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Ethics,
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Prelude

I have been directed a number of questions concerning my work in recent years on aesthetics, ethics and *Technik*... technology, and the very question where I'm heading to, or, rather, where my work is leading me towards. These questions, yet unresolved, and perhaps unresolvable in the near future, will accompany me in the flux of my work lying ahead.

Part I **The Question of Labor**

Having said that, in retrospect, over a time spent covering the last thirty-five years and starting with my student years at this university, one of the salient themes, sometimes receding to the background and other times coming to the fore, but which was always 'there,' has been the question of 'labor' and the very modes in which the question of labor has been treated in theoretical discourses. Expectedly, it was initially carried out under the shadow of classical political economy, viz, the treatment of basically the 'labor-power' by Ricardo, Marx as well as others, pro and con. In the late seventies, my encounter with the post-humously published - and largely neglected - work, *Ontology* by Lukács and particularly the chapter on labor was quite momentous. It sort of opened up new venues for me in approaching the question of labor towards which my work always gravitated in the end. For Lukács, the issue was essentially bursting open the confines of the technisistic understanding of classical political economy and, especially, the arbitrary division made between mental and manual labor. Having come to grips with Lukács's interesting dialogue with Aristotle's treatment of labor buried in those passages in *Metaphysics* and the two essential moments which constituted labor in a contradictory fashion right in the heart of his certain brief passages, namely, the very unity of the opposites of 'teleological positings' and 'causal chains' was nearly a revelation. Since then my work has been very much revolving around this question. Having encountered Aristotle, having

closely read him, as well as such other important figures of human thinking as Heidegger, Gadamer, Alfred Sohn-Rethel upon whose shoulders we want to raise ourselves, it seemed to me and still appears that this question cannot easily be dismissed. Our old notions of concerning labor-power have to be discussed in a new way, and I have arrived at the temporary conclusion that, even in this country, Turkey which has always been part of the Western metaphysics and where the same galaxy of thinking is collapsing, perhaps we have to indeed make another detour via the ancients, notably through the work of Aristotle.

Part II

Labor of Love

That is in a sense the balance sheet of my work so far. I feel certainly very blessed for the fact that the last fifteen years or so, my studies have displayed, at least in my eyes, a kind of **labor of love**. I really love this topic which took me into new directions such as aesthetics, techno-scientific setup of the modern world, and finally the question of ethics, ethical precepts, their practicality. I'm very glad that love's labor has not been lost, and I hope it will be that way in the future as well.

However the question is that, especially concerning the labor-power today, we cannot avoid rethinking this issue - call it immaterial labor or not, choose whatever wording you do -, and it still seems to me that we have to force the confines of the post-Galilean-Cartesian thinking which has taken its toll upon our conceptions about this founding atom of social which has to be understood not in the sense of historiography [*Historie*] which is a neatly drawn, clear cut, logical way of thinking, but rather as history [*Geschichte*] i.e. in the sense of 'story,' almost a saga of the human-animal who dwells within language and who falsely thinks he is in command of language in setting up his goals and trying to find the causal chains to realize those goals. Yet, on the other hand, thanks to his dispersion within the very language, he is actually a gateway to the decentered world of language.

Everybody knows the famous dictum by Heidegger ``where the world, there the work or vice-versa" [*Wo Welt, da Werk_und umgekehrt*]. This is indeed true. We are born into language, and the sounds given 'synthetic' conventional meanings (Aristotle: *De interpretatione*), be it in ancient Greek, medieval Arabic, or Latin, or any of the natural languages as well as the artificial ones in our contemporary world, we - or our *Dasein* as they call it - are, in a sense, very much dispersed within language. We also have to re-question the kind of the causality in which we are habituated to work. It seems to me that especially Aristotle was quite

realistic about it and the Islamic philosophers who discuss these matters largely thought in the same way. Hence the detour I already mentioned earlier may lead us to new openings to evade the *cul-de-sacs* of the present binary thinking about the question of labor has lead us into so far.

