warlike age upon which we Europeans have obviously entered.” Cf., under the heading “*War indispensable*,” the description of the means “Present-day Englishmen” employ to energize their fading instincts in explorations, mountain-climbing, etc.: “One will be able to discover many other such surrogates for war, but they will perhaps increasingly reveal that so highly cultivated and for that reason necessarily feeble humanity as that of the present-day European requires not merely war but the greatest and most terrible wars – thus a temporary relapse into barbarism – if the means to culture are not to deprive them of their culture and of their existence itself,” *HH* I.477.

[11] *Critique of Pure Reason*, II. ch II s III, B832 ff.

[12] Compare Nietzsche’s claim that persons in favor of commerce and socialists have essentially the same end (*BGE* 202).

[13] Nietzsche himself raises this questions and responds, “well, so much the better,” which is obviously an admission of the problem rather than an attempt to address it (*BGE* 22). Compare his discussion of the difficulty that it is somehow impossible to create whilst knowing that one is creating, i.e., creativity requires a certain self-delusion or ignorance (*BGE* 185, 188).

[14] *BGE* 36; cf. 54 with 12.

[15] See René Descartes, *Philosophical Essays and Correspondence*, ed. R. Ariew, Indianapolis, 2000), p. 74; hereafter *Essays*.

[16] So, for example, Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1094b12-14, 19-27.

[17] Descartes

[18] See, e.g., Francis Bacon, *The Advancement of Learning* (in *The Major Works*, ed. B. Vickers, Oxford: 1996), pp. 190, 254.

[19] Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. F. L. Anderson (Indianapolis, 1960), I.129; henceforth *NO*. Cf. Bacon’s promise to “hand over to men their fortunes” and provide an “improvement in man’s estate and an enlargement of his power over nature” (*NO* II.52).

[20] Richard Kennington, *On Modern Origins: Essays in Early Modern Philosophy*, ed. P. Kraus and F. Hunt (Lanham, 2004), p. 185.

[21] Cf. *BGE* 231 with Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation” (in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, tr. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (Oxford, 1946), pp. 129-156.

[22] See *Phaedo* 96a5-100e3.

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