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Modernity and Ocularcentrism
A Second Look at Descartes and Heidegger

I

A host of idioms and metaphors – both dead and alive – in every-day language as well as in philosophical parlance bears witness to the importance of sight and vision as a source of knowledge and experience: we speak of *seeing*, in the sense of understanding, we have *views* about this or that, poets and philosophers have formulated *visions* of reality, we can be *clear-sighted*, *far-sighted* or *short-sighted*, we can gain *insight* into things or we can be *blind* to certain things, we *visualize* things we have not seen, we sometimes *overlook* things, we sometimes *see through* the invalid reasoning of others, and we hope that our own reasoning is *perceptive* and *perspicuous*.

Sight and vision as a source of knowledge or illusion is a cardinal theme in the philosophical tradition from Plato to the present time. The hegemony of vision, »the noblest of the senses«, is deeply ingrained in our Western ways of thinking, feeling and acting. The precedence given to the eye, to vision and to the visual has recently come under attack from various quarters; the critique of ocularcentrism is intended to supplement and reinforce the critique of logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence.

Although the prevalence of ocularcentric thinking and of visual metaphors is frequently associated with Descartes and the rise of modern scientific thinking, ocularcentrism does not seem to be a particularly modern phenomenon nor specifically Western. Visual and ocularcentric metaphors abound in various cultural settings, perhaps because »[i]n their expressive power and subtle capacity to change, metaphors of light are incomparable«, as Hans Blumenberg puts it.¹ The fact that the Sanskrit word »veda« (which means knowledge and transmitted wisdom) has given the holy scriptures of Indian religion, *The Vedas*, their name, bears witness to the intimate connection between vision and knowledge assumed in most, if not all, cultures. The Greek word »οἶδα«, meaning »I know«, is the perfect tense of »εἶδω« and

¹ Hans Blumenberg, »Light as a Metaphor for Truth: At the Preliminary Stage of Philosophical Concept Formation«, in David Michael Levin (Ed.), *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, p. 31.

means literally »I have seen« and the noun » εἶδος » (means that which is seen, as well as form, shape, figure, class or kind.

Light as opposed to darkness and vision as opposed to blindness play a fundamental role in ancient religious thinking and experience: »[light] has certainly been one of the things in the physical environment of man which, from the earliest times we know of, has peculiarly impressed him and been most closely associated with his thoughts of the Divine«, says the theologian Edwyn Bevan in his work *Symbolism and Belief*.² »In all great religions of antiquity,« he notes, »the chief gods are characterized by their connexion with light«. ³ In Judaism, for example, »[l]ight in an extreme degree, splendour, is the normal characteristic of Divine manifestations«, ⁴ and in *The New Testament* we read that »God dwelleth in light which cannot be approached« (1 Tim. VI. 16). In the Nicene Creed (325) we find a fusion of platonizing themes with an ancient metaphoric of light: Christ is hailed as »Light from Light, true God from true God«. The association of the godhead with light and splendour seems to be ubiquitous; at any rate, it is a common Indo-European habit of thought as the Sanskrit word »deva« (derived from »to shine«) which becomes »deus« in Latin seems to indicate.⁵

In the present paper I shall discuss some features of ocularcentrism and some aspects of the critique of ocularcentrism analyzed and documented in Martin Jay's magisterial *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (1993) and in the essays in David Michael Levin's *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* (1993). Ocularcentrism is frequently regarded as a variety of logocentrism and as a form of essentialism: it can be regarded as an expression of the seemingly interminable search for secure foundations, a search that cannot but result in failure according to the poststructuralist and postmodernist critics of Enlightenment rationality.

Martin Jay's claim that »[d]isillusionment with the project of illumination [i.e. Enlightenment] is now so widespread that it has become the new conventional wisdom«⁶ seems to me to be correct, provided it is suitably qualified. For although the disillusionment with the Enlightenment and reason and the repudiation of universal standards of rationality is widespread, it is not universal. The anti-enlightenment stance dominates contemporary

² Edwyn Bevan, *Symbolism and Belief*, 1938, Fontana, London 1962, p. 111.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁵ M. Hiriyana, *Outlines of Indian Philosophy*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1932, pp. 31-2.