Part III

Brave New World of Technology

We presently live largely in a world of artifices. It is almost the second nature to us. Yet, in spite of our wills to power, our strugglings for a large variety of goals, this situation takes its own toll. It has its own flux. It is also an entirely new kind of *phúsis*, and I'm using the word *phúsis* not in the sense of a framed nature [usually taken as an object to be studied, known and finally manipulated], but as the generic name for the overall process in which things move, are generated, die away, pass into other things, etc. Probably our detour will help us very much in our thinking, for its being on more realistic grounds as to the human makings and actions—be it in aesthetic works, art, which can be understood not in a techno-scientific sense or the bourgeois subjectivity presently in the wane, but in the original sense of the Greek *téchñe* (τέχνη; *tékhne*), or *sana 'a* in Arabic.

One of the salient points we should not miss with respect to the 18th century questions concerning human labor, was that it was taken as a 'force,' a power, *Kraft*, no longer as a *dúnamis*. In fact, even in Marx, such usages as *Arbeitsvermögen* and *Arbeitskraft* have to be closely studied. It also reminds one of Kant's famous *Erkenntnisvermögen* - those abilities, potentialities such as the so-translated 'cognitive faculties' [of the 'mind'] which may not actually be realized, yet may come to pass. Essentially this aspect of labor, *Vermögen*, i.e. the 'abilities' is much closer to the Greek *dúnamis*. Obviously, with respect to the development of capitalist industry, rise of a new world order—or alternatively disorder—this shift of emphasis was indicative of a newer conception of labor power.

Having emphasized the important difference between Greek *dúnamis* and the post-Cartesian 'power' (*Kraft*), on the one hand, and given the artificiality of a forced division between mental and manual labor, an artificiality proven every passing day e.g. by the leveling off the labor of 'office workers' in our contemporary world, we have to inevitably land on the parallel question of another arbitrary division between the 'body' and the 'soul' especially given the profound repercussions such artificiality for human psyche and questions of morality. Here, I share the fundamental insight by scholars like Gadamer that, "soul is the living power of body," an insight which was already there in

Aristotle's texts, for example. One difficulty which arises with our new approaches to this gravitational point, i.e. labor and labor-power, lies with what kinds of human activity should be understood as labor again. Here, we might fall into the trap of seeing every human activity in terms of the attainment of goals as a kind of labor. It seems to me that Aristotle is again quite realistic, and provides us with clues as to possible new research directions, new ways of reflection about the existential problem of humanity today. Without providing any solution, I can perhaps point out a number of things, Aristotle, for instance, talks about the genesis of things. Certain things are generated according to their own *phúsis* (and here *phúsis* is, not anything which is enframed and treated as a an object) but the very nature of the things as they evolve, coming into being and passing away. Here, it seems to me that the fundamental attributes of human activities, divided basically into two, under the rubric of *lógos* (which, in turn, cannot be taken as reason as we understand it today but rather as a kind of 'gathering' of things according to their *phúsis*). The division between what Aristotle calls *poíesis* (making, affecting something) where the *télos* (the goal) is 'outside' the body and the *praxis* where the goal concerns the very psyche (*psuché*) of the body is of fundamental importance. Here I would like to, for instance, quote from Gadamer, who returns to this point when he talks about, for instance, *phronésis* as an important attribute of practical life and which is a fundamentally important constituent for political life. Gadamer writes:

For Aristotle considered *phronésis*, is a sedimented reason in language. Not only as the clever, skillful discovery of means for meeting specific tasks, not only as an awareness of what is practical of how to realize incidental goals, but also as the sense for setting the goals themselves and taking responsibility for them.

I underline the word 'responsibility,' because it really is very closely related to the question of ethics.

