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Wooden Eyes

NINE REFLECTIONS ON DISTANCE

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COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York

forth, as adhering to a set of values of which it is, in the last analysis, the prisoner. Perspective, we are told, is good, because it emphasizes the element of subjectivity; but it is also bad, because it emphasizes intellectual distance, rather than emotional closeness (or identification).[66] It is this anti-intellectualistic climate that has fostered the line of argument that I referred to at the start, according to which memory, being closer to lived experience, is better able than history to establish a vital relationship with the past.

An adequate discussion of these attitudes would require another essay.[67] I shall make just one remark here. Both fundamentalists and neo-skeptics reject or ignore, though each for their own different and opposed reasons, what has made perspective into such a powerful cognitive metaphor: the tension between subjective point of view and objective and verifiable truths, guaranteed by reality (as in Machiavelli) or by God (as in Leibniz). If this tension can only be kept open, the notion of perspective will cease to be a stumbling block between scientists and social scientists and become instead a space to meet—a square where we can converse, discuss, and disagree.

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To Kill a Chinese Mandarin

THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF DISTANCE

The opposition between the laws of nature and history has been bequeathed to us, like so much else, by the ancient Greeks. In a famous passage of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle wrote:

> Just and unjust actions have been defined in reference to two kinds of law and in reference to persons spoken of in two senses. I call law on the one hand specific, on the other common, the latter being unwritten, the former written, *specific* being what has been defined by each people in reference to themselves, and *common* that which is based on nature [*kata physis*]; for there is in nature a common principle of the just and unjust that all people in some way divine, even if they have no association or commerce with each other, for example, what Antigone in Sophocles' play seems to speak of when she says that though forbidden, it is just to bury Polyneices,

since this is just by nature: "For not now and yesterday, but always, ever / Lives this rule, and no one knows whence it appeared."[1]

Aristotle is analyzing the various branches of rhetoric: deliberative, judicial, and epideictic (intended, that is, to praise or to reprove). It is in his discussion of judicial rhetoric that he formulates the opposition between specific, written laws and the general unwritten law. Aristotle wastes no time demonstrating the existence of unwritten natural law: if it is natural, it self-evidently exists. One should note that the Loeb Classical Library translation (1926) ("as all *men* in a manner divine . . . no *man* knoweth") has to our ears an undertone of sexism that is not in the original Greek. The point is not unimportant: both Aristotle and Sophocles use neuter terms (*"oudeis,"* no one"; *"pantes,"* everyone) in passages that refer directly to female characters like Antigone, or invoke such characters as examples. These neuter terms remind us that natural law includes both women and men. Antigone speaks in the voice of the universal; the written (and masculine) law in whose name Creon prohibits Polyneices' funeral, by contrast, is—according to Aristotle—"a specific law" (*nomon ton men idion*).

Aristotle seems to want to tell us that what is "based on nature" (*kata physis*) is not confined to particular places and times. However, a different point of view is suggested in some passages in the second book of the *Rhetoric*. Here, Aristotle is analyzing the various emotions called into play by the orator as he seeks to convince his audience. For example (1386a), pity:

> Now those for whom people feel pity are the following and those like them. They pity their acquaintances, unless they are very closely connected to their own household, and in that case they feel for them as they feel about their own future suffering . . . [For] the dreadful is something different from the pitiable and capable of expelling pity . . . for people no longer feel pity when something dreadful is near themselves. And they pity those like themselves in age, in character, in habits, in rank, in birth; for in all these cases something seems more to apply also to the self; for in general, one should grasp here, too, that people pity things happening to others in so far as they fear for themselves. And since sufferings are pitiable when they appear near at hand and since people do not feel pity, or not in the same way, about things ten thousand years in the past or future, neither anticipating nor remembering them, necessarily those are more pitiable who contribute to the effect by gestures and cries and display of feelings and generally in their acting; for they make the evil seem near by making it appear before [our] eyes either as something about to happen or as something that has happened, and things are more pitiable when having just happened or going to happen in a short space of time.

We encounter a similar argument in the section devoted to envy (1388a):

> [People] envy those near to them in time and place and age and reputation, whence it has been said that "Kinship, too, knows how to envy." And [they envy] those they rival; for they rival those mentioned, [feeling] the same way toward them and on the same grounds, but no one rivals people ten thousand years in the future or dead nor those who live at the Pillars of Heracles nor those they or others regard as inferior or much superior.[2]

Aristotle takes it as obvious that the emotions analyzed in the second book of the *Rhetoric* are "based on nature," *kata physis*. Nonetheless, he ends up setting both historical and geographical limits to them. According to the myth recounted by Plato, the kingdom of Atlantis flourished nine thousand years before Solon's time.[3] Aristotle uses a still larger number, "ten thousand years" (*murioston*), to convey the idea of an immensely distant time, past or future, which would preclude any possibility of our identifying positively or negatively with the emotions of the human beings who lived in it. Something more or less similar is implied by the allusion to the Pillars of Heracles: legendary traditions (which would be one day connected to Aristotle's pupil Alexander the Great) held that the lands and seas that lay beyond the limits of the Mediterranean were peopled by savages or monsters.