⁶ Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993, p. 592.

cultural studies and much literary theory and can also be found in much contemporary Anglo-Saxon and French sociology and philosophy. In the natural sciences and in many other areas of intellectual activity and research, this situation does not obtain. A majority of economists in the United States, for example, and I suspect also elsewhere, support so-called rational choice or public choice theories⁷ which have their roots in the utilitarian tradition, and are therefore firmly anchored within the rationalistic Enlightenment tradition.

The new conventional wisdom that Jay speaks of and which we encounter in cultural studies and in much contemporary social and humanistic thought, is open to serious objections on several accounts. Critics of Enlightenment thought are prone to embrace, implicitly or explicitly, relativistic doctrines which are deeply problematic, both theoretically and politically. I hasten to add that I am not objecting to relativism as such; there are, to be sure, a bewildering variety of positions that are considered relativist, not all of which are self-refuting or pernicious. The relativism of the so-called Edinburgh school is different from the relativism espoused by Joseph Margolis, Paul Feyerabend's relativistic philosophy of science is different from the standard postmodernist »constructivist« relativism, which again differs from the cultural relativism of many anthropologists. What I object to is the ease and sometimes also the naïveté with which cognitive relativism is accepted as a matter of course.

The critique of ocularcentrism is graphically expressed by Levin who claims that vision is »the most reifying of all our perceptual modalities«. There is, he claims, a »power drive inherent in vision«⁸ – an inherent drive toward domination and control over objects and persons, and a desire for total visibility and a complete overview of reality. The relevant question that needs to be asked (but which is seldom put) is: is this really true?, or, as Stephen Houlgate puts it in his contribution to Levin's book, »Vision, Reflection, and Openness«: »Is vision (and the mode of thinking which is modeled on vision) inherently oriented toward surveying and dominating objects?«⁹

I think that the anti-enlightenment critique, as it appears in Jay's work and in various essays in Levin's collection, overshoots the mark in certain fundamental respects. In particular I shall argue that the anti-ocularcentrists'

⁷ See *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, February 17, 1995, p. 15.

⁸ David Levin, *The Opening of Vision*, Routledge, New York 1988, p. 65.

⁹ Stephen Houlgate, »Vision, Reflection, and Openness: The 'Hegemony of Vision' from a Hegelian Point of View«, in *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 98.

appeal to Heidegger, whose thinking is hailed as a radical alternative to ocularcentrism and essentialism, is dubious.

To begin with I shall consider some aspects of Descartes's philosophy that betoken his modernity and his ocularcentrism. In the second section I shall discuss Heidegger's critique of modernity.

II

According to the traditional and somewhat self-congratulatory narrative, as recounted and criticized by Stephen Toulmin in his perceptive work, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (1990), the »twin founding pillars of modern thought« are modern science, with its first hero Isaac Newton and modern philosophy, initiated by René Descartes. Modern science and modern philosophy are thus considered to be paradigmatic examples of reason and rationality.¹⁰

If we wish to play the game of who-came-first we could easily think of other candidates for the title of founding father of modern philosophy: Francis Bacon, David Hume and Immanuel Kant spring to mind, but Descartes is as good a candidate as any. It is therefore not surprising that Descartes has become the favourite target of recent critiques of the Enlightenment, of rationalism and of scientism. Descartes's philosophy is also one of the main targets of Heidegger's deconstruction (*Abbau*) of Western metaphysics, while Cartesian foundationalism and dualism are similarly central to Rorty's critique of philosophy as a quasi-scientific enterprise aiming at mirroring nature. Wittgenstein's later philosophy is of course also decidedly anti-Cartesian and anti-foundationalist in intent.

» 'Cartesian perspectivalism'«, Martin Jays says, »may nicely serve as a shorthand way to characterize the dominant scopic regime of the modern era«. ¹¹ But if Descartes is an ocularcentric thinker, he is not ocularcentric in the way that the British empiricists are. Unlike Locke Descartes did not espouse a representative theory of perception and knowledge: he did not believe that our perception of the qualities of objects resembles the qualities of the objects perceived, nor did he think that words and signs resemble the things they signify (the view that the linguistic sign is arbitrary does not originate with de Saussure as is sometimes supposed). Sense perception in itself is

¹⁰ Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity*, The Free Press, New York 1990, p. ix.

