
EUROPEAN CULTURE BETWEEN IDEOLOGY AND METAPHYSICAL VOLUNTARISM

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Abstract

In the history of the European culture, the 20th century has been sometimes related, not necessarily in a joint manner, to ‘the end of Metaphysics’, on the one hand, to the political and epistemic hegemony of ideology, on the other. How much truth is there to these two statements? Is there a correlation between these two phenomena? If so, what are the exogenous and the endogenous factors of this overthrow? Moreover, to what extent are we really dealing here with two different, but occasionally tangent, fields and not with mere *aspects* of a single ideative modus?

To all these questions I will attempt to outline an answer by referring, on the one hand, to the one philosopher who established the *death of metaphysics* as one fundamental theme of contemporary philosophy, Friedrich Nietzsche, on the other, to the sociologist who, as far as I know, most explicitly discussed the nature of the relationship between metaphysics and ideology, Karl Mannheim. More to the point, I set about from the assumption that it could be that Mannheim found, in his *Ideology and Utopia*, a more pertinent answer, at least in a political sense, to Nietzsche’s fundamental concern, i.e. the surpassing of nihilism. In this respect, my claim is that the key issue would be the transition from what I have called a descriptivist approach to *aletheia*, the nature of the relationship between truth and Being, to a prescriptivist one, essentially that reality is not so much to be described as willed. *In nuce*, the entire issue could be broken into these three questions: (i) can we regard ideology as an attempt by metaphysics to provide an answer to nihilism, (ii) if so, what would be the incumbent epistemological modifications and, (iii) last but not least, how much success could we expect from such an attempt ?

Keywords: ideology, metaphysics, existential horizon, relativism, nihilism

1. Delimitation of the problematical horizon. Conceptual framework: ideology and metaphysics

I will start by providing a framing of the two main concepts: ‘metaphysics’ and ‘ideology’.

Roughly speaking, one could determine metaphysics as the product of the incidence of ontology on epistemology. Therefore, as ontology concerns itself

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with *that which is* (the *Being*), and epistemology with *what we know*, we could say that the fundamental question of metaphysics is: how do we come to know that which is? And as metaphysics had to operate by concepts that were necessary and universal, thereby aiming to reduce the world to its principle, while the sensible experience, on the other hand, showed such heterogeneity, it had to take on another auxiliary task, namely that of providing a way through which we could bypass the many (the sensible experience) and gain access to *the one* (the principle). Hence, the essential understanding of metaphysics as ‘disclosure’, *i.e.*, as a way of removing the veil of the apparent, sensible reality, while concomitantly gaining access to the transcendent essence behind it.

An epistemological operationalization of the previously stated fundamental question of metaphysics would be the following: how can we gain an objective knowledge of the (external) things when all that we have at our disposal are our own subjective representations of them? On the other hand, the transcendental philosophy, especially Kant, has shown us that the entire approach of classical metaphysics to this subject was fundamentally flawed due to an original problematization misunderstanding that necessarily sets knowledge on a self-contradictory path (the antinomies).

As such, according to Kant, the contradiction ensues from the very initial problematization of the aforementioned concepts, namely from the fact that this *essence*, which we have previously established as the ultimate finality of knowledge, has been regarded as being transcendent, *i.e.*, beyond the world and, more importantly, us. On the other hand, he tells us, when we regard this essence as being transcendental [1], respectively as deriving from the generic structure of our cognitive apparatus that is necessarily and universally shared among all epistemic subjects as human beings, all these contradictions disappear. Thus, the notion of *objectivity* itself, initially understood as ontological independence with respect to the subject, underwent a reconceptualization by which it became conceived of as transcendental inter-subjectivity. Obviously, the price paid for this ideative transformation was the fact that the world could no longer be conceived of as in-itself accessible, but the benefit was that it became necessarily and universally knowable as phenomenon, *i.e.* as immediate product of our cognitive apparatus. Basically, metaphysics became from transcendent knowledge of reality, transcendental knowledge of ourselves. To this would amount, in a very sketchy perspective, the philosophical landscape in which Nietzsche emerged.