What Aristotle says about the chronological and geographical limits of pity and envy cannot be reduced to an opposition between reality and myth. Mythical beings, especially when they appeared on

the stage, could arouse deep feelings. Aristotle remarked in the *Poetics* that tragedy deals with "incidents that awaken fear and pity" (*phoberon kai eleeinon*) (1452b), and he went on to add that deeds

> regarded as fearful or pitiable must of course involve people who are either friends to one another, or enemies, or neither. Now if a man injures his enemy, there is nothing pitiable either in his act or in his intention, except in so far as suffering is inflicted; nor is there if they are indifferent to each other. But when the sufferings involve those who are near and dear, when for example brother kills brother, son father, mother son, or son mother, or if such a deed is contemplated, or something else of the kind is actually done, then we have a situation of the kind to be aimed at.[4]

"Out of sight, out of mind," as the English say; as the Italians say, "*Fratelli, coltelli*"—where there are brothers, there are knives. These two proverbs help us to grasp the contradiction implicit in the passages we have just quoted from the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*. Too great a distance gives rise to indifference; too great proximity may awaken compassion, or provoke murderous rivalry. This ambivalence, expressed with extraordinary vigor in Greek drama, was part of everyday experience in the society Aristotle lived in: a limited, confined society based on face-to-face relationships.

2. Let us turn now to a very different text, written two thousand years later. Diderot's *Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants, ou du danger de se mettre au-dessus des lois* (Conversation of a father with his children, or the danger of setting oneself above the law) was first published in 1773.[5] In a broken, frantic style, inspired by Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*, Diderot describes a conversation that takes place one calm winter's evening in his father's house. People come and go, all of them telling of events and memories that bear on a single problem: the relationship between the written code of the law and moral principles—between, as Aristotle would have put it, "specific" laws and the "common" law, which are represented respectively by Diderot *père* and Diderot *fils*.[6] Do we have the right to break the written code in order to protect the general principles of morality? Is it allowable for a doctor to refuse to treat a wounded criminal? Is it morally legitimate to destroy an unjust will that would deprive a group of poor people of their inheritance to the sole benefit of a rich egoist? When he reworked the text of the *Entretien*, subsequent to its original 1773 publication, Diderot inserted a digression that is not very well linked to the main text. A hatmaker arrives and tells his story. For eighteen years he tended to his sick wife; when she died, and he found himself penniless, he appropriated the dowry that by law should have gone to her relatives. Has his action been right or wrong? A discussion begins, in which Diderot *père* insists that the hatter should restore what he has wrongfully taken. To this advice the hatter replies brusquely:

> "No, sire, I shall go away to Geneva."
> "And do you suppose you will leave your remorse behind here?"
> "I do not know, but I shall go to Geneva."
> "Go where you will, your conscience will await you there."
> The hatmaker departed; and our talk turned to his strange response. We agreed that distance in place and time perhaps to some extent weakened feeling and awareness of all kinds, even the consciousness of crime. The murderer transported to the coast of China is too far away to make out the corpse he has left bleeding on the banks of the Seine. Perhaps remorse is engendered less by our horror at ourselves than by our fear of others, less by the shame we feel over our deeds than by our knowledge that blame and punishment would be the consequence should they be discovered.[7]

In the *Supplement to the Voyage da Bougainville*, Diderot was to maintain that sexuality, since it is a natural faculty, should be subject to no kind of legal constraint. In the *Entretien d'un père avec ses enfants*, he seems to suggest the same thing about murder. Diderot's uncompromising observation that "distance in place and time perhaps to some extent weakens feeling and awareness of all kinds" seems a word-for-word echo of the passage quoted earlier from Arisotle's *Rhetoric*; but here Aristotle's thought is taken to its logical extreme. There is nothing strange in this. In his earlier *Discourse on Dramatic Poetry* (1758), Diderot had described Aristotle as a philosopher who proceeded in an orderly manner and formulated general principles, leaving it to others to draw their consequences and apply them.[8] One instance of such a consequence would be Diderot's own

move here, where he transforms the lack of compassion, which Aristotle had seen as a result of "distance in place or time," into the presumptive lack of remorse for murder, which might follow from the same causes. Human beings who are far apart and unable to communicate turn themselves into split egos—the theme that inspired two of Diderot's finest works, *Rameau's Nephew* and *The Paradox of Acting*.