¹¹ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, pp. 69-70.

neither the source nor the criterion of certainty and knowledge: »it is the mind which senses, not the body«, as Descartes puts it in his *Optics*.¹²

Cartesian dualism between mind and matter became influential, Jay argues, because of »its valorization of the disembodied eye ... shared by modern science and Albertian art«. ¹³ It justified and privileged the objective, and disembodied gaze at the expense of the active and embodied look.

What makes Descartes a modern thinker is not so much his ocularcentrism as his conception of thought and knowledge, or as Blumenberg points out: »The demand for the *presence* of the object under study is the point of departure for the modern idea of science, and in Bacon and Descartes, this demand is formulated in opposition to the validity of *auctoritas*«. ¹⁴ Instead it is the internalization of light and vision, the reliance on the eye of the mind and the stress on intellectual perception and conception as well as the rejection of tradition that weds Descartes with ocularcentrism. Jay distinguishes between two varieties of ocularcentrism: the »traditions of *speculation* with the eye of the mind and *observation* with the two eyes of the body«. ¹⁵ Descartes, being a rationalist, belongs to the first group whereas the British empiricists and the sensualists of the French Enlightenment belong to the second.

In his *Discourse on Method* Descartes formulates the principle which informs his philosophical project: »We ought never to allow ourselves to be persuaded of the truth of anything unless on the evidence of our reason.« ¹⁶ For Descartes the authority of tradition is the main source of error and folly: we should be sceptical of everything that is accepted on the authority of example and custom, he says. Descartes's outlook has been aptly summarized by Ernest Gellner: »it is individual reason versus collective culture. Truth can be secured only by stepping outside prejudice and accumulated custom, and refashioning one's world«. ¹⁷ Descartes's individualism, his anti-authoritarianism and his anti-traditionalism extend to all spheres of life, even to town-planning. In a Corbusieresque passage in the *Discourse on Method* he says that »ancient cities ... are usually but ill laid out compared with the regularly

¹² Quoted from Jay, p. 75.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹⁴ Blumenberg, »Light as a Metaphor for Truth«, p. 48.

¹⁵ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 29.

¹⁶ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff & D. Murdoch, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, part IV.

¹⁷ Ernest Gellner, *Reason and Culture: The Historic Role of Rationality and Rationalism*, Blackwell, London 1992, p. 8.

constructed towns which a professional architect has freely planned on an open plain«. ¹⁸

Descartes's problem, which he passed on to Hume and Kant, was how the human mind could arrive at justifiable and secure knowledge of the world from its own resources without relying on tradition and authority. ¹⁹ Descartes is something of a philosophical *Faust*, but he failed in his enterprise since he did not succeed in throwing off his scholastic baggage completely, but that is another story.

Descartes's starting point is universal doubt – theoretical doubt, if you like, since his doubt is hyperbolic – an intellectual and rhetorical device, since nobody in his or her senses can consistently live up to the standards of Cartesian doubt.

Descartes's celebrated *cogito ergo sum* was intended to provide a firm and indubitable ground for our knowledge of the world, thereby meeting the sceptical challenge. Descartes is after absolute, or, as he calls it, metaphysical certainty. His methodical doubt is expressed in the following manner in the second *Meditation (Mediationes de prima philosophiae)*: »I shall proceed by setting aside all that in which the least doubt could be supposed to exist, just as if I had discovered that it was absolutely false«. ²⁰ Descartes considers something metaphysically certain if it is impossible to conceive of any ground for doubt and if it is impossible to be deceived or mistaken about the truth of what one is certain about. The only thing that is metaphysically certain is one's own existence, for, according to Descartes, the statement »I doubt, but I do not exist«, is contradictory. One cannot, he claims, consistently deny one's own existence: it is metaphysically certain that the conscious, thinking subject exists. In *Principia Philosophiae* Descartes claims that »we cannot doubt our existence without existing while we doubt; and this is the first knowledge that we obtain when we philosophize in an orderly way«. ²¹

It should be borne in mind that Descartes's *cogito*, »I think« includes all conscious experience and not only what we normally would call thinking. It includes willing, understanding, imagining, and perceiving. Therefore we might just as well say »percipio, ergo sum« (I perceive, therefore I am), or, if we regard intentional actions as conscious in some sense, we might say »bibo, ergo sum« (I drink, therefore I am) to quote the student song.