Now let’s have a look at our second main concept, ideology. With respect to its genus, ideology can be understood as any ideative corpus (concepts, images, symbols) that mediates and influences the subjective perception of reality by the individual members of a collectivity. In this respect Mannheim is quite clear:

“The concept of ‘ideology’ reflects the one discovery which emerged from political conflict, namely, that ruling groups can in their thinking become so intensively interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination. There is

implicit in the word ‘ideology’ the insight that in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both to itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it.” [2]

With respect to the differentia, we must take into account the fact that the concept of ideology strictly refers to those factors that in their more or less direct influence on the individual psyche display a social nature. A neurosis, for example, is not ideological precisely because its functioning mechanisms are too tightly bound to the individual psyche. *In extremis*, ten, one hundred, or one thousand neurotics put together will still suffer each one separately of his/her own neurosis. Alienation, on the other hand, is a social phenomenon precisely because the causes and mechanisms involved in it derive from the very structure of society as a whole. *In extremis*, a single alienated individual constitutes a social phenomenon (that is his alienation can be defined solely on the background of the structure of the society as a whole)..

2. Metaphysical prescriptivism – alternative models: Nietzsche vs. ideology

As such, while metaphysics is characterized by a rather passive attitude with respect to the relation between subject and reality, the former’s task being restricted to the proper collection and elaboration of certain exterior signals, ideology, quite the contrary, displays a much more active role of the subject with respect to reality – he/she has, for better or worse, the possibility of distorting reality, namely of imposing his/her own interpretation of it by a process the mechanisms of which are, sometimes conscious, but other times, and all the more profound, unconscious. What are the potential depth and scope of this process? The answer could lie along the following path: to the extent that it could be proven that the present slump in which metaphysics finds itself, actually has to do with the final failure of its artificial attitude with respect to knowledge, *i.e.* to its descriptivism, maybe we could find that the solution lies in the assumption of an active-prescriptive attitude with respect to reality, attitude which is in significant extent analogous to that of ideology. However, how does Nietzsche fit into this picture? Well mainly because that is precisely what he sought to prove, *i.e.* that nihilism is the consequence of thinking through to the last consequence the inherent logic of European culture, specifically the ‘metaphysical Apollinism’, or the contemplative model of knowledge.

More to the point, Nietzsche’s thesis on the issue is the following: nihilism represents the consequence of thinking through ‘to the very bitter end’ [3] the *Christian Weltanschauung*. But how could it come to this? The initial moment: *God is Truth*. Christianity spreads God’s religion not so much as a cult of power, but as one of truth – *Thou shalt not lie!* – still remains one of the basic duties of any Christian. But, in time, *the cult of Truth* increasingly gains autonomy with respect to religion and, in the end, secularizes itself. By now science appears, fact that initiates a universal process of objective, that is factual-rational, re-evaluation and re-substantiation of the traditional world model. Science, along its development, progressively consumes the entire realm of the human existence and, as this happens, a troubling conclusion becomes

more and more apparent: God is in this new universe nowhere to be found, that is the idea of God cannot be factually and rationally validated. Now, says Nietzsche, *Truth* turns against God, and science comes to contest its own, religious origins – *God is dead* [4]. But the epilogue of this story is all the more disturbing as in fact, although apparently secularized, science was in a much lesser degree autonomous with respect to its Christian origins than it held – the death of God brings about the death of Truth (in the sense of objective contemplation). Hence, nihilism. In the self-undermining of Christianity through science, claims Nietzsche, the destiny of any artificial attitude with respect to life becomes apparent, artificial in the sense of it being based on self-delusion and resentment, i.e. of one that when faced with its own scarcity of vital resources, tries to convince both itself and the other parties that life is somehow different than it is.

We could further shed some light on this matter by understanding Nietzsche's position with respect to the concept of time, namely to the main manner in which it is assumed in our existence, as history. This is the main topic of discussion in his *Untimely Meditations*. What begins here as a criticism of the Hegelian historicism becomes an explicit contestation of the notion of objective truth, with respect to both history, in particular, and to knowledge, in general. The most apparent reason for which Nietzsche turns against Hegel has to do with one of the main consequences of the latter's philosophy, namely that history had reached (or could ever reach) its final point.