This turning inward takes place across a geographical space—the distance from France to China—infinitely wider than the Mediterranean world Aristotle wrote of. But why China? This mention of China in the discussion of a fictitious moral case has been thought to show that Diderot perhaps took the example he uses from a Jesuit casuistical treatise.[9] The hypothesis is attractive, though as yet unproven. Wherever he found the anecdote, Diderot made it the starting point for a moral experiment that may be compared to the one he had thought up twenty years earlier in the *Lettre sur les aveugles, à l'usage de ceux qui voient* (Letter on the blind, for the use of those who can see):

> I suspect that the blind in general lack humanity; for of all the outward signs that awaken compassion in us and convey the idea of pain, they are affected only by cries. To a blind person, what is the difference between a man urinating and a man who bleeds but does not cry out? Do not we too cease to feel compassion once distance, or the smallness of objects, produces the effect on us that the lack of sight produces on the blind? How greatly our virtues depend upon how we feel things and upon the degree to which we are affected by what is outside us! And so I doubt not that, but for the fear of punishment, many people would find it less hard to kill a man at a distance from which he appeared no larger than a swallow, than they would to slit a bullock's throat with their own hands. If we feel compassion for the sufferings of a horse, but have no scruples about squashing an ant, does not this same principle determine our feeling?[10]

There is an obvious analogy between the distance that separates France from China and the sensory deprivation that afflicts the blind.[11] The lack of humanity and compassion which (according to Diderot) results from either situation calls into question the presumption that morality has an eternally established character. As Diderot exclaimed to Mme de Puisieux, the dedicatee of the *Lettre sur les aveugles*, "Ah, Madam, the morality of the blind—how different it is from our own!"[12] Morality, in Diderot's view, is the result of physically and historically specific circumstances and constraints. The same two words "*crainte*" and "*châtiment*," "fear" and "punishment," echo across a twenty-year gap, explaining both how a hypothetical murderer might quit Paris for China and how someone might kill a man who was placed at such a distance that he looked no larger than a swallow. And then, with a sudden shift typical of his mode of reasoning, Diderot allows this analogy to introduce a new theme that raises the question of a quite different kind of gap—that involved in human attitudes toward animals. Even when we look at animals, says Diderot, our perceptions of size and distance have an influence. He does not make clear what consequences are to be drawn from this apparently innocent principle; and they are far from obvious. Should we extend to the ants the pity we feel for a suffering horse? Or should we rather regard the horse's sufferings with the same lack of compassion that we, human beings, feel for ants?

There is no doubt that the former conclusion is more in harmony with Diderot's stress on the passions and sensibility—"that disposition," as he wrote (undoubtedly with himself in mind), "which accompanies constitutional weakness, and which results from the movements of the diaphragm, the liveliness of the imagination, the delicacy of the nervous organization; which is always ready to pity, to shudder, to wonder and to fear, to grow anxious and to weep," and so on.[13] However, one eighteenth-century reader explicitly drew the other, opposite conclusion, with its implication that our indifference to the sufferings of insects should be applied universally. Franco Venturi, the great historian of the European Enlightenment, acutely observed (in his youthful work *Jeunesse de Diderot*) that Sade was strongly influenced by the arguments against religion set forth in the *Lettre sur les aveugles*.[14] It may be that we should even go so far as to say that we cannot imagine Sade's philosophy without Diderot's *Lettre sur les aveugles*.[15] Here is how Sade defends the legitimacy of murder in *La Philosophie dans le boudoir*:

> What is man, and how does he differ from the other plants and animals of nature? Not at all, surely. Placed like them by chance

in the world, he is born in the same manner; reproduces, grows and dwindles as they do; like them, he arrives at old age and falls into nothingness at the end of the term set by nature to the existence of every animal species, as a result of his organic constitution. If he is so close in kind that the eye of the philosopher is quite unable to discern any dissimilarity, then it must be fully as wrong to kill an animal as to kill a man, or rather there can be as little wrong in either case; and it is only the prejudice of our pride which sets the two apart. But nothing is more sadly absurd than the prejudice of pride. . . . If it is impossible in nature that creatures should live forever, then it is a law of nature that they must be destroyed. . . . At the moment when a large animal breathes its last, small animals are formed, and the life of these little animals is nothing but a necessary effect and consequence of the momentary sleep of the large one. Would you now dare to say that one is more pleasing than the other in the sight of nature?[16]

3. Sade has sometimes been regarded as the extreme but logical outcome of the Enlightenment—an argument that was suggested as early as 1801, by the reactionary writer Charles de Pougens.[17] However it was Diderot rather than Sade who was the obvious target in the eyes of the political and intellectual champions of the Restoration. François-René de Chateaubriand gave a new twist to the story of the assassin who leaves Europe for China in his extremely successful *Génie du Christianisme*. "Distance in place and time perhaps to some extent weakens feeling and awareness of all kinds, even the consciousness of crime," Diderot had written; and no such consciousness would arise in the absence of the fear of punishment. These words awakened the virtuous indignation of Chateaubriand:

> O conscience! are you then perhaps nothing but a phantom of our imagination, or the fear of human punishment? I interrogate myself, I ask the question: If, merely by wishing it, you could kill a man in China and inherit his fortune in Europe, being assured by supernatural means that the deed would remain forever unknown, would you allow yourself to form that project? It is in vain that I exaggerate my poverty to myself; it is in vain that I seek to soften the murder by supposing that my wish would cause the Chinaman to die suddenly and painlessly, that he has no heirs, or that his death would in any case mean the loss of his goods to the State; it is in vain that I imagine this stranger as one bowed down with sickness and grief; it is in vain that I tell myself that death would be a boon to him, that he himself calls out for it, or that he has but a moment left to live: all my poor subterfuges cannot silence the voice that speaks deep in my heart, and which forbids me so loudly even to entertain such a thought that I cannot for an instant doubt the reality of conscience.[18]

It is plain that Chateaubriand was here responding both to the passage in Diderot concerning the murderer who flees to China and to Diderot's claim that many people would not hesitate to kill a human being at a distance. By combining the two passages he created a new story, in which the victim was Chinese and the murderer, who explicitly sought to gain a sum of money by his deed, was European. In this new version the story—misattributed to Rousseau—became famous. The mistaken attribution can be traced back to Balzac.[19] In *Père Goriot*, Rastignac spends a night considering the possibility of making a rich marriage that would involve him, at least indirectly, in a murder. Then he goes to the Luxembourg Gardens, where he meets a friend, Bianchon. Rastignac, declaring that he has been tormented by "temptations," asks Bianchon:

> "Have you read Rousseau?"
> "Yes."
> "Do you remember the passage where he asks the reader what he would do if he could make a fortune by killing an old mandarin in China by simply exerting his will, without stirring from Paris?"
> "Yes."
> "Well?"
> "Bah! I'm at my thirty-third mandarin."
> "Don't play the fool. Look here, if it were proved to you that the thing was possible and you only needed to nod your head, would you do it?"
> "Is your mandarin well-stricken in years? But, bless you, young or old, paralytic or healthy, upon my word—The devil take it! Well, no."[20]

4. The parable of the mandarin foreshadows how the character of Rastignac will develop. Balzac wants to show that in bourgeois society it is difficult to keep faith with moral obligations, including the most elementary ones. The series of relations in which we are all caught up may make any of us responsible, at least indirectly, for a crime. A few years later, in his novel *Modeste Mignon*, Balzac again used the figure of a mandarin to put forward a similar argument. The poet Canalis asks:

> "If at this instant the most important mandarin in China were breathing his last, plunging the Empire into war, would you be so sad? In India, the English are killing thousands of people like ourselves; at this very moment, a delightful lady is being consigned to the flames; and yet have you not drunk your coffee just the same?"[21]

In a world whete we know that the cruelty of backwardness and the cruelty of imperialism hold sway, our moral indifference is already a form of complicity.

When Rastignac's friend resists the idea of killing an unknown Chinese mandarin, we may see in this an implicit recognition of the fact that (as Aristotle had put it) "there is in nature a common principle of the just and unjust." Now, however, with the emergence of a global economic system, there would henceforth be real opportunities for people to grow rich across distances immeasurably greater than ever Aristotle had imagined or could imagine.

This connection had long been recognized. In the section of the *Treatise of Human Nature* titled "Of Contiguity and Distance in Space and Time," David Hume remarked that "a West Indian merchant will tell you, that he is not without concern about what passes in Jamaica."[22] As we shall see, however, Hume's subtle discussion ignores the moral and juridical implications of the question. Today, we are struck by this silence. We know that one person's economic gain may be the more or less direct cause of the sufferings of other human beings at a great distance, who are condemned to poverty, malnutrition, or even death. Economic relations, moreover, are but one of the means that progress makes available for influencing the lives of other human beings at a distance. The most widely known version of the story of the Chinese mandarin has him killed by the simple pressing of a button: a detail that puts us in mind of modern weapons of war rather than of Rousseau, the supposed author of the anecdote.[23] Airplanes and missiles have shown how right Diderot was to suppose that people might find it much easier to kill human beings if they looked no bigger than swallows. The progress of bureaucracy has run along a similar track, making it possible to treat large numbers of individuals as if they were mere numbers—another potent way of placing them at a distance.

To release a bomb that kills hundreds of thousands of people may lead to remorse, as it did in the case of Claude Eatherly, the Hiroshima pilot. Bombs, however, do not require those who launch them to learn the dreadful particulars of human butchery. Even in the (frequent) cases where the requisite training succeeds completely, little malfunctions may still occur. This is shown in Christopher Browning's terrible book *Ordinary Men*, which gives a detailed account of the role played by a reserve battalion of the German police force in the extermination of the Jews in Poland.[24] When these normal German citizens who had been transformed into mass murderers chanced to come across Jews whom they had previously known, they proved incapable of carrying out their task in the expected manner. It was clearly far easier to project the stereotypes of Nazi propaganda onto dozens, hundreds, or thousands of Jews.