¹⁸ Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, part II.

¹⁹ Cf. Gellner, *Reason and Culture*, ch. 1.

²⁰ *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. E. S. Haldane & G.R.T. Ross, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1972, vol. 1, p. 149.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 221.

Having established a firm ground for human knowledge, Descartes then formulates his famous criterion of truth: the criterion of clear and distinct ideas, which however appears to be presupposed in the *cogito-ergo-sum* proof. But the criterion of truth is reliable, it seems, only if it is guaranteed by the existence of a non-deceiving God and Descartes's ontological proof of the existence of God relies on the criterion of clear and distinct ideas, so »Descartes is in the impossible predicament of trying to hoist himself by his own bootstraps« as Norman Malcolm puts it.²²

A recurrent theme in epistemology since Descartes is that the foundation of knowledge is to be sought in subjective self-certainty. Within this epistemological tradition there is agreement concerning the principal task: to construct human knowledge out of the contents of consciousness. The disagreement concerns the exact nature of the elements of consciousness. The last and most consistent (and perhaps most heroic) off-shoot of this tradition was the logical positivism of the Vienna Circle, which attempted to construct the world out of sense-data, the postulated »atoms« of experience.

The presupposition or the grand premise of this epistemological tradition, viz. that the consciousness of the individual human subject is the natural point of departure for epistemology, is rejected by Hegelians, by Heidegger, by the later Wittgenstein and by the pragmatists in favour of a communal, collective and practical conception of the nature of human knowledge. A corollary of the rejection of the grand epistemological premise is the rejection of Cartesian and empiricist foundationalism, and by implication all varieties of ocularcentrism associated with rationalism and empiricism.

Cartesian rationalism can be interpreted as an existential response to a personal and cultural crisis. As Toulmin points out, Cartesian philosophy matured during an extremely turbulent and violent period in European history: the Thirty Years' War was ravaging the Continent, the major European powers, with the exception of the Netherlands, were suffering a severe economic depression and religious intolerance and persecution was on the increase.²³ The present-day rift between the two cultures, the scientific and technological culture and the humanistic and social culture is prefigured in the formation of modernity, Toulmin argues. »Modernity«, he claims, »had two distinct starting points, a humanistic one grounded in classical literature, and a scientific one rooted in 17th-century natural philosophy«. ²⁴ Galileo, Descartes and Newton represent the scientific tendency in modernity while

²² Norman Malcolm, *Wittgenstein: Nothing is Hidden*, Blackwell, Oxford 1986, p. 206.

²³ Cf. Toulmin, *Cosmopolis*, pp. 13 ff.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Erasmus, Rabelais, Shakespeare and Montaigne personify the other face of modernity. Needless to say, it was the scientific and rationalistic version of modernity that prevailed at the expense of the humanistic and sceptical variety. As a consequence, logic was favoured at the expense of rhetoric, the universal at the expense of the particular, the general at the expense of the local and the timeless at the expense of the transitory.²⁵ «The God-eye's view of reality» as opposed to the embodied subject's historically situated vision of reality and the disinterested and theoretical gaze as opposed to the interested and practical look could also be added to Toulmin's list.

III

Heidegger is often regarded, rightly or wrongly, as the most radical and consistent critic of Western metaphysics and Enlightenment rationality, whose most spectacular manifestation is modern science and technology. The critique of ocularcentrism is an integral part of Heidegger's critique of Western metaphysics, but, as Jay notes, Heidegger »was never simply hostile to vision *per se*, but only to the variant that had dominated Western metaphysics for millennia.«²⁶ David Levin argues in his essay, »Decline and Fall: Ocularcentrism in Heidegger's Reading of the History of Metaphysics« that Heidegger's thinking is *the* antidote to an oppressive and domineering ocularcentrism. Heidegger's thinking provides us with »a hermeneutical gaze that recollects the unconcealment of being«, he claims:

the »truthful« gaze is thus a gaze that would hold itself open to the interplay of the visible and the invisible, the present and the absent – an interplay that is also made visible as the gift of the ontological difference, opening up a field of illumination for the enactment of human vision.²⁷

Levin believes that Heidegger's thinking encourages »resistance to all forms of reification, totalization, and reductionism« and promotes »epistemological humility, a rigorously experimental attitude, always provisional, always questioning«.²⁸ In Levin's view Heidegger stands for »a consistent perspectivism, truth without certainty, the end of essentialism, an uncompro-

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 30-35.

