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Modernity

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The term *modern* and its derivatives are not new, and they are ambiguous in their meanings, especially if one considers the globe's competing worldviews and cosmologies. Whereas modernity has had for some time a positive connotation in the West, particularly among the more educated classes, the same cannot be said about the notion as understood in other parts of the world, where, until very recently in their long cultural histories, the cardinal virtues of social and intellectual life have always been stability, continuity, and predictability. The very notion that “change is natural and good,” accepted almost without reflection by many citizens of Western nations for the last several centuries, has been wholly repugnant, even inconceivable, to those billions of Asians and Africans who devoutly followed the doctrines of Confucius, Buddha, Hinduism, or Islam. The famous Chinese curse “May you live in interesting times” wryly captures this widespread human sentiment. This basic contradiction between worldviews, perhaps more than any other single factor, has sparked the repeated cultural and political conflicts among cultural zones of the world, where, in most other ways, life might have been viewed in similar, even sympathetic, terms. Thus, the concept of modernity is not of merely analytic or academic interest. Considered broadly, it contains one of the major keys toward understanding why geopolitical and cultural instability has become the standard condition of [p. 506 ↓] international affairs, particularly during the last two centuries. If static certitude characterized the ancient civilizations in Egypt, Persia, China, and India, dynamic shifts in actions and meanings identify “the way we live now” (to borrow Anthony Trollope's title from 1875).

The question of what exactly *modernity* means—when it began, how it has developed, where it leads—has perplexed intellectual historians for decades, if not centuries. A platitude holds that whatever is “modern” (“from the fifth century Latin term *modernus* which was used to distinguish a Christian present from a Roman, pagan past” [Smart 1990:17]) is always relative to any period of interest. For instance, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones* seemed to its readers stunningly “modern” in 1749, so much so that Edward Gibbon in his *Autobiography* (1794) claimed that this “exquisite picture of human manners” would outlast the mighty Austrian empire in significance. The unrivalled eleventh edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* argued in 1910 that “the methods of fiction have grown more sophisticated since his day...but the traces of *Tom Jones* are still discernible in most of our manlier modern fiction.” Now, though, the novel (and

famous filmed version) seems trapped in almost formulaic predictability, and as such bears the marks of an art form that is no longer in any ordinary sense “modern.”

Yet a purely relativistic viewpoint does not take one very far in understanding the concept, even if “that gallery of echoes called modern thought” (Durant 2001:24) proves to be entirely derivative rather than original in nature. There are indeed authoritative analyses, which over the years have proposed signposts on the road to (Western) modernity that still bear consideration, even after the ideological onslaught called “postmodernism.” John Herman Randall's beloved textbook, *The Making of the Modern Mind* (published in 1926 when he was 27), is one such standard interpretation. Whereas today even informed readers might cite 1500 as the earliest possible date for the origin of what is modern, Randall seconds Charles Homer Haskins's famous claim (*The Renaissance of the 12th Century*) that it began much earlier: “The chief pathfinder of this *via moderna*, William of Ockham [1300?–1349?], left his pupils in control not only in Oxford but in Paris itself, the former stronghold of the Thomists. The new modernism stood for a skeptical empiricism that completely demolished in the fourteenth century the great systems so carefully erected the century before. Gone were all the necessities of reason, all metaphysical entities and distinctions. *Nothing could be accounted real in nature that was not an observed fact or relation between facts. Experience was the only test of physical truth*” (Randall [1926]1976:211–12; emphasis added). It would seem that William of Ockham had anticipated the major premises of Francis Bacon's scientific method by 300 years and of Descartes's empirically based rationalist philosophy by 350. Moreover, his understanding of verifiable truth, often considered the hallmark of modern thinking, coincides with those common among Enlightenment *philosophes* 500 years after his death. During a time in Europe commonly thought to be trapped by the iron grip of Catholic orthodoxy, its two most important universities were home to viewpoints we would now see as distinctly modern.