Without going into particulars, Nietzsche finds the propagation of this belief in the end of history to be disastrous, mainly as it conditions man to some sort of auto-excision from the fundamental dimension of his existence, i.e. time. History, claims Nietzsche, is not so much something to be retained or remembered, but rather something to be made, it is not so much past-oriented, but rather future-oriented, and as such, when man starts believing that he cannot make history any more, he will simply consider that there remains nothing for him to do except, maybe, to imitate some past models. Under the impact of the belief in the end of history, man comes to confine himself to the condition of an epigone, and, as any such epigone, he will not only look backwards but rather start thinking backwards.

Now, in a more general sense, his thesis is that human existence is somehow stigmatized by its essential relation to time: memory, respectively the capacity to retain the past. In contradistinction with man, animals are, according to him, essentially confined to the present, they forget each individual existence as it passes. In other words, animals lack the cultural retention of time, all that they have available is, at best, a strictly biological one, i.e. instinct. This is exactly what offers them the actual possibility of happiness, says Nietzsche – short memory, precisely by hindering the formation of an overview ('Übersicht') of the Existence, entertains the possibility of the illusion of the absolute, that is of the universalization of one's own existential context, fact required by any entity, all the more by a conscious one, as landmark and foundation for the meaning of one's life. Too much consciousness seems to be harmful to us.

On the other hand, he claims, man owes the overcoming of its own animality, therefore his very humanity, precisely to the process by which memory becomes history. As such, the key to the vital use of consciousness seems to be represented by the proper balance between retaining and forgetting – man must not forget that all that both history and knowledge in general represent in the end is mere instruments for sustaining and enhancing life and not *per se* values; if they are not understood strictly through this finality, they risk becoming abusive, that is turning against life. And that is exactly what happens in the present, says Nietzsche – Hegel's philosophy, historicism and nihilism are all symptoms of this alteration of the vitally proper balance between knowledge and life.

But what is, after all, this existential horizon that the excess of knowledge comes to undermine? Essentially, it constitutes the socio-historical matrix ensuring the cultural ontogenesis of any human biological entity, the significative structure required by any human organism in order to become a conscious being, i.e. an individual, and on which he/she continues to implicitly lean for the entire duration of his/her life precisely for extracting its meaning; well, this formative substratum is, in some measure conscious, but, for the most part, of a profoundly unconscious nature, and it must remain so in order to keep its weight, to be able to educate.

As such, according to Nietzsche, the use of the past for the future arises from an egoistic interpretation of the historical truth; consequently, history must not, and actually cannot, become an objective science (in the descriptive sense of the term) as this understanding would distort the proper relation between history, respectively knowledge and life, leading to an abusive use of them. In the words of one of Nietzsche's interpreters, myths are useful only as long as they are mistaken for the truth [5], while realizing a myth is a myth already marks a self-removal from the horizon it determines.

3. Metaphysical prescriptivism and the nature of the individuality

Basically in his view, reality itself is something rather to be wanted (in the sense of imposed, created) than merely described, as metaphysical Apollinism attempts to inure us. How is this supposed to happen on Nietzsche's terms? Precisely against the background of a universalized conflict of the various interpretative models, respectively of the herein emergent hierarchies, established by the intensity with which the will to power supports each of them, principle which is available both intra-individually as inter-individually, respectively intra-culturally as inter-culturally. With regard to this latter aspect, we must take note of the fact that for Nietzsche, roughly speaking, the individual does not represent, at least not in its original sense, a perpetually conscious, identical and indivisible unitary entity, but, au contraire, a motley bundle of divergent tendencies and drives, forced to remain together by some sort of social straightjacket. As such, following his view, the heavier the pressure society lays on the individual, the more amplified his/her individuality will be. Totalitarian

circumstances, he writes in his *Untimely Meditations*, are the ones that best train the individual in the spirit of his/her own freedom, i.e. 'the will for self-responsibility'. Reciprocally, the dissolution of society brings about the one of the individual, but only of the human (not also of the 'over-human') one. The *Übermensch* emerges precisely against the background of the social dissolution, namely by the fact that it can keep maintaining its individuality after the former's collapse.