²⁶ Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 275.

²⁷ David Michael Levin, »Decline and Fall: Ocularcentrism in Heidegger's Reading of the History of Metaphysics«, in Levin, *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision*, p. 212.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 190.

mising break with foundationalism, and a renunciation of the metaphysics of presence«. ²⁹

I wish to question Levin's assessment of Heidegger as a critic of modernity; I disagree in particular with his view that Heidegger's thinking is radically anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist. It is, of course, true that Heidegger is a fervent critic of modernity, but his critique, as I shall try to show, bears the stamp of the sinister background – both philosophical and political – against which it unfolds.

Firstly, I shall comment on Heidegger's alleged anti-essentialism. One thing is beyond doubt: Heidegger's texts, both the early and the late works, bristle with essentialist language. In his essay from 1938, »The Age of the World Picture« [»Die Zeit des Weltbildes«], an essay to which I shall return in a moment, Heidegger considers among other things the essence of modern science (das Wesen der neuzeitlichen Wissenschaft), which is an aspect of the essence of modernity (das Wesen der Neuzeit). Heidegger further declares that the essence of science is research and goes on to ask what the essence of research and what the essence of mathematics is (das Wesen der Forschung, das Wesen des Mathematischen). In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* [*Einführung in die Metaphysik*] from 1935 but not published until 1953), Heidegger even speaks of the essence of Being (Das Wesen des Seins) and characterizes the essence of spirit (das Wesen des Geistes) as »the originary and knowing attunement to and the determination for the essence of being«. ³⁰ Many more examples could be given. Some of Heidegger's writings even have the word »essence« in their titles: *On the Essence of Truth*, *On the Essence of the Ground* [*Vom Wesen der Wahrheit, Vom Wesen des Grundes*].

The frequent use of the word »essence«, however, is perhaps not conclusive, although it is significant. We must therefore consider how »essence« is actually used in Heidegger's work and scrutinize what he says about essences, a Herculean task that for obvious reasons cannot be undertaken here, so I shall have to confine myself to a few suggestions. It seems to me that Heidegger's whole way of philosophizing, both in the early and the late works, is informed by a quasi-platonic style of thinking. In the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, for example, Heidegger introduces the question of Being by citing a few examples of things that exist, of things he would call beings with a small b: a building (exists) *is*, there *is* a thunderstorm in the mountains, there *is* a

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ My transl. of the German original: »Geist ist ursprünglich gestimmte, wissende Entschlossenheit zum Wesen des Seins«, Martin Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 1935, 2nd ed., Niemeyer, Tübingen 1958, pp. 37-8.

gateway at the front of the Romanesque church, the state *is* something real, there *is* something in van Gogh's painting of a pair of peasant shoes.³¹ Heidegger then proceeds to ask what the Being of these beings is, assuming that there is something unitary hiding behind phenomena that »exist«, phenomena that »are«, namely the Being of beings or Being itself. It seems to me that Ernst Tugendhat, the renegade Heideggerian, is right in saying that Heidegger assumes that the different meanings and uses of the word »to be« are unitary, or, that they can be reduced to a unitary concept.³² This mode of reasoning, the postulation of »hidden« phenomena and processes from which the visible and tangible phenomena emanate as it were, is omnipresent in Heidegger's thinking. A spectacular example is Heidegger's introduction of »nothing« as a noun in the lecture *What is Metaphysics?* [*Was ist Metaphysik?*] (1929). Science, he says, investigates what is, in other words beings (Seiendes) and nothing else. He then immediately proceeds to ask the question what this nothing with a capital N is, and claims that the Nothing (das Nichts) is more fundamental than negation and our use of the words »no« and »not«.³³ Heidegger believes that the everyday use as well as the logical use of negation is possible only because of the Nothing. In other words, we can negate statements and say no only because of the Nothing. If this is not essentialism and Platonism, then nothing is!