In 1950, another celebrated historian of ideas, Crane Brinton, offered a subtler analysis of the transition from the medieval to the modern, which is closer to current verdicts than Randall's. For him modernity was first indicated by “an awareness of a shared newness, of a way of life different from that of one's forebears—and by 1700 awareness of a way of life felt by many to be much *better* than that of their forebears—this is in itself one of the clearest marks of our modern culture.” He understood that the relationship between the medieval and modern worldviews is distinguished only

with great difficulty, that “we cannot define *modern* neatly...we face the problem of disentangling *modern* from *medieval*.” Distinguishing one epoch from another simply reflects “our rhetorical habit of thinking” more than actual, demonstrable sociopolitical change: “The modern is not a sunrise ending the medieval night. The modern is not the child of the medieval, nor even the medieval grown to manhood” (p. 256). More precisely, Brinton believed that “the medieval view of life was altered into the eighteenth-century view of life. This eighteenth century view of life, though modified in the last two centuries, is still at bottom *our* view of life, especially in the United States. The late fifteenth, the sixteenth, and the seventeenth centuries are from this point of view essentially *transitional*, essentially the years of preparation for the Enlightenment” (pp. 258–9). Though often voiced with less conviction, this has become the more or less standard view among social theorists and other intellectual historians in the half century since Brinton wrote.

In 1923, Virginia Woolf ([1923]1984) famously observed, “I will hazard a second assertion, which is more disputable perhaps, to the effect that on or about December, 1910, human character changed.... And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature. Let us agree to place one of these changes about the year 1910” (pp. 194–5). From an entirely different cultural tradition, Theodor Adorno anointed 1850 as the beginning of the modern period, at least for the things he cared and knew the most about: Western literature, music, philosophy, and the social theories that sprang up to interpret them during the midtwentieth century. More provocatively, Oscar Wilde had argued in 1891 that “[p]ure modernity of form is always somewhat vulgarising. It cannot help being so. The public imagine that, because they are interested in their immediate surroundings, Art should be interested in them also, and should take them as her subject-matter. But the mere fact [p. 507 ↓] that they are interested in these things makes them unsuitable subjects for Art.... Modernity of form and modernity of subject matter are entirely and absolutely wrong” (pp. 18–19). Less flamboyantly and more rigorously grounded, the contemporary historian Paul Johnson (1991) decides in his weighty treatment, *The Birth of the Modern*, that “[m]odernity was conceived in the 1780s” (p. xvii). He then illustrates to his own satisfaction that 1815 through 1830 were the pivotal years, at least in the West, during which time the idea of modernity lost its purely theoretical quality and succeeded in transforming an encyclopedic range of social and political

practices. Another trustworthy historian not long before had observed that “a case can be made for calling the seventeenth century the first ‘modern’ century, ushering in the new Modern Age, that in certain respects has still not run its course. The grounds for giving the seventeenth century a modern label are partly psychological, namely that during those years educated people in increasing numbers began to think of themselves consciously as ‘Moderns,’ as distinguished from ‘Ancients’ (Baum 1977:27). Seconding this judgment, John Crowe Ransom (1984) held that even “Milton felt the impact of modernity which is perennial in every generation; or, if it is not, of the rather handsome degree of modernity which was current in his day” (p. 70), that is, between 1608 and 1674.

Less dramatic but more precise than all such postulations, the indispensable *Oxford English Dictionary* claims that the word itself is pronounced “moden,” without an *r*, and that it originates from *modo* (“just now”), and by analogy from the Latin, *hodiernus*, in turn from *hodie* (“today”). Hakewill wrote in the dictionary in 1635, “Yea but I vilifie the present times, you say, whiles I expect a flourishing State to succeed; bee it so, yet this is not to vilifie modernity, as you pretend,” the first identified instance of its use in this way. Historians claim that the onset of “the modern period,” at least in the Occident, may have begun in 1455 when Gutenberg printed his Bible and a flood of books shortly engulfed the literate world; it may have begun with the projection technique of mapmaking created by Gerardus Mercator in 1569, or the equally important invention of the maritime chronometer in 1735 by John “Longitude” Harrison, making long sea journeys less dangerous; perhaps it began when North and South America were stumbled upon by European navigators in the late sixteenth century; or modernity may have been inaugurated with the discovery of certain fundamental medical facts, like William Harvey's analysis of the circulatory system in 1628.

Another common argument holds that Descartes established modernity for the intellectual class in 1641 when he published his treatise on epistemology and was firmly anchored by the time Kant offered his revolutionary *Critique of Pure Reason* to the learned world in 1785. Equally plausible, historians of science would claim that modernity in its most profound sense grew out of advances in technical practices and theorizing beginning with the astronomical pronouncements of Copernicus (1514), Kepler (1596), and Galileo (1632), or the general “scientific method” as laid out by Bacon in 1605. As Hegel ([1840]1995) put it, “What Cicero said of Socrates may be said

of Bacon, that he brought Philosophy down to the world, to the homes and everyday lives of men” (p. 175).