The clear-cut distinction between *us* and *them* that was at the center of the racial legislation of the Nazis was connected, at the level of theory, to an explicit rejection of the idea of natural laws. In this sense we may see the emergence, at the end of the Second World War, of the legal notion of "crimes against humanity" as a belated victory of Antigone. "Though forbidden, it is just to bury Polyneices, since this is just by nature": Aristotle regarded these words as implying the superiority of common laws over specific laws, of duties toward the human species over duties toward a particular community, and of distance over proximity. However, as Aristotle himself did not fail to point out, distance and proximity are ambivalent notions. As we have seen, distance, when pushed to extremes, may lead to an absolute lack of pity for other human beings. How then are we to draw the boundary between distance and excessive distance? To put this another way: what are the cultural boundaries of a putative natural feeling such as human compassion?

5. This is a difficult question, and I shall not try to give a direct answer. I shall attempt only to clarify some of its implications.

The story of the mandarin involves distance in space only. Hume, in his *Treatise*, explored a much wider theme, "Contiguity and Distance in Space and Time," with which Aristotle, as we have seen, had already been concerned. Hume writes:

> Accordingly we find, in common life, that men are principally concerned about those objects that are not much removed either in space or time, enjoying the present, and leaving what is afar off to the care of chance and fortune. Talk to a man of his condition thirty years hence, and he will not regard you. Speak of what is to happen to-morrow, and he will lend you attention. The breaking of a mirror gives us more concern when at home, than the burning of a house when abroad, and some hundred leagues distant.

In his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Adam Smith developed Hume's reflections, arguing that only the sense of equity and justice is capable of correcting the natural egoism of our sentiments. This egoism is evoked by Smith by way of a parable that recalls the Lisbon earthquake that had happened in 1755, shortly before he wrote. Diderot's story of the murderer escaped to China may have been one indirect inspiration for the parable:

> Let us suppose that the great empire of China, with all its myriads of inhabitants, was suddenly swallowed up by an earthquake, and let us consider how a man of humanity in Europe, who had no sort of connexion with that part of the world, would be affected upon receiving intelligence of this dreadful calamity. He would, I imagine, first of all, express very strongly his sorrow for the misfortune of that unhappy people, he would make many melancholy reflections upon the precariousness of human life, and the vanity of all the labours of man, which could thus be annihilated in a moment. He would too, perhaps, if he was a man of speculation, enter into many reasonings concerning the effects which this disaster might produce upon the commerce of Europe, and the trade and business of the world in general. And when all this fine philosophy was over, when all these humane sentiments had been once fairly expressed, he would pursue his business or his pleasure, take his repose or his diversion, with the same ease and tranquillity, as if no such accident had happened. . . . If he was to lose his little finger tomorrow, he would not sleep tonight; but, provided he never saw them, he will snore with the most profound security over the ruin of a hundred millions of his brethren, and the destruction of that immense multitude seems plainly an object less interesting to him, than this paltry misfortune of his own.[25]

Hume, for his part, makes no mention of sympathy, which he regards as strictly connected with morality. However, he introduces a distinction:

> Though distance, both in space and time, has a considerable effect on the imagination, and by that means on the will and passions, yet the consequences of a removal in *space* are much inferior to those of a removal in *time*. Twenty years are certainly but a small distance of time in comparison of what history and even the memory of some may inform them of, and yet I doubt if a thousand leagues, or even the greatest distance of place this globe can admit of, will so remarkably weaken our ideas and diminish our passions.

Hume then supports this view by citing the "West Indian merchant," concerned about events in Jamaica; whereas "few extend their views so far into futurity, as to dread very remote accidents." This asymmetry leads him to discuss a further distinction that can be made in respect of time: *"the superior effects of the same distance in futurity above that in the past."*[26] Distance in the past weakens both our passion and our will. "This difference with respect to the will is easily accounted for," says Hume. "As none of our actions can alter the past, it is not strange it should never determine the will." He offers a much fuller discussion of the passions, concluding as follows:

> We conceive the future as flowing every moment nearer to us, and the past as retiring. An equal distance, therefore, in the past and in the future, has not the same effect on the imagination; and that because we consider the one as continually increasing, and

the other as continually diminishing. The fancy anticipates the course of things, and surveys the object in that condition to which it tends, as well as in that which is regarded as the present.

Hume claims that his detailed analysis has enabled him to account for

> three phenomena, which seem pretty remarkable. Why distance weakens the conception and passion: why distance in time has a greater effect than that in space: and why distance in past time has still a greater effect than that in future. We must now consider three phenomena, which seem to be in a manner the reverse of these: why a very great distance increases our esteem and admiration for an object: why such a distance in time increases it more than that in space: and a distance in past time more than that in future.