As for Heidegger's alleged anti-foundationalism, I will confine myself to a short and arresting passage from *What is Metaphysics*, in which Heidegger claims that although science does not wish to have anything to do with the Nothing, science is in fact only possible because it is grounded in the Nothing. »Only because the Nothing is manifest is it possible for science to investigate beings«, Heidegger declares.³⁴ For Heidegger scientific inquiry is always founded on metaphysical presuppositions. Therefore I consider that is incorrect to regard him as a radical anti-foundationalist.

I now turn to Heidegger's critique of modernity as it is expressed in his essay »The Age of the World Picture« and in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*. Metaphysics, Heidegger says, provides the foundations for an age and confers upon it its essential *gestalt*, because metaphysics furnishes a particular

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

³² Ernst Tugendhat, *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die sprachanalytische Philosophie*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main 1976, p. 91.

³³ Martin Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?*, 1929, 9th ed., Klostermann, Frankfurt/Main 1965, pp. 26-8.

³⁴ My translation of the German original: »Nur weil das Nichts offenbar ist, kann die Wissenschaft das Seiende selbst zum Gegenstand der Untersuchung machen«, Martin Heidegger, *Was ist Metaphysik?*, p. 40.

interpretation of being and a specific conception of truth. Every phenomenon that is characteristic of an age is permeated by the metaphysical foundation of the age, Heidegger claims. According to Heidegger the following phenomena constitute the essential characteristics of the modern age: the dominance of natural science and technology; the aesthetization of art, that is, the fact that the work of art becomes an object of aesthetic experience and is viewed as an expression of human life; the fact that human action is interpreted in terms of culture and value and the »de-deification« (Entgötterung) of the world. All these phenomena contribute to the domination of the world as picture, by which he means that the world has become a picture, a representation, something reified which man can dispose of at will. The fact that the world has become a picture, a representation is an essential characteristic of modernity (Neuzeit). For Heidegger modernity is the latest stage in the history of the forgetfulness of Being that set in after the Pre-Socratic period in philosophy.

Basically, the same analysis is found in the *Introduction to Metaphysics*, but with stronger political and historicist overtones. European culture is decaying, Europe »lies in the giant pincers between Russia and America«, which from the metaphysical point of view are identical: the same »dismal rage of unchained technology« and the same »appalling organizing of the average man« (die bodenlose Organisation des Normalmenschen). Heidegger dreads the time when the whole world has been conquered technically and economically and when »every event is accessible at all times everywhere«. ³⁵ The darkening of the world (Weltverdüstörung) is in progress: the gods have fled, the earth is being exploited, the collectivization of man (Vermassung des Menschen) is proceeding and mediocrity is rife. ³⁶ The Germans are a metaphysical people, Heidegger says, and although Germany is surrounded by neighbours on all sides and is therefore in a vulnerable position, she can, Heidegger claims, become the source of the renewal of Europe, bringing Europe back into contact with the powers of Being. ³⁷ Levin no doubt has similar passages in mind to the ones I have paraphrased when he writes:

Heidegger might seem to be telling the very *same* story that so many reactionary thinkers in Europe had been telling and repeating since the closing years of the nineteenth century: a story which, let us say, begins in nostalgia and concludes with a condemnation of modernity. ³⁸

³⁵ Heidegger, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, pp. 28-9.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁸ Levin, »Decline and Fall«, p. 187.