As such, according to his conception, an adequate approach to history was held not even by far by the historians, as scientists pretending to convey us an objective description of it, but by the historic men such as Caesar or Napoleon, respectively by those who made history, in the sense of having, more or less involuntarily, projected by their own actions future human existential horizons. The objectivity claim made by the historians is profoundly artificial, says Nietzsche, representing in fact nothing more than a version of the will to power, but a dissimulative one. In other words, by the contemplative concept of objectivity, historians, traditional philosophers, scientists, in one word descriptivist, did little more than seek to promote a world model that favoured them. But, actually, such a form of descriptive objectivity is unattainable – the mere selection of a handful of data out of an infinite number of possibilities already represents an interpretation. The historian, if you will, is a hermeneut not an observer and this is precisely why he can be held accountable for the interpretation he offers. The very theory of the will to power is an interpretation, one however that holds a more wise perspective, first because it is more encompassing, second by the very fact of it being the one that first became conscious of the will to power.

Human, All Too Human ends with the questioning of man's destiny in the context of *God's death*. The main problem seems to be the following: does the conscious understanding by man of his ontological freedom, namely of the fact that he is capable of an *ad libitum* engenderment of the existential horizons, constitute the key to his over-human becoming, or quite the contrary, the main impetus to his final collapse? The basic, positive, idea would be that if man overcame his animality, thereby becoming man, by the unconscious projection of existential horizons, now, as he became conscious of this ability and by the voluntary and assumed use of it, he could become more than man. However, the main difference between an existential horizon, on the one hand, and a common ideative framework, on the other, resides precisely in the fact that the former was provided with necessity and universality, thereby being taken as an expression of certain objective and determinant principles with respect to man's choice – could one believe in an absolute way in something knowingly relative? To the extent that the answer is affirmative, it might be possible for man to use this newly attained consciousness for progressing towards a prescriptivist metaphysics and an overhuman condition, if not, he will most probably remain captive in the descriptivist metaphysics, collapsing in the end along with it in nihilism. Any of these two alternatives, even their joint fulfilment, is possible, suggests Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. More explicitly, man, in the context of nihilism,

seems to have lost his *per se* identity, becoming a mere interstice between ‘that which is more than man’ (the *Übermensch*) and ‘that which is less than man (the last man – der letzte Mensch)’. Only the *Übermensch* will be able to make productive *use* of that which for man constituted and abuse of history and knowledge – the consciousness of his own essential ontological freedom.

Thus, nihilism and anomy, on their positive side [6], would seem to represent for Nietzsche the conditions for the emergence of the *Übermensch*. In fact, according to the suggestions in *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, each *Übermensch* would constitute such specific and dynamic a configuration of the divergent drives of the will to power that one could no longer speak of a genus, species and even ‘society of Overhumans’ – each *Übermensch* would represent, philogenetically, a species in itself, and ontogenetically an incarnation of the individualist solipsism. The only common feature of the *Übermensch* would be purely generic: he would have the capacity to arbitrarily *will* both himself and the surrounding reality, thereby becoming, *stricto sensu*, *ens causa sui*.

The link between ideology, as defined in the first pages and this voluntarist metaphysics of the *Übermensch* is rather apparent – both systematically impose a biased model of reality on the basis of what we could call, along with Nietzsche, will to power. On the other hand, ideology also has a profoundly collectivist connotation which would seem to be completely unfamiliar to Nietzsche’s voluntarist metaphysics. Regarding this latter aspect, we could take the ideological hegemony of the 20th century as an attempt to overcome nihilism but came at best from the *zoon politikon* version of man, rather than from what he called *Übermensch*, as a complete expression of the solipsistic individuality. As such, could ideology retrieve the aforementioned proper balance between knowledge and life that traditional (contemplative) metaphysics seems to have lost? If so, ideology could constitute the epistemological model that specifically emerged in the context of the collective (therefore human, not over-human) assumption by man of what I have previously called ontological freedom, i.e. the capacity for an *ad libitum* engendering of the existential horizons.

However, in order to provide an answer to the previous question we should determine whether ideology could be taken as a mature (i.e. through and beyond nihilistic) continuation of metaphysics, namely a metaphysics that overcame (or at least consistently attempts to overcome) that which Nietzsche defined as contemplative attitude or Apollinism; and presently there is no such proof.