Among literary scholars, “modernism” (which is not necessarily synonymous with either “modern” or “modernity,” nor surely “modernization”) can be dated by the poems of Baudelaire (1857) and Rimbaud (1870), the writings of Ezra Pound prior to the Great War, the first novels of James Joyce (1910–1922), or the journal *Blast*, edited by Wyndham Lewis just following the First World War. Naturally, historians of photography, film, music, dance, and all the other arts can pinpoint when modernity began for them and their particular mode of expression, and none of them would agree, of course. Alternatively, military historians might hold that the first “modern” wars occurred during the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when new and unprecedentedly ferocious weapons were initially fielded (high explosives, 70-mile range artillery, the machine gun, the battleship, poison gas, the tank, and so on).

Thus, as we have now seen, both scholars and the literati have tried to summarize the multivalent phenomenon of modernity for at least two centuries. Many of their conclusions, taken in the round, have been concisely restated by Richard Tarnas (1991) in a widely read popularization, where he summarizes the entire process: “And so between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the West saw the emergence of a newly self-conscious and autonomous human being—curious about the world, confident in his own judgments, skeptical of orthodoxies, rebellious against authority, responsible for his own beliefs and actions, enamored of the classical past but even more committed to a greater future, proud of his humanity, conscious of his distinctness from nature, aware of his artistic powers as individual creator, assured of his intellectual capacity to comprehend and control nature, and altogether less dependent on an omnipotent God. The emergence of the modern mind, rooted in the rebellion against the medieval Church and the ancient authorities, and yet dependent upon and developing from both these matrices... established the more individualistic, skeptical, and secular spirit of the modern age. Out of that profound cultural transformation, science emerged as the West's new faith” (p. 282). For Tarnas, there are eight (partially redundant) foundational beliefs and practices that created the modern world, including (1) the godless impersonality of the universe, i.e., *deus absconditus*, (2) secular materialism triumphing over sacred spiritualism (3) science's victory over religion, (4) the struggle between subjective mind and objective world and the desirability of nature being

dominated by humankind, (5) irrational emotionality held to be inferior to [p. 508 ↓] rational control (“the modern cosmos was now comprehensible in principle by man's rational and empirical faculties alone, while other aspects of human nature—emotional, aesthetic, ethical, volitional, relational, imaginative, epiphanic—were generally regarded as irrelevant or distortional for an objective understanding of the world”; p. 287), (6) the conviction that our mechanistic universe lacks “deeper” meaning, (7) the amoral, natural, evolutionary theory displaced ethics, and (8) a secular utopia via the domination of nature became preferable to a supernatural afterlife (pp. 282–90). Though one could quibble whether these are exhaustive, Tarnas has surely found the largest themes of a purely intellectual nature as the medieval became the modern over time. What he did not treat, of course, are the sheerly demographic, sociopolitical, or military causatives that also fed into this overheated cultural pot during the last several centuries.

All that said, though, it is nonetheless difficult now for us to determine exactly what constituted modernity for Hakewill in 1635, yet following his inauguration of the term, a great many thinkers and artists have chimed in with their own thoughts on the matter. Hegel surely deserves a hearing, since his ideas influenced nearly every subsequent social theorist and philosopher who discussed the issue, either as followers of his ideas or as repudiators. Habermas's (1987) opinion is typical: “Hegel was the first philosopher to develop a clear concept of modernity” (p. 4). Hegel's (1995) least ambiguous statements appear in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* delivered in Berlin during the 1820s. Here modernity is characterized as “the opposition between thought and Being, the comprehending of whose unity from this time forward constitutes the interest of all philosophies. Here thought is more independent, and thus we now abandon its unity with theology.” More generally, “All that is speculative is pared and smoothed down in order to bring it under experience” (pp. 160, 162). Along with nearly everybody writing since, he holds that “with Descartes, the philosophy of modern times as abstract thought properly speaking begins” (p. 166). More important, particularly as his ideas influenced Marx and many others, is the closely paired sociological observation that “no one can suffice for himself; he must seek to act in connection with others. The modern world is this essential power of connection, and it implies the fact that it is clearly necessary for the individual to enter into these relations of external existence; only a common mode of existence is possible in any calling or condition” (p. 169). For Hegel, then, modernity means not only severing ties with theology and giving