These two sets of contrasting arguments reveal, unless I am mistaken, a contradiction (of fact, rather than logic) that Hume, and the Enlightenment more generally, were unable to face up to. On the one hand, there was the tendency to make nothing of the power and prestige of tradition, to regard them as based on a mere irrational argument; on the other, there was the tendency to recognize the force that they undeniably exerted. In some of the sharp remarks he makes in comparing temporal distance with spatial distance, we overhear Hume the philosopher engaged in fruitful dialogue with Hume the historian:

> Ancient busts and inscriptions are more valued than Japan tables: and, not to mention the Greeks and Romans, it is certain we regard with more veneration the old Chaldeans and Egyptians, than the modern Chinese and Persians; and bestow more fruitless pains to clear up the history and chronology of the former, than it would cost us to make a voyage, and be certainly informed of the character, learning and government of the latter.[27]

Hume's way of attempting to resolve the contradictions we have mentioned is disappointing, because he considers only individual psychology. He emphasizes the connection between what is distant and what is difficult, and between difficulty and the pleasure of overcoming obstacles, but this is not enough to explain the value attributed in our civilization to distance and to the past—indeed to the very remote past. This is a specific phenomenon, bound up with particular historical circumstances that have undergone profound change in the course of the twentieth century. Hume could still write confidently that "none of our actions can alter the past." Today, we might well add that human actions can, however, exert a profound influence on the way the past is remembered: they can distort its traces, consign them to oblivion, and condemn them to destruction.

6. The impulse to rescue the past from an incumbent menace has never been so poignantly articulated as in Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," written in the first months of 1940, in the aftermath of the Hitler-Stalin pact. "Even the *dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he wins," wrote Benjamin, who within a few months was to put an end to his own life.[28] The second thesis begins with a quotation from the nineteenth-century philosopher Hermann Lotze: "One of the most remarkable characteristics of human nature is, alongside so much selfishness in specific instances, the freedom from envy that the present displays toward the future."

Here we discern a distinct echo of Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, with its discussion of the ambivalent relationship between the passions (in the case in point, envy) and temporal and spatial distance. Lotze saw the lack of envy we display toward those who will come after us as a "wonderful phenomenon" that

> may well tend to confirm our belief that there is some unity of history, transcending that of which we are conscious, a unity in which we cannot merely say of the past that it is not—a unity rather in which all that has been inexorably divided by the temporal course of history, has a co-existence independent of time. . . . The presentiment that we shall not be lost to the future, that those who were before us though they have passed away from the sphere of earthly reality have not passed away from reality altogether, and that in some mysterious way the progress of history affects them too—this conviction it is that first entitles us to speak as we do of humanity and its history.[29]

The *Passagen-Werk*, Walter Benjamin's great unfinished work on nineteenth-century Paris, includes a number of quotations from and references to Lotze's *Microcosmus*, which enjoyed great popularity at the end of the nineteenth century. Lotze was an important, though long neglected, influence on Benjamin's thought.[30] One of the fundamental themes of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," the need to "brush history against the grain," takes up Lotze's observations about the redemption of the past, developing them in a perspective inspired by both Judaism and historical materialism. "Like every generation that preceded us," writes Benjamin, "we have been endowed with a *weak* Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim."[31]

These words were written in 1940. In the light of what has happened since then, we may be tempted to say that the last two generations have been endowed, contrary to what Benjamin supposed, with a *strong*, if negative, Messianic power. The end of history—not in the metaphorical sense that has recently been in vogue, but in an absolutely literal sense—has become technically feasible during the last half century. The possibility that the human race may be destroyed, a possibility that in itself constitutes a decisive historical turning point, has exerted and will exert its influence respectively on the lives of every future generation and on the fragments of memory of every generation that passes or has passed; and this includes those of whom Aristotle wrote, "ten thousand years in the past or future." At the same time, the sphere of what Aristotle called "common law" seems to have become much broader. But to express compassion for those distant fellow humans would be, I suspect, an act of mere rhetoric. Our capacity to pollute and destroy the present, the past, and the future is incomparably greater than our feeble moral imagination.

9

Pope Wojtyla's Slip

I

The Catholic Church has asked for forgiveness from the Jews, and we can expect the discussions that this has sparked off to continue for a long time to come. Many people cannot accept such a turn of events, and it would certainly have been inconceivable to anyone until the last ten years or so. The first occasion on which the Church had the courage to acknowledge its responsibility for Christian anti-Semitism was, we have been reminded, the "now historic pilgrimage of John Paul II to the Synagogue in Rome."[1] This reminder unexpectedly prompted a doubt—one that I set out to resolve by reading, first of all, the account of this extraordinary event printed in the *Osservatore Romano* of 14–15 April 1986, and then the complete text of the speech that the pope gave at the time.

