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Against Humanism I: Externalism

6.1 Against the spirit of our age

We philosophers live in a humanistic age. The dominant philosophical doctrine of our time, today’s intellectual \textit{zeitgeist}, is that the world is a world structured by us; forged by the architectural propensities and proclivities of our mind. This is the Kantian turn in philosophy. Reality as it is in itself, noumenal reality, is essentially unknowable, and philosophy, accordingly, shifts from the study of being-qua-being to the study of being-qua-known. Philosophy is \textit{first} philosophy, and first philosophy is the study of the structuring activities of the human mind. Philosophy is the philosophy of thought. This much has been the orthodoxy ever since Kant. Just think how much of philosophy in the twentieth century has been shaped by, and makes little sense without, this tenet. There are, of course, the obvious examples such as the phenomenalism prevalent in the early part of the century. Less obviously, the so called linguistic turn, which, until quite recently, dominated philosophy in the Anglo-American world, was essentially a linguistic form of Kantianism, constituted by appending to the Kantian turn one of two claims: either the structure of language determines the structure of cognition, or the structure of language mirrors the structure of cognition. Once we accept either of these, philosophy as first philosophy can proceed as philosophy of language rather than philosophy of thought. In a similar vein, much of twentieth-century philosophy of science has been exercised by the question of the so called theory impregnation of observation; the extent to which our observation, in both scientific and everyday contexts, is influenced, shaped and even determined by background theoretical principles and assumptions. And, in accordance with the Kantian spirit of our time, this claim
about the content of observation becomes translated into a claim about the content of reality. It is not just observation but the reality that is observed that is laden with theory. Much of the popularity of Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, easily the best selling philosophy book of all time, almost certainly stemmed from its being interpreted in this way, an interpretation which Kuhn vainly spent the rest of his career trying to repudiate. Without too much oversimplification, one can say that the role played by the mind in Kant's worldview has been played by 'theory' in much twentieth-century philosophy of science. And if we switch from so called analytic philosophy to the allegedly antagonistic *Continental* alternative, the essentially Kantian organising vision remains. In the phenomenological tradition, Husserl, its founder, developed his own phenomenological version of transcendental idealism. And even Heidegger, who is in many respects a very unKantian thinker, and who in fact explicitly describes his position (or one of them) as anti-humanist, tells us that man is the lighting up place of being, the place where beings come to be. And in the structuralist and poststructuralist tradition, one could say, without an inordinate amount of oversimplification, that the role played by the mind in Kant's worldview is played by 'the text'.

Undoubtedly, much of the above is polemic. But I do not think it is that far from the truth either. And, why stop when I'm on a roll? The roots of this humanist, neo-idealist, neo-Kantian organising vision can be traced back to the very beginnings of Western philosophy. An intimate connection between reality and our knowledge of it can be clearly found in Plato. Reality, for Plato, is essentially intelligible: it is that which can be understood by reason alone, at least when reason is embodied in a suitably trained and cognitively equipped subject. The connection between reality and intelligibility is, thus, an intrinsic one. If this connection was first asseverated by the father of Western philosophy, then it was certainly extended and strengthened by the father of modern Western philosophy, René Descartes. Descartes made the criterion of the reality of a situation or state of affairs its representation to a knowing subject with certainty. This sort of developmental profile of the history of philosophy is sketched, with typical perspicacity, by Nietzsche in a little known passage in *Twilight of the Idols* aptly entitled 'How the Real World at last became a myth'. And, if Heidegger is to be believed, Nietzsche himself became the culmination of this history in his assertion that the world is simply will to power: 'This world is will to power and nothing else. And you yourselves are this will to power and nothing else besides.' Except Nietzsche was not the culmination.