Although Levin admits that there are, »some deep and profoundly disturbing affinities between Heidegger's account and the narratives in circulation among the forces of the German right«, he nevertheless believes that we can find hints of a new beginning which is very different from the ideals of Heidegger's conservative contemporaries or from the new beginning proclaimed by National Socialism.³⁹ I do not wish to enlarge on the so-called Heidegger affaire, which concerns the nature and extent of Heidegger's involvement with National Socialism, but a few comments may be in place since Heidegger's critique of modernity inevitably raises political and historical issues. The real question is not whether Heidegger had National Socialist sympathies (that question has been settled long ago); the real issue concerns the relationship between Heidegger's philosophy and the politics of National Socialism.⁴⁰ It seems to me that in some of his writings from the thirties Heidegger comes perilously near to identifying the »fate of being« and »the powers of Being« with the German revolution. Karl Löwith, Heidegger's one-time student and a philosopher and historian of ideas in his own right, recalls that after hearing Heidegger's notorious »Rektoratsrede« in 1933 he didn't know whether Heidegger meant that one should go home and read the pre-Socratics or that one should join the storm troops.⁴¹ Löwith also recalls that Heidegger concurred in Löwith's opinion that Heidegger's political commitment was founded on his philosophy and that Heidegger told him that his political intervention was based on his concept of historicity.⁴²

In Heidegger's writings after the war his invocations of Being are considerably more quietist. His pronouncements on Being assume an increasingly mystical, or should I say quasi-mystical, quality. The thinking of Being transcends both theoretical and practical thinking. It is purely a remembrance of Being and nothing else, it lets Being be, Heidegger says in his *Letter on Humanism* (1946) [*Brief über den Humanismus*]. This ordinary thinking is »an

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Heidegger's refusal after the war to disassociate himself unequivocally from the politics of the Nazi period and his persistent silence about the holocaust are surely relevant in this context. In the exchange of letters with Herbert Marcuse in 1947 Heidegger compares the fate of the Jews with the expulsion of Germans from the eastern territories awarded to Poland after the war. The philosopher of ontological difference was blind to some very real ontic differences. (See Bernd Martin, *Martin Heidegger und das »Dritte Reich«: Ein Kompendium*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 1989, p. 157.)

⁴¹ Rüdiger Safranski, *Ein Meister aus Deutschland: Heidegger und seine Zeit*, Hanser, München 1994, p. 292.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 371.

echo of the favour of Being«,⁴³ as Heidegger puts it and presumably can only be practised by the elect. Those of us who have not heard the call of the pathway in the Black Forest may be forgiven for thinking that Heidegger has abandoned rational thought and communicative rationality. The impression that Heidegger is attempting to express the unsayable in his works after *Time and Being* (*Sein und Zeit*) is strengthened by the fact that there has not been (and, as far as I can see, there cannot) be any real development of Heideggerian philosophy. Heideggerians are in the habit of producing more or less readable paraphrases of the master. In the final analysis Heidegger's thinking is religious. Heidegger's influence seems to be steadily decreasing in France and Germany, whereas he has a considerable following in America, arguably the most secularized country in the world. The non-confessional religious quality of his thinking may paradoxically help to explain his appeal in a world from which the gods have fled and where technoscience reigns supreme.

For the reasons indicated I cannot agree with Levin's appraisal of Heidegger as a critic of modernity and of ocularcentrism. I do not believe that Heidegger is a radical anti-essentialist and anti-foundationalist thinker, although his essentialism and foundationalism is admittedly somewhat outlandish.

The concept of theory, inherited from Greek philosophy, and the theoretical attitude is often made responsible for the prevalence of ocularcentrism in our culture. Theory implies generality in philosophy as well as in science. Heidegger is critical of the claims of both philosophical and scientific theory. Science does not think, science is not the revelation of truth, it can only attain »rightness« Heidegger says in his essay »What is thinking?« [*Was heißt Denken?*«]. To say that Heidegger is right in saying that science does not think, since only scientists think, is perhaps a petty response. Nevertheless such a response points to an important aspect of Heidegger's attitude toward science: his total disregard for differences and for specific cases.

I think there are some fundamental similarities between Heidegger's and Derrida's attitude toward science in spite of the fact that Derrida is no uncritical admirer of Heidegger's. Derrida's pronouncements on science and scientific thinking seem to me to be essentialist in some peculiar way. It may be naïve, or perverse (or both) to accuse Derrida of essentialism. The fact that there are many passages in his writings where he uses »essentialist« language is not in itself proof of essentialist thinking. Conversely, the absence of essen-

⁴³ »das anfängliche Denken ist der Wiederhall der Gunst des Seins«, *Was ist Metaphysik?*, p. 49.