John Paul II's visit had been announced in advance, and

nari (Berlin and New York, 1973), pp. 272–275; Nietzsche, *Zur Genealogie der Moral*, 3:12. KGW, 6/2 (Berlin, 1968), pp. 382 f.; "Nachgelassene Fragmente, Anfang 1888 bis Anfang Januar 1889," KGW, 8/3 (Berlin and New York, 1972), pp. 165 f. See also F. Kaulbach, "Nietzsche und der monadologische Gedanke," *Nietzsche-Studien* 8 (1979): 127–156; V. Gerhardt and N. Herold, eds., *Perspektiven des Perspektivismus: Gedenkschrift zum Tode Freidrich Kaulbachs* (Würzburg, 1992).

62. See Justinus, *Dialogues* 11:3, ed. G. Archambault (Paris, 1909). On the theological implications of the terms "*verus*" and "*verissimus*" in Augustine's writings, see Lecuyer, "Le sacrifice"; de Broglie, "La notion de sacrifice." M. Simon, *Verus Israel* (Paris, 1983), is of fundamental importance as regards this whole question (see p. 93 for a note of the now-lost work against Marcion written by Justinus). Justinus refers back to Romans 9:6 ("for not all descendants of Israel are truly Israel"), and more generally to the Pauline understanding of the relations between Jews and Christians in terms of the opposition between letter (or flesh) and spirit, and between Esau and Jacob (see chapter 9, below).

63. It may also be the case, looking at it from another point of view, that the need to hold together, in a material sense, the Torah, the prophetic books and the Gospels was one factor that led the Christians to prefer the codex to the less manageable scroll: a hypothesis put forward in E. Bickerman, "Some Notes on the Transmission of the Septuagint" (1950), in Bickerman, *Studies in Jewish and Christian History* (Leiden, 1976), 1:137–166, esp. pp. 138 f.

64. See W. Kamlah, *Christentum und Geschichtlichkeit: Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des Christentums und zu Augustins "Bürgerschaft Gottes,"* 2d (rev.) ed. (Stuttgart and Cologne, 1951), p. 17. It would be quite interesting to compare this with the first edition of this notable study (*Christentum und Selbstbehauptung: Historische und philosophische Untersuchungen zur Entstehung des Christentums und zu Augustins "Bürgerschaft Gottes,"* [Frankfurt am Main, 1940])—see also the comment of J. Taubes, in a note to F. Overbeck, *Selbstbekenntnisse* [Frankfurt am Main, 1966], p. 152). The afterword to the second edition draws attention to a number of changes, which include a new introduction (to which I refer above). One notes that the epithet "*philosophisch*," inspired by Heidegger (who is gratefully acknowledged on pp. xii–xiii), figures in the subtitle of the first edition but has disappeared from the second, where it is stated at the outset that the inquiry to be conducted will be "historical" (p. 7).

65. E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion* (London, 1992). F. Fukuyama's book *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York, 1992) is discussed, and set in a broad intellectual context, in P. Anderson, "The Ends of History," in *A Zone of Engagement* (London, 1992), pp. 279–335.

66. M. Iversen, "Warburg—neu gelesen," in Baumgart (ed.), *Denkräume zwischen Kunst und Wissenschaft*, ed. S. Baumgart (which I read at the suggestion of Karen Michels). Cf. also G. Bock, "Der Platz der Frauen in der Geschichte," in *Neue Aufsätze in der Geschichtswissenschaft* (Vienna, 1984), pp. 108–127; D. Haraway, "Situated Knowledge: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14 (1988): 575–599, esp. pp. 581 and 583 (which I read at the suggestion of Nadine Tanio).

67. See my "Just One Witness," in S. Friedlanger, ed., *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the "Final Solution,"* Cambridge, Mass. 1992, pp. 82–96; *History, Rhetoric, and Proof*, London and Hanover 1999.

8. TO KILL A CHINESE MANDARIN: THE MORAL IMPLICATIONS OF DISTANCE

This essay was given as a lecture in 1994 as part of the series of Oxford Amnesty Lectures on the theme "Human Rights and History." For their help and criticism, my thanks go to Perry Anderson, Pier Cesare Bori, Alberto Gajano, Samuel R. Gilbert, Stefano Levi Della Torre, Francesco Orlando, and Adriano Prosperi. The version printed here is slightly longer than the lecture as originally given.

1. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. with introduction and notes by G. A. Kennedy (New York and Oxford, 1991), pp. 102 f. George Steiner offers an analysis of the various images of Antigone, from Sophocles to the present, in *Antigones* (Oxford, 1986).

2. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. Kennedy, pp. 153 ff.

3. See P. Vidal-Naquet, "L'Atlantide et les nations," in Vidal-Naquet, *La démocratie grecque vue d'ailleurs* (Paris, 1990), pp. 139 ff.

4. Aristotle, *On the Art of Poetry*, in *Aristotle, Horace, Longinus: Classical Literary Criticism*, trans. and ed. T. S. Dorsch (Harmondsworth, 1965), p. 50.