Descartes credit for opening the rationalist escape from mythologized thinking. It also includes embracing one's role as a Burger—a citizen or bourgeois member of society—because postfeudal social relations (meaning a *relatively* unconstrained give and take) had finally become possible in parts of Europe and North America. The need for “connection with others” and a “common mode of existence” illustrates Hegel's vital point that for the first time in Western history (except for a brief moment in Athens), people could speak to each other as political equals in what came to be called “the public sphere.” Not only could they do so, but increasingly they were expected to do so as part of the “social contract.” This development in citizen participation, along with the possession of private property, both under a published code of rights (for adult males, at least), became the political foundation on which modernity rested.

Yet there are many other ways to understand the meaning of modernity, viewed either as a great collective achievement or as an ambivalent, even dangerous, experiment in Western hubris. A hint of this nagging worry about its “ultimate meaning” is apparent in Kristeva's (1981) remark: “Modernity is characterized as the first epoch in human history in which human beings attempt to live without religion” (p. 33). While hardly any longer intellectually surprising—and also an exaggeration empirically speaking—such a realization continues existentially to bother many denizens of the modern period, since ethically correct behavior can no longer be tied to doctrinal directives in the way it is imagined to have been done during the Middle Ages. To move through life with nothing more concrete for guidance than so-called situational ethics is a frightening, even debilitating, prospect for many people—which is perhaps why Kristeva writes “*attempt to live without religion,*” as if doing so altogether has not been an entirely successful enterprise.

Perhaps the most thoroughgoing and profound sense of despair at the cost modernity has wrung from the certainties of religiosity was voiced by Kierkegaard (1967–1978) in the 1840s. His critique of “the modern temper” is brittle and brilliant: “In contrast to what was said about possession in the Middle Ages and times like that, that there were individuals who sold themselves to the devil, I have an urge to write a book: *Possession and Obsession in Modern Times*, and show how people *en masse* abandon themselves to it, how it is now carried on *en masse*. This is why people run together in flocks—so that natural and animal rage will grip a person, so that he feels stimulated, inflamed and *ausser sich*” [beside himself] (1968: vol. 4:4178). Not only did Kierkegaard find

reprehensible the manic conformity and mob behavior typical of his era, but he also saw in these new developments a generalized abdication from moral autonomy and that strong sense of self with which his father's Pietism had inculcated him as a boy, and from which he never really escaped. His most famous diatribes against modernity as he witnessed it appear in *The Present Age* ([1846]1978), a long review-essay that wandered far from its assignment: "The present age is essentially a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudently relaxing [p. 509 ↓] in indolence" (p. 63). On one hand, he found modern times to be a sad era of collective manias and animal thoughtlessness, yet on the other, he bridled at the smug, passionless dullards who constituted the Danish bourgeoisie among whom he lived. Both ailments of the soul, he thought, were due to a lack of scruples and enough resolution to live by them. He also earned permanent obloquy from the liberal mindset when he blasted equality as a pointless societal goal and one that would inevitably lead to individual slavery at the behest of social organization: "The dialectic of the present age is oriented to equality, and its most logical implementation, albeit abortive, is leveling, the negative unity of the negative mutual reciprocity of individuals (p. 79).

Kierkegaard's denunciation of modernity, in style and substance, did not begin with him nor end with his death in 1855. A very recent example, somewhat less florid and impassioned but similar in tone, comes from John Lukacs (2002), an American historian. Proclaiming "It's the End of the Modern Age," Lukacs states that "the widespread usage and application of the adjective to life and art, such as 'modern woman,' 'modern design,' 'modern architecture,' 'modern art,' and so on, appeared mostly in the 1895–1925 period" (p. B11). He further believes that a series of readily identifiable periods and the qualities that made each distinctive from the others have exhausted themselves. He explains: "During these past 10 years (not *fin de siècle: fin d'une ère*), my conviction hardened further, into an unquestioning belief not only that the entire age, and the civilization to which I have belonged, are passing but that we are living through—if not already beyond—its very end. I am writing about the so-called Modern Age." Historians as much as social theorists enjoy pontificating about "the end of" this and the "origin of" that, yet Lukacs's argument cannot easily be dismissed. In his view, "the Modern Age (or at least its two centuries before 1914)" ought to be thought of principally as "the Bourgeois Age," which he describes as follows: "[It] was

the Age of the State; the Age of Money; the Age of Industry; the Age of the Cities; the Age of Privacy; the Age of the Family; the Age of Schooling; the Age of the Book; the Age of Representation; the Age of Science; and the age of an evolving historical consciousness. Except for the last two, all of those primacies are now fading and declining fast” (pp. B7, B8, B11). Sentiments such as these might be interpreted as the disillusioned swan song of an elderly student of cultural change, yet Lukacs is hardly alone in believing that globalized consciousness, economics, and militarization have rendered what he calls “the Bourgeois Age” permanently irrelevant to the human future, particularly in the richer countries.