First, we could say, that ideology finds itself at the very antipode of metaphysics (at least in its classical understanding): while metaphysics sought to provide immediate access to an in itself objective Reality, ideology, quite the contrary, constitutes an essentially dissimulative phenomenon, referring, as previously said, to any ideative corpus (concepts, images, symbols, representations), that induce, on the backdrop of certain social mechanisms, a distorted perception of reality. By its original task, metaphysics as ‘unravelment’ would seem to seek the elimination of all forms of appearance, including those

of ideological nature. On the other hand, a phrase such as distorted images of reality could very easily point us at asking: What or whose reality? Well, the very fact that such a question has meaning to us represents a clue to the deep transformations that the metaphysical understanding of concepts such as consciousness, reality, objectivity underwent since the moment of their classical and even modern formulation. Hence, what I attempt at showing, following Mannheim's point, is that, in a very general sense, metaphysics has somehow by itself tended to become ideology, fact that could be determined through a diachronic analysis of it.

I have previously said that we would follow the historical steps that took metaphysics, more or less discretely, ever closer to ideology and further away from the original contemplative model. But what is, after all, this contemplative ontological, metaphysical and epistemological model? A summarized characterization of it would be that its basic assumption is that the world represents some sort of vessel or container filled with all sorts of entities, some among which endowed, along their other properties, with consciousness, fact that enables them to establish through various channels (obviously, their senses) an epistemic relation to the world and to the external objects, relation consisting in their inner but purely ideal appropriation, namely in the formation of some sort of inner copies of the external objects in the ideal immanence of the consciousness-endowed entity, consequently designated as subject. As I have already said at the beginning, one of the major flaws of this model is that it places metaphysics, in particular, knowledge in general, in a position of perpetual self-dissatisfaction, respectively in an insurmountable incapacity of rising up to its own standards. More to the point, as Kant showed us, the fact of inferring the objects as exterior causes of our inner representations is much below the standards of apodictic certainty essentially characteristic to metaphysics. This problem would generate in the modern and contemporary metaphysics an ample movement aiming at rethinking the relation between consciousness and world beyond the classical subject-object dichotomy, namely of removing consciousness from the exclusive claim of the subject, respectively the world, from that of the object and of placing them in a relation of concrescence in which each of the two provides the *a priori* conditions for the possibility of the other. According to Mannheim, there is a direct connection between the definition of the ideology and the nature of its relation to metaphysics, on the one hand, and this ample movement that occurred within the epistemic realm, on the other.

4. Conclusion

Let's sum up the argument: ideology cannot constitute the awaited solution to nihilism because any solution to nihilism must enable, on the one hand, the overcoming of the existential horizon, on the other the fulfilment of the function the latter performed with respect to the individual, namely the maintenance of the illusion of the absolute (in the lack of which human existence

became meaningless). As single possibility in this respect I see the one conceived by Nietzsche, namely that the part assumed the whole, that is that the individual that previously participated in an all-encompassing existential horizon became an existential horizon itself. Metaphysically, this would amount to the possibility of lucidly believing in the truth of an illusion, namely of believing in an absolute way in something consciously known to be relative. But this type of transition could only be realized if a corresponding transformation of the epistemological attitude took place, i.e. a transition from a contemplative descriptivism (*adequatio intellectus ad rem*) to a voluntaristic prescriptivism (*adequatio res ad intellectum*), namely from a position by which truth consists in accurately *describing* reality, to one in which it rather results from the willing act of imposing it. However, a transition of this sort could only be possible in the case of an individual that became its own existential horizon. This necessarily entails individualistic solipsism, *i.e.*, subsequent to this transformation individuals became as mutually exclusive as existential horizons among themselves. This is precisely what hinders ideology, ultimately a form of prescriptivist metaphysics, from constituting a solution to nihilism, namely the fact that it necessarily entails a collective dimension. Synthetically, ideology cannot represent the awaited solution to the crisis of the existential horizon, precisely because it represents, in the end, a form of existential horizon itself. To this would amount my main objection to Mannheim's view.

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