tialist language is not conclusive evidence of the absence of essentialism. But what are we to make of the following striking passage from Derrida's work *Mémoires d'aveugle*, quoted and commented on in Jay's work:

If the eyes of all animals are destined for sight, and perhaps from there to the scopic knowledge of the *animale rationale*, only man knows how to go beyond seeing and knowing because he knows how to cry ... Only he knows that tears are the essence of the eye – and not sight ... Revelatory blindness, apocalyptic blindness, that which reveals the very truth of the eyes, this would be the gaze veiled by tears.⁴⁴

The quoted passage may strike us as poignant or pathetic as the case may be, but one thing at least seems to me to be clear: Derrida is making the valid point that eyes are not only for seeing and looking, they have an expressive potential that other sense-organs lack. It is surely significant that we cry with our eyes, and not, say with our noses or our ears. Nevertheless, the view that tears are the essence of the eye and that the gaze veiled by tears reveals the very truth of the eyes is puzzling. I think we should be grateful that our mathematicians and engineers are not struck by apocalyptic blindness while doing sums or when designing airplanes and computers, even if they thereby prove that they are using their eyes in a »scopic« and non-essential way.

A final point about Derrida and essentialism: in an interview in 1984 Derrida delineated the task of philosophy as follows:

Philosophy, as logocentrism, is present in every scientific discipline and the only justification for transforming philosophy into a specialized discipline is the necessity to render explicit and thematic the philosophical subtext in every discourse.⁴⁵

To render explicit the »philosophical subtext« in the sense of uncovering the hidden logical and non-logical presuppositions in various theories and discourses is in my view an important philosophical task, albeit not the only one. But Derrida actually says that the exposure of logocentrism is the *only* justification for philosophy. His view that logocentrism is present in every scientific discipline is a surprisingly general and unspecific claim. In what manner, we may ask, is logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence active in mathematics or palaeontology, in geology or quantum chemistry, in computer science or theoretical cosmology? Is it present in all the sciences in the

⁴⁴ Quoted from Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, p. 523.

⁴⁵ »Dialogue with Jacques Derrida« in R. Kearney, (Ed.), *Dialogues with Contemporary Continental Thinkers*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1984, p. 110.

same way, and if so, does it affect the validity and fruitfulness of the theories and the results achieved in those fields of scientific inquiry? Derrida's attitude seems to me somewhat high-handed, because I do not believe that these important questions can be answered without a systematic analysis of the methods and conceptual frameworks of specific sciences. Is there not more than a trace of essentialism in his thinking about science and does not the philosopher of *différance* display a remarkable disregard for the multifarious differences between the aims, methods and theories of different scientific disciplines? To ask what the purpose or the function of science is is like asking what the purpose and the function of art is. In both cases the answer is the same: they have many different purposes and functions and no general theory can do justice to the multiplicity of the sciences or the arts.

Wittgenstein, a very different philosopher of difference, who once told his seminar: »I'll teach you differences«, writes in the *Blue Book* that

Our craving for generality has another main source: our preoccupation with the method of science. I mean the method of reducing the explanation of natural phenomena to the smallest possible number of primitive natural laws; and, in mathematics, of unifying the treatment of different topics by using generalization. Philosophers constantly see the method of science before their eyes, and are irresistibly tempted to ask and answer questions in the way science does. This tendency is the real source of metaphysics, and leads the philosopher into complete darkness ... Instead of »craving for generality« I could also have said »the contemptuous attitude towards the particular case«. ⁴⁶

It would of course be ridiculous to suggest that Heidegger or Derrida were influenced by the methods of science, or that they »constantly see the method of science before their eyes«. But there is »a craving for generality« and a »contemptuous attitude toward the particular case« in their thinking, not because they adore scientific rationality, but because they are enamoured with a certain conception of philosophy as a *theoretical* enterprise, theoretical in the sense of providing a profound vision and an extensive interpretation of the world which is more fundamental and general than anything envisaged in everyday life or in science.

The critique of ocularcentrism aims at exposing the totalizing and generalizing nature of the modern, scientific, scopic regime. But if the critique itself is totalizing and if it relies on unwarranted generalizations it quite literally loses sight of its target.

⁴⁶ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, 1958, Blackwell, Oxford 1964, p. 18.