Of course, postmodernists—from whom Lukacs distances himself—have been arguing a similar position for at least 25 years. The most famous among this disparate group, Jean-Francois Lyotard (1984), gives his versions of why “modernity” is over and a new social formation is in place, and he does it by contrasting his view with that of his archrival: “Jürgen Habermas thinks that if modernity has failed, it is in allowing the totality of life to be splintered into independent specialties which are left to the narrow competence of experts, while the concrete individual experiences ‘desublimated meaning’ and ‘destructured form,’ not as a liberation but in the mode of that immense *ennui* which Baudelaire described over a century ago (p. 72). The heated debate between Habermas and his French adversaries about the political meaning of the postmodernist credo is complex, but the gist revolves around the former's continued faith in the Enlightenment, in reasoned action and communication, and in a neo-Kantian ethics predicated on individual autonomy and resistance to prepackaged ethical formulae, spoonfed to citizens through mass media. For the postmodernists, the rational horse is out of the behavioral barn, and it makes no sense to call out for its return. As Lyotard put it: “Is the aim of the project of modernity the constitution of sociocultural unity within which all the elements of daily life and of thought would take their places as in an organic whole? or does the passage that has to be charted between heterogeneous language games—those of cognition, of ethics, of politics—belong to a different order from that? ... Modernity, in whatever age it appears, cannot exist without a shattering of belief and without discovery of the ‘lack of reality’ of reality, together with the invention of other realities” (pp. 72–73, 77). It is these “other realities,” of course, that are of primary interest to Lyotard, but which Habermas finds politically debilitating, even irresponsible. It is troubling, to say the least, that a major

philosopher of cultural change should apparently praise a reality that “lacks reality,” even if one is clear on his intended meaning. For modernity, as Tarnas pointed out above, rests first of all on a social agent who can readily distinguish what is “empirically” real (e.g., political/economic interests) from what is unreal (e.g., supernatural beliefs and yearnings). When the “border lands” (a favorite postmodernist metaphor) become blurred between the real and unreal, the true and false, the past and future, then social action of a responsible type—the Enlightenment style that Hegel, Marx, or Habermas would appreciate—becomes extremely difficult to manage. Perhaps this is the gist of what has been said lately by Lyotard, Derrida, and others who think similarly.

Not since the Second World War has a French/German intellectual and cultural split been so keen and obvious in its ramifications as in this case. And because of the fireworks involved, it has drawn widespread attention. Recently, one noted British political theorist, Alan Ryan (2003), had this to say: “Habermas’s wish for a ‘modern’ Germany brings us to the point at which his politics and his philosophy meet. Habermas’s political views are, viewed from a sufficient distance, quite simple, though in close-up [p. 510 ↓] they are anything but. He is—and this is why the comparison with Dewey is inescapable—a theorist of ‘modernity’ in shorthand, that means he thinks that the modern social and political world is fated to operate without philosophical or religious reassurance, that there can be no transcendental guarantees that what we take to be true, good, beautiful, and just really are so. To philosophers like Heidegger, the absence of transcendental guarantees was a source of anguish. To Dewey, it was just a fact about the world” (p. 46). By working Dewey into the equation, Ryan manages to hint at a possible “solution” to the dilemma posed by the modern era. If religious anchors to morally correct action have been lost to the heavy seas of modernist thought and the sometimes dreadful historical events to which they helped give rise, one can either retreat nostalgically to some form of ersatz religiosity or can accept the foundationless condition of secular life, much as Voltaire did, and bravely carry on, free of any illusions. Except, perhaps, for the singular and essential illusion that one can indeed persevere without the aid of transcendental guarantees. Mark Lilla (2002) recently captured this set of phenomena succinctly: “Throughout the nineteenth century, Hegel had been understood, correctly or not, as having discovered a rational process in world history that would culminate in the modern bureaucratic state, bourgeois civil society, a Protestant civil religion, a capitalist economy, technological advances, and, of