Part IV

Questioning Ethics and Morality

Throughout the trajectory of my own studies, I deliberately refrained from writing on ethical questions and later their relationship with aesthetics, because in our contemporary world, in the subjectivized realm of aesthetics, quite an emphasis is upon this realm as a mainstay of bourgeois subjectivity's 'taste'. We demand too much from the 'aesthetic.' We expect from it some sort of moral bearing, even moral duty, which it cannot fulfill. Today aesthetics has essentially been assigned the task of providing humanity with things by which they change

their personal ethical life, and as epitomized by the oft quoted line of a poem by Rilke “You must change your life”. It seems to me that it is fundamentally unattainable, and the proliferation of ethical ‘precepts’ during the recent decades - now we talk about sports ethics, business ethics, whatever - is rather a symptom of perhaps the lack of something in a world, conveniently described as being abandoned by the gods. A world where, in fact, ‘twilight of idols (or “Overthrowing idols=Ideals”)) has already taken place. That, quite naturally according to the *phúsis* of my work as a flux, has overtaken my own will-to-power and has led me finally to write something about this relation. Once again, a detour via the Ancient ‘ancestors’ of Western metaphysics can provide us with certain clues, pointers, but not solutions. For instance, personal character/morality (*ēthos*), unlike the bourgeois morality which we all-too-easily take for granted and with which we are often equipped as well as on the basis of which we sermonize, was of an alien thing for people like Aristotle who would probably have drawn a blank face if you talked about the questions of morality with him. *Ethos* was simply the habituation of an *ethnos* in a world of self-sufficient farmers, small scale production. Any individual, any member of the *ethnos*, the tribe, the people who speak the same language is in continuity with the traditions (*ethos*) of his *ethnos* in his character (*ēthos*). It is no wonder that, what distinguishes the human-animal (and human-animal is literally an animal in the eyes of Aristotle) from other animals is not that he is a gregarious one, for there are other animals which are gregarious, but that it dwells in language. His adobe is language, hence the relevance of the saying ‘*zōion lōgon êchon*’ in Aristotle’s parlance. In that world, somebody’s character, morality was a natural continuation of one’s habitation in the norms, values, customs, traditions of his own folk. In his famous *Nicomachean Ethics*, in fact, Aristotle points out the fact that with a [slight] change, the word *ethos* simply becomes *ēthos* [a person’s character].

Now the question relevant to our day is, unlike such a closely knit, cohesive - which was in any case an ideal case even for Greeks - we [today] live on fault lines. How are we [then] going to live by ethical precepts? This is an impasse. Many of the ethical precepts which we often unthinkingly distribute around through various means of techno-scientific establishment (e.g. mass-media) are basically serving very practical ends, how today’s superpowers, present empire systems conduct business, in the murky waters of *Realpolitik*, being the most prominent example. Again, the Greeks, and other ancient peoples were quite realistic in this respect [as well]. Obviously a forced Victorian morality was alien to them. They lived under conditions of constant warfare; even those who speak the same language, so to speak, were at cutthroats with each other, and hence the reason why people like Aristotle, Plato, despite the important differences between the two, had to develop the question of ethics.

Part V

The Art of Life Unrehearsed

What I'm ultimately trying to say is that, you cannot retrofit your present-day precepts upon the ancients, and above all, to people like Plato and Aristotle. This also takes us to the question of how those ancient works are translated into modern day western languages. Certain translations, to my amazement, reveal more about the social and cultural background of, say, a Victorian gentleman, who turns the Platonic dialogues into some sort of conversation at a table with late afternoon tea and cucumber sandwiches in an English garden.