5. Diderot, *Oeuvres*, ed. A. Billy (Paris, 1951), pp. 759–781.

6. See W. E. Edmiston, *Diderot and the Family: A Conflict of Nature and Law* (Saratoga, Calif., 1985), pp. 75 ff.

7. Diderot, *Oeuvres*, p. 772.

8. Diderot, *Oeuvres Esthétiques*, ed. P. Vernière (Paris, 1988), p. 206.

9. However, when Diderot refers to a "text" ("ce texte épuisé," p. 742), he does not necessarily mean a written text; cf. p. 817 (*Lettre sur les aveugles*).

10. Diderot, *Oeuvres*, ed. Billy, p. 820.

11. See the insightful comments in F. Venturi, *Jeunesse de Diderot* (Paris, 1939), pp. 142–167, esp. pp. 163–166.

12. Diderot, *Oeuvres*, ed. Billy, p. 820.

13. D. Diderot, *Paradoxe sur le comédien*, in *Diderot's Writings on the The-*

atre, ed. F. C. Green (Cambridge, 1936), p. 284. [Translators' note: This anthology contains Diderot's text in French, which we translate here.]

14. Venturi, *Jeunesse de Diderot*, pp. 159 f.

15. In reference to Diderot's observation that to a blind person there is no difference between a man urinating and a man bleeding, Venturi remarks on the "characteristic cruelty often associated with the vision of nature in the eighteenth century" (*Jeunesse de Diderot*, p. 165).

16. D. A. F. de Sade, *La philosophie dans le boudoir*, in *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris, 1966), pp. 514 f.

17. See the passage quoted by M. Delon in the introduction to de Sade, *Oeuvres* (Paris, 1990), p. xxiv.

18. F.-R. de Chateaubriand, *Génie du Christianisme* (Paris, 1930), 1:166 f.

19. P. Rönai was the first to point out the connection between Chateaubriand and Balzac in "Tuer le mandarin," *Revue de littérature comparée* 10 (1930): 520–523. Despite the article's subtitle, L. W. Keates does not consider eighteenth-century precedents in "Mysterious Miraculous Mandarin: Origins, Literary Paternity, Implications in Ethics," *Revue de littérature comparée* 40 (1966): 497–525. A. Coimbra Martíns explicitly denies that the two passages in Diderot are significant in "O Mandarim assassinado," in *Ensaios Queirosianos* (Lisbon, 1967), pp. 11–266, 381–383, 387–395; see esp. pp. 27 f. See also R. Trousson, *Balzac disciple et juge de Jean-Jacques Rousseau* (Geneva, 1983), p. 243 and n. 11.

20. H. de Balzac, *Old Goriot*, trans. M. A. Crawford, (1951; reprint, Harmondsworth, 1979), p. 157; see also p. 176. On the mistaken attribution to Rousseau, see Coimbra Martíns, "O Mandarim asassinado," pp. 38–40.

21. Balzac, *La comédie humaine* (Paris, 1976), 1:593. P. Rönai remarks on the passage (see Coimbra Martíns, "O Mandarim assassinado," pp. 38–40).

22. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, introduction by A. D. Lindsay (1911; reprint, London, 1936), 2:139.

23. Diderot, too, alludes to a text supposedly by Rousseau (*Oeuvres*, ed. Billy, p. 1418, n. 7), citing *Emile* but giving no precise reference. That the reference is erroneous can be rapidly confirmed by checking in E. Brunet, *Index-Concordance d'Emile ou de l'éducation*, 2 vols. (Geneva and Paris, 1980).

24. C. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 101 and the Final Solution in Poland* (New York, 1992).

25. A. Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. D. Raphael and A. MacFie (Oxford, 1979; reprint, Indianapolis, 1982) pp. 136 f. This passage was drawn to my attention by Perry Anderson.

26. Hume, *Treatise*, p. 140, italics in original. The text reads "superior," not "inferior"; but the entire logic of the following passage requires "inferior," and I amend accordingly.

27. Hume, *Treatise*, p. 143.

28. W. Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Benjamin, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn, *Illuminations* (London, 1970), p. 257 (Thesis VI).

29. H. Lotze, *Microcosmus: An Essay Concerning Man and his Relation to the World*, trans. E. Constance Jones (Edinburgh, 1894), pp. 172, 173 f.

30. On Benjamin's intellectual debt to Lotze, see S. Mosés, *L'Ange de l'histoire: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Paris, 1992), p. 166. And see also H. D. Kittsteiner, "Walter Benjamin's Historicism," *New German Critique* 39 (Fall 1986): pp. 179 f. (brought to my attention by Dan Sherer).

31. Benjamin, "Theses," p. 256 (Thesis II).

9. POPE WOJTYLA'S SLIP

I acknowledge with thanks the critical comments of Pier Cesare Bori, Gianni Cova, and Stefano Levi Della Torre.

1. M. Politi, "*In ginocchio davanti agli ebrei*" (On his knees before the Jews), *La Repubblica*, 24 September 1997 (on some remarks made by Cardinal Martini).