On Confronting Species-Specific Skepticism as We Near the End of the Twentieth Century*

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I. The Decentering of the Subject

Ever since Socrates "called philosophy down from heaven to earth" to locate it in the cities and in the lives of individual human beings by exhorting them to turn within to their souls and to the concepts (logoi) that dwell therein, to turn to a knowledge of oneself first of all, to examine one's own inner life in its acts of knowing, believing, desiring, willing, evaluating, giving meaning and intelligibility to the chaos of earths, airs, fires, waters and bones, sinews, humors, and joints, which confront us in raw nature, Western philosophy has seen the necessary turn to the foundations of experience and of reality-as-experienced which has come to be called "foundationalism" in philosophy. In their many different ways all of the greatest philosophers of our tradition have been "foundationalists": Plato, Aristotle, Augustine, Aquinas, Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, Hegel and Husserl, to mention only the

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"giants," who together and separately constitute the backbone of Western philosophy.

But for many, already in the Nineteenth but especially since the middle of the Twentieth century, the centrality of human experience has begun to be questioned, the aristo-centric assumption of a necessary, archimedean basis on which to build a systematic understanding of reality has begun to be denied. This is what is today called the "decentering of the subject" not only in Structuralism, but in Poststructuralism, Deconstructionism, and in all the sociologies of knowledge which are now vying to replace philosophy in the ancient, classical sense. Our topic is but the latest, the philosophic, decentering of the subject and it fits into a whole series of previous decenterings.

First there was the cosmological decentering which took place, amidst great cultural upheaval, in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth centuries with the physical astronomy of Copernicus and Galileo. The results of this first major decentering are still just beginning to be understood. Men have not only begun to suspect but already know that the planet earth and the solar system of which it is a part are not at the center of the universe and that it is extremely unlikely that mankind is the final culmination point of the entire creative evolutionary process, or the only "purpose" of the universe of beings. Our solar system is not even central to our own (Milky Way) galaxy but is, instead, a peripheral tail, perhaps one of many so numerous they are impossible to count. And this galaxy itself is but one local cluster of more than two dozen similar galaxies which are themselves but an infinitesimal part of a universe composed of billions of galaxies. And this universe itself may be but one of many more.

In his unfinished and disorganized final work, *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty at least three times cites the "inexhaustible question" of the poet Claudel: "Where are we?" and "What time is it?" as the most existentially important philosophical