Greeks were in fact not like that at all; nor were the Sumerians, or the tribes living in Arabian Peninsula, for that matter. But still the questions of striking a balance to avoid chaos, and continue the existing cosmos—the fragile, very fragile cosmos of ancient world—was a headache for all those peoples. As everybody knows, Greeks were very afraid of *chaos*. *Cosmos* was not the *phúsis*, but it was what was expected, what everybody wanted. If you don't have *cosmos*, i.e. order, in the *polis*, for example, the whole thing will be destructive. The eye of the needle called 'politics,' was discovered almost concomitantly by the very force of circumstances imposed upon the Greek city-states in the 6th to 4th centuries and comes all the way down to our day. Various earlier genres of expression, e.g. 'tragedy' which had a very short life span left the scene only to be filled, leaving thereby a vacuum behind which had to be filled by *philosōphia*, 'love of wisdom,' which is very far from what is today taught in the 'technical' departments of philosophy in the academic business establishment of our contemporary world. In those days the question of, for instance, *phronésis*, striking a balance, some sort of having one's own composure, etc. was not based upon what is dictated by precepts of an abstract, empty morality that characterizes the bourgeois order to our own day. It was very practical concerns that necessitated *phronésis* in the Ancient Greek world; that is: if you go beyond the bounds acceptable to all the parties and violate certain things in this life, then you incur a price you have to pay for, and sometimes the cost, as often was, quite high.

Remember that, in terms of what we today call 'economy,' those were rather fragile peasant economies; the life was harsh, and the question of even excellence which the Greeks called *arete* (which didn't necessarily always have a positive meaning) arose out of this necessity. Remember the renegade Spartan general who talks to the Persian king in Herodotus's *Histories*, where he draws attention to the poverty in the Peloponnese. He says [something to the effect] that "what keeps us powerful is strong *nómos* and *àreté*. We stick to our customs, we have

to.” I think you can see a parallelism here with Afghan tribes today. In a country where life dictates its harsh terms among the ravages of the war from both within and without, that sort of ethos is sustained. There is no abstract morality here, and it would be nonsense to talk about such a thing. That was the art of life. That was, a kind of *tékhne*. Yet *tékhne*, as Aristotle observes, loves what he calls chance, *túkhe*. And the chance loves *tékhne*. More importantly, if there is something called ‘art’ and if it’s not going to evaporate within the emergent realm of techno-scientific flux, this ‘chance factor’ is a rather significant unknown. Art, in a sense, violates the very kind of predictability expected by science and technology. Yet it is very questionable if art can provide us with clear cut pointers towards an ethical life.

In his last book, Marcuse essentially said something like: ‘art does not provide any promises.’ It just provides a clue as to the possibility of building a happy and good life but it doesn’t issue out a raincheck. It doesn’t provide you with any guarantees. If you look at the art establishment today, [on the other hand], the business of galleries, the museums (often called the prison houses or tombs of art), the very way the subjectivity of artist is cultivated into the ideology of man-god, the so-called ‘creative genius’ who, like the god of the monotheistic religions, creates things from without, all these point to the fact that it is perhaps too much to expect ethical precepts from ‘art,’ even though ‘art’ is always there with humanity. It is always talking anthropomorphically about us, about our existence.

In a sense, ‘good’ art, [or any work of lasting importance, for that matter] has to be, almost by definition, a ‘labor of love.’ Whatever happens throughout the process of creating a ‘work of art,’ is not that important. It creates its own time, its own free time, contrary to the empty, so-called “free-time” of industrial life where your free time is formatted according to the blueprints of standardized ‘work time.’ Real free time, what is called *freie Zeit*, also called *Muße*, the ‘leisure time’ as against *Freizeit*, has more chance of being actualized in the work process of creating artworks whereby the artist himself becomes just an incidental footnote to the very work. ‘Is that still possible?’ is the question.

These are some of the questions which still beset my mind, and I suspect probably will continue to do so in my future thinking, the reflections that I intend to carry out (but which do not necessarily come as a result of my own will-power just because I wanted it to be but as they ‘naturally’ come to me). In short, my labor of love bore fruits for me so far. Again I re-emphasize a certain personal fact: I certainly feel quite blessed in that each instance of a flash coming to me as a beam of sunlight, gives me the confidence that I can create my own time in the timespace of very fragile freedoms.

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