course, Hegel's own philosophy. This was the prophecy, and when it was first distilled from Hegel's works it was welcomed throughout Germany. As the prophecy approached fulfillment near the end of the nineteenth century, horror set in and a deep cultural reaction followed. Expressionism, antimodernism, primitivism, irrationalism, fascination with myth and the occult—a Pandora's box of movements and tendencies was opened. The horror was genuine: if Hegel and his epigones were right, the whole of human experience had been explained rationally and historically, anesthetizing the human spirit and foreclosing the experience of anything genuinely new, personal or sacred. It meant in Max Weber's chilling phrase, 'the disenchantment of the world'" (p. 61).

The conviction that modernity, despite all its patent advantages over the medieval, necessarily brought with it an intimidating, fearsome prospect for humanity's future, was first detailed by a social theorist in 1887. In that year Ferdinand Tönnies published *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft*, a highly influential tract that caused Durkheim to push theorizing in precisely the opposite direction as hard as he could—celebrating rather than disparaging major social change in his time. Simultaneously, it also motivated Weber to word carefully his reflections about the process leading to what Lilla called "disenchantment," a loose translation of *Entzauberung*: the removal of magic from the world. Tönnies moved from his native German village to Berlin and back, and during this hegira he experienced the same urban anomie that Durkheim had identified while studying suicide from his position in France. Tönnies ([1887]2001) summarizes his theory: "The theory of *Gesellschaft* takes as its starting point a group of people who, as in *Gemeinschaft*, live peacefully alongside one another, but in this case without being essentially united—indeed, on the contrary, they are essentially detached. In *Gemeinschaft* they stay together in spite of everything that separates them; in *Gesellschaft* they remain separate in spite of everything that unites them. As a result, there are no activities taking place which are derived from an *a priori* and predetermined unity and which therefore express the will and spirit of this unity through any individual who performs them. Nothing happens in *Gesellschaft* that is more important for the individual's wider group than it is for himself. On the contrary, everyone is out for himself alone and living in a state of tension against everyone else" (p. 52). This brilliant and bitter denunciation of contemporary urban life served as a backbone to twentieth-century social thought, even if unattributed to its author. Virtually every subsequent

theorist assumed the essential validity of this viewpoint, even as they altered its terminology to suit their own purposes.

Yet there were strong voices of dissent, most notably Georg Simmel's. For him (as for Marx, for whom the bucolic life was the preserve of society's least intelligent members), urbanity opened salutary opportunities for thought and action that had been previously unimagined. And the money economy, vilified by Marx and many others on the Left, Simmel also understood to be a motor of endless change, experimentation, and a generalized enlargement of social possibility. He was perfectly aware of its dangers to the social fabric and wrote perceptively about the condition of urban poverty amidst great wealth. Nevertheless, on balance, Simmel thought that modernity brought with it freedom from any number of shackles, social and intellectual, and was therefore to be embraced, not repelled. Moreover, he believed (as did Weber) that wishing for a nostalgic return to *Gemeinschaft* would accomplish little, since the forces of rationalization, once unleashed, could never again be contained. As Simmel (1971) put it, in his inimitably speculative style: "The dynamic vital character of the modern life-feeling, and the fact that it is manifest to us as a form of vital *movement*, consumed in a continuous flux in spite of all persistence and faithfulness, and adhering to a rhythm that is always new—this runs counter to the Greek's sense of substance and its eternal outline. The great task of modern man—to comprehend the eternal as something which immediately dwells within the transient, without its having to forfeit anything for being transplanted from the transcendental to the earthly plane—is alien to him [the Greek] through and through." For Simmel, the key difference between Greek and modern thinking is that "the former involves a much slighter theoretical awareness of the creativity of the soul." [p. 511 ↓] And in summary, "[T]he great problem of the modern spirit comes forward here as well: to find a place for everything which transcends the givenness of vital phenomena within those phenomena themselves, instead of transposing it to a spatial beyond (pp. 238, 243).

In short, modernity offers boundless chances for humans to create and re-create their environments and themselves; it also makes available, as Goethe's Faust learned 200 years ago, an equal likelihood for catastrophe, for the individual in their most private moments, as well as the megalopolis wherein they struggle to survive.

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See also

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